



PCCS 101

-or-

**(Almost) Everything You Ever Wanted
to Know About
Prairie Crossing Charter School,
but Did Not Know Who to Ask**

**A Guide *for* PCCS Parents
by PCCS Parents**

Parent Staff Organization Mission Statement

All parents and staff are members of the Parent Staff Organization. We foster community and support the school to fulfill the mission and vision of PCCS. We achieve this through communication, coordination of volunteers, school-community development and financial means.

Prairie Crossing Charter School Mission Statement

Prairie Crossing Charter School is a public school that transforms our children through academic discovery and interaction with our unique natural, ecological and community resources.

Prairie Crossing Charter School Value Statements

Environmental Stewardship

We respect the Earth and conserve, protect and restore the natural environment.

Ecological Understanding

We believe the natural environment provides a fertile ground for creativity, wonder, inquiry and integrated learning across academic disciplines.

Academic Rigor and Innovation

We use effective and innovative teaching practices that result in consistently high student achievement.

Partnering with Parents

Parents are our children's first teachers and their support and involvement strengthens our school.

Promote Personal Responsibility

Our small school fosters an academic community where students, staff and parents are compassionate, just, caring and health-conscious individuals.

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Introduction

Welcome to Prairie Crossing Charter School(PCCS)! Starting at a new school can be an exciting but also overwhelming experience that often seems to have its own language.

Between “trash-free lunches” (what are those?), SLPs, PSO, MVGPs and SCRIP it’s easy to get confused. Throw in trying to keep all the different buildings straight; Kennicott, Carson, Comstock (and where in the heck is Helle Hall?)—it’s enough to make even the most brilliant parent feel, well...a little lost.

Not to Worry! The PSO or Parent Staff Organization (think PTA) has put together this handbook to help guide you through the fundamentals of PCCS.

Charter Schools 101

The Basics

A charter school is a free, public school of choice that often has specific goals or a unique focus not offered at traditional public school in the area. It is open to all students and no tuition is charged.

The “charter” granted to these schools is a performance-based contract between the school and its chartering authority. This contract addresses many areas of performance including academic rigor, standardized test results, adherence to the stated mission of the school as well as fiscal, managerial and governance standards.

Charter Schools operate unrestrained by many statutes and regulations that apply to traditional public schools. This allows the school to explore innovative teaching approaches and practices. In exchange for this freedom, they are held accountable to their chartering authority to produce positive academic results and adherence to the other components essential to the charter contract. Unlike traditional public schools which may continue to remain open regardless of how they perform, charter schools that do not meet or exceed the standards expressed in their charter contract will not be granted renewal.

The Funding

The bulk of funding for Illinois Charter Schools comes from the State of Illinois. Each student in Illinois is allotted a per capita amount that follows this student to whatever public school they attend. If the student enrolls in a charter school, this money follows them to that school.

Additionally, other revenue streams utilized by traditional public schools are not open to charter schools. The monies allotted by the State to charter schools can only be applied to the general operating fund. For instance, if our feeder districts (Woodland and Fremont) needed additional classroom or office space on their campuses, they could bring a tax referendum to the public for a vote. This option is not available to Charter Schools.

The money needed to erect the buildings that house their students has to be obtained through other avenues such as fundraising, donations and building loans.

Our Charter and You

So, we now understand the basics of Illinois Charter Schools in general but what do the specifics look like for PCCS?

As we mentioned above, Charter schools are a school of choice that often offer a unique focus. The unique focus of the charter granted to PCCS is its commitment to environmental education and stewardship as stated in the school's mission "*Prairie Crossing Charter School is a public school that transforms our children through academic discovery and interaction with our unique natural, ecological, and community resources*".

Our chartering authority is the Illinois State Charter School Commission and our charter contract is presented for renewal every five years. PCCS will be up for charter renewal in 2014.

In the Beginning

Prairie Crossing Charter School was founded in 1999 by a group of individuals looking for an alternate public school choice for students in the Woodland (Dist. 50) and Fremont (Dist. 79) school districts.

Seeing as PCCS encompassed students from two separate districts, we in effect became our own school district. We are governed by a Board of Directors, independent of those of our feeder schools, and are overseen by the Illinois State Charter School Commission, our chartering authority.

The school made its humble beginnings in the Wright School House serving students in kindergarten through 2nd grade. As per the original agreement with the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), one grade level was added with each school year. By the 2005-2006 school year, PCCS was serving students from kindergarten through 8th grade.

As the school population grew, so too did the need for an expanded campus. Vigorous fundraising campaigns and substantial building loans allowed PCCS to move forward on its endeavor to becoming a K-8 campus.

During the interim, students were housed in all manner of facilities ranging from portable classroom trailers (The Laura Ingalls Wilder classrooms) to the Crossroads Church just down the road. Our first facility, The Anna B. Comstock building, opened its doors in January of 2005. Two new buildings followed suit in the fall of 2006; the Rachel Carson Building and the Prairie Crossing School Gymnasium. The PCCS campus now consists of 5 buildings (Carson, Comstock, Gymnasium, Kennicott and Wright buildings).

Who's in Charge?

Your child's teacher is the best place to start when you have questions or concerns. They are the ones who spend the most time with your child during school hours and can offer a wealth of knowledge, education and experience.

The administration in charge of academics and education at Prairie Crossing Charter School consists of Executive Director, Geoff Deigan; Dean of Faculty and Students, Andrea Koeniger; Dean of Environmental Programs, Naomi Hershiser; and Director of Student Services, Kathleen Lynch. When your child's teacher cannot address your questions, they will direct you to the appropriate administrator. The Parent/Student handbook contains a complete overview of the roles and responsibilities of each administrator.

PCCS is governed by a Board of Directors. There are a total of nine board members; six of which are board appointed, three of which are parent-elected. All board members are volunteers and do not receive compensation for this role. Board member terms are three years. Each fall three new members are selected through appointment or election to replace three outgoing members.

What's the Buzz?

Communication Basics

As with any relationship, good communication is the key to success! With so much happening at PCCS, it is important to understand the different avenues through which you can find the information you need.

You've Got Mail!

As we are an environmentally-focused school, most communications are sent electronically to a parent's e-mail address. Please be sure to provide the office and your child's teacher(s) with an email address that is read at least once a day.

Each classroom also has a Parent Coordinator who will send out the classroom calendars each month. The Parent Coordinator gathers volunteering availability and contact information from the parents in your child's class and uses this information to help fill classroom volunteering needs as determined by the teacher.

Extra! Extra! Read All About It!

The PCCS Office sends out a newsletter every other Friday with important school happenings. It is important to read through the entire Friday newsletter so you don't miss any of the "good stuff".

Classroom teachers also send home a regular newsletter which highlights in-class activities and events on alternate Fridays.

In some classes, students have a take home folder (or similar system) that travels to and from school every day. This mode of communication is also known as the "backpack express" and is a vital communication tool for any daily correspondence.

When two or more of your children attend the school, any paper correspondence will go home in the take home folder of the youngest child.

Gear Up!

“Does My Child Really Need a Full Set of Rain Gear?”

In a word: yes. As mentioned in the “Charter School’s 101” chapter, PCCS is an environmentally-focused school. This means that students will go outside in all kinds of weather and need to be prepared for this. Dressing in layers is strongly recommended as are full sets of rain gear (jackets, pants, and rain boots) and snow gear (snow pants, boots, hats and gloves, etc.).

Students will go out in the rain and some areas around the school are quite muddy. It is a great idea, in addition to the appropriate rain gear, to also send an extra change of clothes for students to keep in their lockers. You might also want to stock-up on stain-removers.

To keep the classrooms clean and as mud-free as possible, students typically remove their shoes before entering the classroom and wear closed-back slippers. Students will need a clean pair of athletic shoes to keep in the classroom for gym class. It truly is best to have an extra pair kept at school for this purpose—it is no fun to miss out on gym for not having the proper footwear.

You Are *HERE*

The campus at PCCS consists of five buildings. These buildings are named for people known for environmental stewardship.

Kennicott: houses the school offices, staff lounge and art and Special education classrooms

Comstock: houses students in kindergarten through 4th grade (and is also where **Helle Hall** is located)

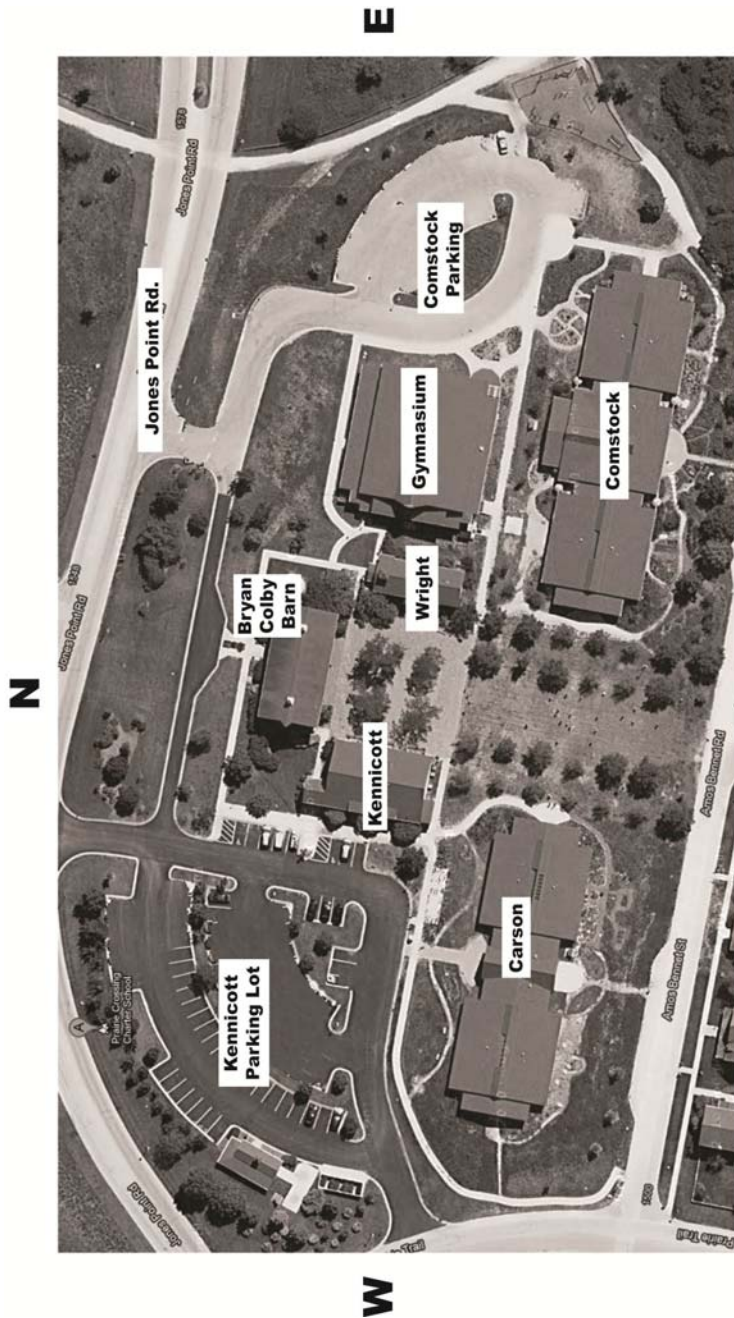
Carson: houses students in 5th-8th grade

Wright Schoolhouse: the upper level houses our computer lab and Victoria Post Ranney Environmental Library; the lower level houses some special education offices

Gym: where Physical Education classes are held as well as basketball games, school dances and Family Fun Nights.

Most of the buildings remain locked during school hours. If you are at school to volunteer, you must first **sign in at the office and get a visitor’s badge**. On both the Comstock and Carson buildings, there is a button to press by the entrances nearest to Market Square. After signing in at the office, please proceed to these entrances and press the button. The office will then notify the classroom to send someone to open the door for you.

Also on our campus are the **Byron Colby Barn** and **Market Square**. These areas belong to the Prairie Crossing community. The Byron Colby barn is used by PCCS occasionally for special school events. Market Square is used daily for morning gathering and recess.



Aerial View of PCCS Campus

What’s for LUNCH?

At PCCS, all students are encouraged to bring healthy, trash-free lunches. A trash-free lunch and snack is exactly what the name implies; a lunch/snack that is packed in a way that produces the least amount of trash possible. Instead of purchasing individually-wrapped items and juice boxes, parents are encouraged to buy in bulk and utilize reusable containers.

Why go trash-free? It is estimated that if every child adopted a trash-free lunch (including finishing all of their food and composting), we could divert more than 3.5 billion pounds of trash from our landfills. Packing trash-free lunches is a small action that can have a huge, positive impact on our environment. **This fits right in with our school value of environmental stewardship.**

Visit the following websites for some great ideas!

www.kidskonserve.com

www.wastefreelunches.org

www.laptoplunches.com/bento-menus

We realize that even the most stalwart trash-free practices will produce some amount of trash, but the goal is to reduce the overall amount of trash created when packing lunches. At times the task of packing lunches this way can seem tedious but it helps to remember that not only is it better for the environment—it is usually much more economical too! Most classrooms have microwaves for heating lunch items.

Farm to Table

For the past several years, the school has offered an award-winning “Farm to Table” lunch program that featured a food crop that had been planted, cultivated and harvested by the students.

We are planning six Farm to Table meals this year. Watch the website for more information.

Carpool

The Carpool Number

Each family is assigned a carpool number. Even if your family does not ride-share with another, **all students are dismissed by their carpool number** so it is important they know what that number is. You can obtain your carpool number through the office.

The Morning Routine

Students are dropped off each morning in the Kennicott/Carson parking lot. **You must enter the parking lot off Jones Point Road.**

- All students must be dropped off in front of the Kennicott Building (by the office)
- “Morning Greeters” will open car doors on the passenger side only to ensure your child’s safety
- Students will proceed to Market Square until 7:55am

For safety and security reasons, NO students are to be dropped off on Prairie Trail or Amos Bennett Street or in the Comstock parking lot.

Parents are welcome to park and walk students to morning recess in Market Square, weather permitting. There will be supervision on Market Square beginning at 7:45am.

At 7:55am the bell will be rung for students to line up and enter the building. In severe weather children go directly to their classrooms. School begins promptly at 8:00am. If your child arrives after 8:00am, you will need to walk your child to the office and sign them in for the day.

The Kindergarten Afternoon Routine

All Kindergarten students will be picked up in the Comstock parking lot. On early release days, Kindergarten pick-up will take place in the Comstock lot with the rest of the student body. Allow extra time for pick-up on early release days.

The use of cell phones in the ACTIVE carpool line is prohibited per state law.

The Afternoon Routine

This is where your carpool number becomes important! Your family carpool number and the carpool number of any other students you are picking up should be located on the passenger side of the front window in large numbers.

- Enter the Kennicott parking lot from Jones Point Road (by the office)
- Turn immediately right and form two lines and follow the road around just like the morning drop off
- Merge into a single line after the mail boxes
- Turn right in front of Byron Colby Barn and follow the lane around to the Comstock Parking lot
- Pick up is to the east of the gym
- Staff members will open car doors on the passenger side only
- Exit onto Jones Point Road from Comstock parking lot

Please help your child to memorize his/her carpool number. Please do not interrupt carpool lines for conversations. If you wish to speak to a teacher, please call him/her after school. The carpool line is just too busy for good parent-teacher communication. **Due to staff and student safety, if your child misses their number and does not arrive when your car is in the pick-up zone, you will need to pull through and get back in line.**

Dismissal for grades 1-8 begins at 3:30. Cars usually begin lining up for afternoon carpool around 3:00 starting at the Comstock lot. Please note: Kindergarteners are released at 1:00. **On Early Release days ALL students are picked up at 1:00.**

Around 3:20 a teaching assistant will come around to record the carpool numbers from the waiting vehicles. The assistant then relays these numbers to the office via walkie-talkies. The office will then use the school’s intercom to dismiss the students by their carpool numbers.

As in the morning, drivers are encouraged to pull their cars far forward to allow for the most doors to be opened per stop. Doors are opened either by teaching assistants.

Office Pick-Up

If you have a special circumstance that require your child(ren) to leave early or right at 3:30, special permission will need to be given by the administration. You will need to park in the center section of the Kennicott parking lot (by the office), sign out and pick up your child(ren) from the office. Procedures for this are posted in the office waiting area.

Walkers/Bike Riders

Children who walk or bike to school may enter the school grounds either by crossing Jones Point Road near the Kennicott parking lot or at the corner of Amos Bennett Street and Prairie Trail. There will be a crossing guard present at each of these locations from 7:45-8:00 am each morning and from 3:30-3:40 p.m. each afternoon.

Walkers and bike riders are dismissed before carpool starts to get students on their way before traffic starts. All bikers and walkers need to stay off the grass area between the Rachel Carson and the Anna B. Comstock Building, and to walk on the sidewalk only.

All bike riders and skateboarders are required to wear helmets.

Carpool Etiquette

Be kind to the people who open your doors! They are out in all kinds of weather to help the line move quickly.

NEVER pull around stopped cars in the carpool line even if all your carpoolers are securely in place.

Never enter the carpool line off of Prairie Trail Road.

Waiting for afternoon carpool to begin is a great time to catch up on phone calls, but once the first children are dismissed **hang up that phone!**

Here a Fundraiser, There a Fundraiser, EVERYWHERE a Fundraiser...

Many parents new to PCCS are quickly overwhelmed by the different fundraisers offered at the school. There are several groups within the school fundraising for a variety of things—and it can get confusing. Not to fret—the PSO is here to help pave the way to understanding the different fundraising groups within the school and where the money goes.

The most important thing to remember when it comes to *all* fundraising at PCCS is that participation in any fundraising activity is **strictly voluntary!** Children will not be discriminated against in any way if parents are unable or choose not to contribute financially to the school.

Because charter schools do not have access to the same revenue streams as traditional public schools, a portion of the school's operating budget comes directly from fundraising income. The other main fundraising groups at the school include (but are not limited to): PSO, Band Boosters, and the 8th Grade Virginia trip.

It is important when looking over information regarding a fundraiser to pay attention to where the money is going. That way, you can make sure your money is going to the group you intended.

PSO Fundraising

Revenue generated via PSO fundraisers will be used to support PSO programs and activities such as: Family Fun Nights, Student and Classroom Grant programs, Teacher Reimbursement Program, Leadership Awards, Staff Luncheons and the school directory—just to name a few.

The PSO has structured the majority of its fundraisers so that families are not asked to spend any extra money but asked to spend their money in a different way or collect things that would normally be discarded. Following is a brief explanation of the ongoing fundraisers that support the PSO:

SCRIP

SCRIP is a great way to raise money for PCCS because it doesn't require you to spend any more money than you normally spend doing your weekly shopping. PCCS buys gift certificates at a discount, and then sells them at face value, making a profit on each sale. You just purchase the gift certificates for the stores you usually shop and then spend them like cash! There are many retail stores, grocery stores, gas stations and restaurants that participate. Using SCRIP costs you absolutely nothing. These are funds you are already spending in the community, with or without SCRIP. Using SCRIP allows our local merchants to support PCCS. More information and order forms are available on the school's website. ON-SITE SCRIP sales take place every Friday during morning and afternoon carpool.

Box Tops for Education

The Box Tops program is another easy way to help the PSO raise funds that support PCCS. Simply clip the Box Tops "coupon" from the packages of products you normally buy and send them in. For every Box Top collected, the PCCS PSO receives 10 cents. It sounds like a small amount but those little clippings typically bring in around \$1,500 annually for our school! **Keep an eye out for Box Tops on products in keeping with our school mission and values.**

Holiday Bazaar

Every year in December, families are asked to send in gently used items to be used as "stock" for our very own boutique which is set up in the gym. Children are then able to shop for family members with all items costing \$1.

The gifts are then wrapped by our bevy helpers. Not only is this a great way to practice our mission of reusing but it is an event that for many students is one of the highlights of the year. Many families set aside a box in their garage or basement to collect items throughout the year that would be appropriate to donate to the Holiday Bazaar.

New To You Clothes Sale & Textile Recycling Event

Each fall, the PSO collects sellable clothing, shoes, and outdoor wear as well as stained and unusable fabrics and textiles (lonely socks, ripped towels and stained sheets). We have the clothing sale and then all items not sold as well as all those stained and unusable fabrics are bagged up and picked up by Chicago Textile and Recycling (www.chicagotextilerecycling.com). They pull out what is usable to donate and the rest is recycled into insulation or rags. Everything is used which fits in perfectly with our school's mission.

Many Hands...Make Light Work

This adage is as true at PCCS as it is everywhere. Integral to the success of our school is the opportunity parents have to volunteer in a variety of ways at PCCS. Whether it is opening car doors, helping with lunch or chaperoning on field trips—opportunities for sharing your talents abound! While all these chances to volunteer at PCCS can, at times, seem overwhelming, it is important to let your personal interests and gifts guide the areas to which you lend your time. Volunteering is a great way to meet new people and get to know your children's school environment on a very personal level.

“Schools with strong parent involvement programs experience profound benefits for students, parents, teachers, and administrators. Research shows that when parents are involved in students' education, those students generally have higher grades and test scores, better attendance, and more consistently completed homework.”—National Parent Teacher Association

There are a few ways you can learn about current volunteering needs at PCCS. You can check with the classroom parent coordinator for in-class volunteering opportunities, contact the PSO Officers to find out where help is needed with PSO-supported events, or contact the school office to offer your time for school-wide events.

As with fundraising, PCCS is first and foremost a public school, therefore volunteering is encouraged but absolutely NOT required by any family. Children will not be discriminated against in any way if parents are unable or choose not to volunteer at PCCS.

Conclusion

Well, that sums up the basics. We understand that this is a wealth of information and you may have questions that go beyond what we have addressed here. Please do not hesitate to contact one of the PSO officers listed below with any additional questions. Even if they cannot answer the question directly, they will do their best to point you in the right direction.

Again welcome to Prairie Crossing Charter School—we are genuinely glad you are here!

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