

Greenwich Special Education Advisory Council Meeting Minutes

September 20, 2022
Zoom meeting, 6:30pm

A. Attendance:

- a. SEAC Voting/Alternate Members: Jenni Reynolds, Abby Anders, Andi Cosby, Elizabeth Forger, Jennifer Dunn, Jennifer Kutai, Kimberly O'Donnell, Donald McGuire, Audra O'Donovan, Caroline Lerum, Daria Pestone, Jenn Donat, Virginia Plath-Kelly, Dawn Zimmerman, Kathy Walker, Courtney Powers, Robyn Leader
- b. SEAC Non-Voting Members: Dr. Stacey Heiligenthaler, Michael Mercanti-Anthony
- c. SEAC General Members Leah Zilich, Naomi Nova, Sarah Damsky, Lindsey Keller Eisenstein, Elizabeth Lynch, Diana Martinez, Lori Mancini, Emily Curry Brown, Annabella Jucius,

B. Welcome and Opening Remarks from Chairperson

- a. Jenni Reynolds introduced herself as new Chairperson of SEAC, and had general members of the public introduce themselves as well. Jenni thanked those members who completed the survey to start off the year, and shared that all members are involved to help make changes that will benefit the children in the district, and many specifically mentioned that they appreciated the collaboration among various stakeholders. Jenni discussed that meetings will start on time and that every effort will be made to ensure efficiency within the meetings.

C. Public Comment : None

D. Approval of Meeting Minutes for 5/17/22

- a. Motioned by Don McGuire and seconded by Abby Anders. All in favor, none opposed, minutes approved

E. Vote on proposed language change to by-laws regarding vacancies and alternates

- a. Current language: "Alternates may be appointed to the board upon a majority vote thereof when a vacancy occurs."
- b. Proposed new language: "Alternates will automatically be appointed to the board as vacancies occur for the position they qualify for. If there are more alternates than vacancies, a lottery will be held to determine which alternate member will be appointed to the board."
- c. Council member question was asked regarding quorum. Jenni clarified that the council has 21 Voting Members. In order to have a quorum there needs to be at least 11 members present and of the members present, at least 51% need to be parents.
- d. Discussion ensued and suggestions were made to adjust the new language to explicitly designate which alternates would be able to replace which roles (eg parent alternate can only fill a vacant parent position, teacher alternate can only fill the matching teacher position).
- e. Vote was taken with this stipulation in place: Don McGuire motioned, Jennifer Kutai seconded. All in favor, none opposed, language change passed.

F. Discussion of open positions

- a. Currently 6 open spots: 3 parents ,2 general educators, 1 related service provider

- b. Jenni thanked those that moved on from the district or from the positions related to their previous SEAC roles.
- c. With new by-laws language in place, the two Parent Alternates, Kim O'Donnell and Daria Pestone move into 2 of the vacant Parent Voting Member positions (KO term 2024, DP term 2023) and the two Teacher Alternates, Courtney Powers and Jennifer Dunn move into the 2 General Educator Voting Member positions (both term 2023).
- d. This leaves the following vacancies remaining: 1 Parent Voting Member, 1 Related Service Provider Voting Member, 2 Parent Alternates and 2 Teacher Alternates. A lottery will be publicized and held within the next month.

G. Discussion and approval of new working committees

- a. Jenni Reynolds discussed closing out last year's Working Committees (IEP/504 Implementation and Eligibility), since work was completed while continuing with the two Standing Committees, Enrichment and Nominating.
- b. Surveys sent out prior to the meeting narrowed interest in the following areas: MTSS/Eligibility, Consistency throughout the district, Education/Staff Implementation or Professional Development and Behavior Management Strategies including Restraint and Seclusion.
- c. Discussion on new working committees was opened to both voting and non-voting members. Key discussion points included:
 - i. Could professional development be somehow under both Behavior and Consistency?
 - ii. MTSS was discussed at last week's BOE meeting and will be a big component of the 5 year plan.
 - iii. Eligibility was already covered in previous SEAC committee work. There was some confusion about the language MTSS/Eligibility and clarification was made that it was found that students were in MTSS for a significant amount of time before being eligible for special education, so the topics were combined in previous committee work. There was suggestion that this could continue to be looked at within new committee work, and that council members had questions as to how previous committee work and recommendations will be handled by the district and BOE.
 - iv. A question was raised as to whether Mental Health should be another consideration for committee work given the effect of the pandemic
 - v. Discussion ensued as to whether behavior management and mental health could be combined. Some spoke that Behavior management is more about response to challenging behaviors, and that both topics are vast and it would be hard to capture both in one committee. Others brought up that special education students have behavior management situations more often than non-special ed students while the same correlation may not be there for mental health. Others mentioned that more students are probably qualifying or needing to qualify for additional services for mental health post pandemic.
 - vi. A comment was made that we could potentially fold in consistency across the district into behavior and mental health.

- vii. Some members expressed concern over restraint and seclusion practices. Dr. Heiligenthaler stated that there were only a handful of students who were restrained last school year. In the chat it was asked if any schools have seclusion rooms. She clarified that there are no seclusion rooms in GPS buildings.
- viii. Jenni Reynolds requested that a decision be made about sub-committees. The three choices were:
 1. Committee on mental health: behavioral health and safety for children in crisis.
 2. Committee on behavioral interventions for students with challenging behaviors.
 3. Consistency in programming and implementation of interventions across the district.
- ix. A vote was taken via the chat (SEAC Voting Members only) and #2 and #3 were (above) were determined this year's Working committees.
- x. Motion to approve by Dawn Zimmerman and seconded by Audra O'Donovan. All in favor, none opposed. Working Committees finalized.
- xi. Jenni Reynolds will send out sign ups for all four committees (working and standing). She encouraged that members reach out to people they know who have expertise in these areas who might join us and be involved.

H. Remarks and updates from Dr. Heiligenthaler

- a. Welcome back! Excited for another school year. Updates are on the Thursday's BOE agenda and are on board docs. Encouraged everyone to watch the board meeting.
- b. New hires at the end of last school year, who are now up and running in their roles.
 - i. Leah Zilich: Special education coordinator for the high school
 - ii. Teresa Fox: Special education coordinator for middle school
 - iii. Cara Vitolo: Special education coordinator for preschools and their associated elementary schools
 - iv. Karen Vitti has returned for elementary coordinator.
 - v. New out of district placement manager. Interim program administrator for Windrose is also on board. New Assistant Principals and interim Assistant Principals. (Check website for names and schools)
- c. Office of Special Education and Supports updated a lot of processes over the summer
 - i. Moved away from director's advisory to smaller groups called professional learning communities in groups by school levels.
 - ii. Doing walk throughs of other schools with building APs to see how things are implemented in the different buildings by different staff and what that looks like.
 - iii. Dr. Heiligenthaler stressed the importance of consistency across all buildings and said that she is the consistency across all buildings, and the coordinators are the consistency among the school levels.
 - iv. MTSS was brought up last year. Spent last year working on the MTSS manual. The manual is being rolled out to schools now. Bi-weekly meetings with leadership on this.
- d. Programming

- i. Co-teaching K and 1st grade started this year.
- ii. Placement for preschoolers based on need and putting them in best program for them.
- iii. Science is now included in co-taught classes in the high school. All special ed teachers at the high school have academic labs and co-teaching in their schedule.
- iv. Professional development is still going strong. Visualizing and verbalizing (through Linda Mood-Bell) was rolled out last year. Continuum of teaching that will be ongoing. Three-year plan for consistency moving forward.
- e. New IEP system in the state
 - i. SH asks for grace as they navigate the new system.
 - ii. For PPT meetings there is not a change of content, the IEP format and process is what changed.
 - iii. Written prior notice is now a separate document.
 - iv. There is a parent portal section that parents will have access to.
- f. Strategic plan is in board docs with 6 goals.
 - i. Parent and community engagement is a big one. Ensure every school does at least quarterly events to engage, in addition to the district workshops and speakers. More positive phone calls to increase positive engagement with parents.
 - ii. Improving students' sense of belonging, part of mental health initiatives and social emotional learning.
 - iii. Have hit the ground running continuing the work from last year. Value the partnership with the special ed department with the parents and community members.

I. Q and A with Dr. Heiligenthaler

- a. What open positions remain in special education teams? 3 ½ psychologist positions open (1 is temporary for maternity leave). For the student services roles there are interim fill ins. Actively trying to fill with permanent staff. Open paraprofessional positions that HR is working on – Dr. H did not have the exact number in front of her. There was confusion about benefits over the summer and many paraprofessionals resigned in the summer. The positions do have benefits during the summer, so HR is being sure to emphasize this in rehiring.
- b. Who is handling PPT's at Cos Cob? Karen Vitti is covering them.
- c. How has roll out been of co-taught classes been and which schools have them?
Elementary: only Cos Cob. Middle: Central and Eastern have had them, and Western added them this year. At the HS no more than 45% of special ed in co-taught classes. Inclusion specialist supporting co-teaching roll out. Co-taught classes in the HS is the same content, just additional support.

J. Adjournment

- a. Look for announcement for lottery for new members and committee signups.