

Ask the boys!

I try to spend much of recess and lunchtime walking around the school. It provides a great opportunity to chat with the boys and to find out what is happening on the campus. The younger boys are often the most responsive to my tête-à-tête and will generally go into great detail about their classes, teachers and life at home. The older boys can be more reserved and usually focus their conversations on examinations and university entrance. I am always amazed by their willingness to chat, particularly with the Principal, but also to do so in a second language. I see these encounters as my small part to improving their conversational English.

A couple of weeks ago I invited the Committee Prefects to a meeting. I told the 10 senior boys that I was keen to hear about the 'burning issues' and to receive their suggestions regarding improvements around the school. We met again last week over a buffet lunch in the Wong Ming Him Hall and this time they were given the floor - I simply listened and took notes. I had no idea what they would raise or suggest. Maybe fewer assignments and less homework; a shorter school day with a reduction in the number of lessons; a greater selection of foods served up by the canteen; longer holidays, a change to the school uniform, and so forth. Their responses, however, mentioned none of these items but centred on two key points: greater flexibility in procedures and a more attractive school campus.

The Pokfulam Road entrance to the College is closed 15 minutes after the formal end of the school at the completion of the ninth lesson. Any boy who leaves the school after the 15 minutes is up needs to use the Bonham Road entrance. The Prefects pointed out that 15 minutes is not a great deal of time particularly if you wish to go to the Library or see a teacher. To the boys in the lower school who catch public transport in Pokfulam Road the closure means a reasonably long walk to the main entrance in Bonham Road and then down Hing Hon Road. An immediate outcome of my meeting with the Prefects is that the Pokfulam Road door will remain open an additional 20 minutes over the next month. If there is a sufficient number of boys using this exit during the one month trial period the new opening time will become a permanent arrangement.

The Prefects also asked if the Library could also stay open longer - a suggestion that will now be considered by the Librarian and the Library Prefects. There was also a suggestion that the Gymnasium be opened on a Sunday. Many senior boys value the opportunity of remaining after school, on occasions well into the evenings. Some see the benefit of working with classmates on common tasks; others see school as a quiet alternative to working at home or at a public venue. The College has long provided classrooms for after-school study but maybe it is time for us to reconsider what we provide during this time to cater for the study needs of the boys.

The second area raised by the Prefects related to the school environment. A lack of green spaces was noted with a request for more plants and green roof tops. The College has taken action in recent years to give the school a 'greener feel', notably the gardens surrounding the Wong Ming Him Hall and the flower planters on the podium and upper playground. But there is still more that could be done. We have asked the architect to look at ways of greening the roof of the Hall and there is a concerted effort underway to provide additional plants and shrubs. The Prefects are correct in saying that a greener and softer looking school to the concrete surfaces that characterise many Hong Kong buildings will certainly improve the learning environment on campus. I also informed the Prefects that we shall be repainting the external walls of the school over the next twelve months and that their suggestions as to the colour scheme will be conveyed to the architect.

I remember one of my initial thoughts after being shown around the school for the first time in August 2005; where do the boys sit when they are not in the classroom? Since that time we have provided seating and sun umbrellas in the upper playground but the Prefects suggested that we need additional seating wherever there is space for a bench or a chair. We shall soon open up the podium for boys who wish to eat their lunch in this location. Boys need alternatives and places to talk and relax with classmates during non-teaching times.

I have said to the Committee Prefects that I would like to meet with them on a regular basis to hear their views and receive their suggestions. My invitation has been enthusiastically received by the boys. Besides, they did enjoy the buffet lunch!

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