

Meeting Notes: St Stithians Girls' College Key Stakeholders Session held on Saturday, 20 June 2020 from 10:00 – 14:30

1. Initial decisions taken at the beginning of the meeting:

- All meeting attendees agreed to the recording of the meeting and the subsequent sharing of the meeting minutes.
- Minutes will be shared with the larger Saints community once they are approved by the committee.
- The medium used for sharing the minutes will be decided after the session with the intention that whatever platform is used is accessible to the Saints community.

2. Expectation Setting:

Below is a list of expectations shared by attendees of the meeting:

- The issues that are brought up should not be swept under the rug and should be dealt with swiftly.
- A discussion on harsher punishments for students and teachers who are racist.
- A desire that communication about actions taken by the school surrounding these issues will be transparent.
- A commitment to collaborate with the school in order to support the transformation journey.
- Proposal for the use of an external party or expert to resolve racist incidents at Saints.
- Discuss the current disciplinary processes at Saints and to get further clarity from the alumnae on their suggestions about how best the school could go about this when the case involves a minor.
- Share further information on the existing structures and processes that are available on the campus and discuss the gaps in the present structures.
- Solicit feedback and suggestions from the alumnae on the how to improve these structures and processes.
- To have meeting attendees share their expertise to support the Saints community going forward in order to foster change.
- Discuss educating and rehabilitating those that have transgressed against Saints learners
- Exploring discipline as part of learning process and restorative approach to disciplinary action.
- Get guidance from alumnae in terms of other areas that Transformation Committee could focus on.
- Obtaining understanding from the alumnae about how Saints can decolonise education, foreground indigenous knowledge and African philosophy.



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- Further engagement on how to change current Saints structures:
 - How we can improve and add value to those structures?
 - How are these structures suited to addressing issues that have been brought up through the alumnae's letter of demand and in this meeting?
- Discuss the use of an external party to adjudicate racist incidents at the school.
- Make sure that everyone feels acknowledged and heard and is confident that action will be taken in some shape or form.
- Go through what the school has done so far for the purposes of transformation (including failures and successes).
- Intent is to listen, learn, and answer questions.

Notes on Agenda Items as discussed:

3. Statement to Broader Saints Community

- Saints alumnae would like a sincere apology from the school. The official apology needs to ensure that:
 - It validates the pain that is felt by Saints alumnae of colour due to their experiences at the school. Phrases like 'we accept' or 'we are committed' should be used as part of acknowledging the hurt caused by experiences students have had at the school.
 - It demonstrates a commitment to making sure that there is intersectional change and transformation in the school.
 - It should use specific words that would illustrate harm that has been allowed by the school such as racism, classism, bigotry etc. The language of the apology should not be watered down.
 - The apology must be public to the broader Saints community
- Alumnae also noted that in the letter that was released earlier in the week, there was a big emphasis on transformation resources that the school has available, but the apology must acknowledge that these measures are ineffective.
- It should be noted that the apology will be the starting point but an apology by itself is not enough.
- An important debate arose regarding who the apology should come from?
 - There was a clear recognition that *the school is us* therefore the apology must come from the whole school system. There was a clear reference to the complicity of all structures of authority at the school that have directly and indirectly allowed the hurt to continue.



- The public apology would need to come from the Transformation Committee, Alumni, Methodist Church, the Council, the Executive Leadership, the Parent Association and other structures of the school etc.
 - There was a recognition that the school is not an amorphous body, but is made up of various constituent bodies, with decision-making power, that all form part of the governing structure. Therefore whilst the College will issue the apology, it needs to be clear that it comes from specific parts of the Saints community. It cannot just be from St Stithians in general.
 - It is more the decision-making bodies in the school community that need to apologise. This would include the PTA and OSA.
- What would make the apology authentic:
 - Apologise that even with the transformation committee and transformation structures that exist at Saints, the school continues to hurt learners, specifically black learners and learners of colour.
 - Do not apologise for “possible experiences of racism” as that invalidates the pain felt by students of colour.
 - Do not include statements such as “innocent until proven otherwise” as it is invalidating and dismissive to the stories that the learners have brought up.
 - Take note that even though there are structures in place, the issues that are being brought up are behavioural.
 - There needs to be an acknowledgement that St Stithians has failed its learners even if it did not intend to do so.
 - Sincere apology should look backwards and look forward. It needs to highlight what Saints has done and thought would be useful. It can also acknowledge that intentions didn’t match up with the impact.
 - The school must be prepared to apologise many more times in the future and to do so from a position of humility.
 - Taking a stance of restorative justice includes giving people the option to reject the apology as the schools actions thereafter will determine reception of the apology.
 - The point of the apology is doing the work and inner reflection that comes with apologising.
 - Learners came to Saints to gain knowledge and a holistic education. The school failed to teach learners about race and other aspects of social identity – this is not holistic and it has resulted in harm.
 - There is an overall apology that various parts of the Saints community need to co-sign. All decision-making bodies must agree to the official statement/apology.



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- The Methodist Church is very open to interrogate its role in perpetuating racism and sexism the School Chaplain indicated on behalf of the Church that they would like to be part of the official apology

4. Transparency and Consistency of Disciplinary Action.

- Alumnae highlighted the need for an independent disciplinary committee since the College has not done well in taking disciplinary action against white racist teachers and learners at the school.
- Alumnae expressed that they see Saints to be fostering a behaviour of protecting white racist individuals instead of protecting the people of colour who are experiencing racism.
- Alumnae want to see disciplinary actions and processes being more transparent and open to the Saints community. People would like to know if something is happening about the harm that has been experienced by learners.
- Alumnae further requested clarity on the criteria used by the school to determine whether an act or behaviour is racist.
- Alumnae recognise and understand that there needs to be an educational aspect as part of the disciplinary process, however an important question emerged: “At what point will Saints decide that certain people have caused too much harm and as such they should leave or be removed from the school system?”
- Alumnae further expresses the need to keep in mind that racism in South Africa is illegal and is a criminal offence. Therefore, punishment can be harsh as these actions could be taken to the police.
- Part of what informed alumnae’s choice to go to social media was to ensure that their situation will be dealt with and that their concerns would be addressed.
- Further questions from alumnae were directed at the OSA:
 - What was the OSA’s previous disciplinary process and what is it now? Is it transparent?
- The OSA representative expressed sadness that the OSA was not given a chance to help and engage with the Alumnae that have brought up the letter of demand. Further proceeded to outline the disciplinary process used by the OSA:
 - If it is a matter involving a current student at the school – the OSA follows the schools’ disciplinary process
 - If it is a matter involving Alumni, then the OSA follows their own process. This has previously resulted in some Alumni being suspended and/or expelled from the OSA due to behaviour.
 - OSA has disciplinary processes in place and is comfortable with them



- There was a general recognition that there is a power imbalance in the process when students need to report racism. It was therefore recommended that racism should always be heard by an outside expert/organisation and that external party must also recommend the appropriate sanction so that it is not only up to the school to decide on the actions that need to be taken.
- Language reinforces the power dynamic that exists between teachers and learners. Some students don't have the vocab to determine what they have gone through. It is difficult for a grade 8 or 9 learner to be able to identify and speak about what they have experienced.
- Victimisation needs to be accounted for in disciplinary processes. What happens after someone reports an incident; how does the school ensure that everyone is protected?
- Further suggestions from the Alumnae included that, for the purposes of transparency, the school should draft and distribute a monthly/quarterly report that provides a high-level view of all the incidents that required disciplinary action. This report will summarise the number of incidents, the severity of each case, the outcomes of each case and a clear analysis of the disciplinary actions undertaken within the period. It was also alluded to that the reports would go a long way to help with communication around the ongoing issues of racism at the school.
- For disciplinary processes, transparency is required so that people know that something is happening; to ensure that there is follow through.
- People that are directly affected by the situation must also be kept informed to know about the results of their case. Transparency does not have to mean that everyone must be told of the full details and consequences faced by those who harm people.
- There was agreement among meeting attendees that transparency about a process and putting everything in public is not the same.
- Alumnae acknowledged the underlying perception that the Old Girls were attacking the school when they shared their letter of demand on social media. They however clarified that they also love their school and social media was used as a strategy to ensure that their demands would be listened to and addressed.
- Members of Council alluded to the fact that the school is currently reviewing the Code of Conduct with an external party. All disciplinary processes from 2015 are currently under review. Alumnae attendees of the meeting were invited to be part of the committee that is reviewing this. The group of 17 Alumnae attendees confirmed that they will have to nominate a few people that would be willing to commit to this exercise.



- The review of the disciplinary processes must explore a clear definition and differentiation between 'independent' and/or 'external' as well as 'transparent' vs 'public'. This will inform who will be involved in disciplinary processes and how communication about the process is done going forward.

There was a brief closed conversation where several members of Council and School Executive were permitted to exit the conversation for 10 minutes as the matter being discussed could be prejudiced by their presence in this part of the discussion.

- Alumnae raised key questions about the differences in punishments that are not consistent for all members of the Saints community? This was in specific reference to a recent incident involving racial slurs.
- Council Head provided clarity on this issue:
 - On 31 May – social media clips emerged featuring various St Stithians pupils. Senior staff members were appointed to investigate this matter. Based on the investigation, recommendations will be made for how the learners will be punished. The punishment is confidential as Saints is following the law to protect minors' rights. However, this does not mean that the school's process is not transparent. The school has included an external body in the disciplinary process. There was a hearing after the investigation where students and the school shared their perspective. Hearings were concluded last Saturday (13 June). Thereafter findings were collated and there will be recommendations for sanctions. The process takes time but it has been as quick as it could be.
- There was a suggestion that perhaps alumnae could help to get a common understanding of how we decide on certain racist acts. How do we determine what is acceptable and not acceptable to say?
 - Alumnae pointed out that people that are oppressed are allowed to reclaim terms that were previously used to denigrate them. At the same time, one black person for example, giving a white person a pass to use the 'n-word' does not apply to all black people giving that one white person the same permission.
 - This situation further highlights how important it is to educate the St Stithians community about race in meaningful and critical ways. These workshops about race, critical race theory, racial literacy etc need to be made compulsory for the whole school.
- Critical race theory needs to be incorporated into the education of Saints learners to ensure that the classroom is a space where learners of colour also feel protected and validated in their identities.



5. Demands outlined in 15 June 2020 communication

- Demands were read out to everyone briefly outlining the intent and what was meant by each demand.
 - There was agreement from all attendees that the Transformation Committee representatives on the call and the Campus Director for Transformation and Diversity along with the Rector's office, will review the demands and then provide a comprehensive response from the school with all the answers required, whilst providing clarity on the school structures that are relevant to the demands.
- Alumnae further raised questions on whether the school does investigations before hiring staff members to ensure that they do not have a track record of racism allegations against them in other institutions.
- Feedback to the Alumnae would also need to respond to the questions about the discrepancies in how staff members are allocated on campus housing, as well as the due diligence undertaken before someone is hired.
- The response will need to detail what St Stithians already does to alleviate the issues brought up and it will also include what can be done in response to issues that have been brought up.
- Response will be spearheaded by Motseki, Reshma, Noma and Celeste.

6. Next steps

- An invitation was extended to the alumnae to give thought to who the legitimate people are to select the content that is appropriate for the changes that need to be made in the curriculum. Where can the school get reliable and authoritative information about what racism is?
- The need for a Transformation Task Force will be assessed once a response to the letter of demands has been provided
- The formal and public apology from the school will be sent out by 26 June 2020. It will be co-ordinated by the representatives of all applicable structures
- The school will invite other stakeholders to provide input on the issues that have been raised in today's discussions, as well as other input that may be beneficial to the school's overall transformation journey.
- The school aims to send out a response to the letter of demand by 26 June 2020 and will communicate should they need more time.



7. Key themes from the session

- Current and past learners of colour from Saints have experienced racism and other types of discrimination. When the issues were brought up, the school often **invalidated their pain**. The school is seen to **protect white people who harm** staff members and learners of colour.
- It is important to acknowledge that **South Africa's history** is bound to affect current race relations therefore it is more likely than not that there is deep rooted racism at Saints.
- Saints should not shy away from being **direct** about addressing racism and bigotry at the institution.
- Women, particularly black women, **do not feel represented** or welcome to share their issues with the OSA. There are conversations around race and gender that the OSA needs to have in order to make it a space where all Alumni can feel welcome.
- There are several points that need to be discussed in future:
 - We need to do to identify the **locus of power at the institution** and share that with everyone so that people can speak truth to power
 - Holistic approach to education includes equipping teachers and learners with the **language and knowledge about racism and its history**
 - Saints needs to think about what work needs to be done to make sure that people can raise issues and trust that there will be **follow through**
 - What kind of evidence would the school consider as sufficient **proof of racism?**
 - **Framing of issues** is important. Instead of saying black girl matters, speak about them as Saints issue or Alumnae issues. What affects black women at Saints affects the whole Saints community and as a result the entire Saints community needs to be actively involved in anti-racism efforts.
 - Saints needs to discuss and think about the following in relation to ISASA:
 - Making sure that Saints does not inherit teaching staff who are racist that have been accredited by the organisation
 - Pressuring the organisation to come up with steps to dismantle racism and other forms of bigotry within private school education in South Africa by including changes to the curriculum at an ISASA level.



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- Punishment needs to be consistent i.e. black learners and learners of colour seem to be punished more severely for smaller misdemeanours (e.g. swearing) while white learners seem to be treated more leniently for worse behaviour (e.g. racist language or behaviour.)
- Attendees of the meeting need to think about how the various parts of the school will be engaged. Perhaps consider inviting parents, boys school, ground staff and other stakeholders to express their concerns and give input to the process.
- It is crucial that the transformation journey going forward takes into account what is happening in the classrooms. This is part of creating a safe environment for minors.