

Greenwich Special Education Advisory Council
Meeting Agenda

November 15, 2022
Zoom meeting, 6:30pm

- A. Attendance
 - a. SEAC Voting/Alternate members: Robyn Leader, Dawn Zimmerman, Jennifer Kutai, Leah Thornton, Andi Cosby, Daria Pestone, Don McGuire, Jenn Dunn, Courtney Powers, Beth Forger, Ginger Plath-Kelly, Maya Feldman, Abby Anders, Jenni Reynolds, Caroline Lerum, Audra O'Donovan, Maria Jukoc
 - b. SEAC Non-Voting Members: Dr. Stacey Heiligenthaler, Dr. Toni Jones, Michael Mercanti-Anthony, Karen Hirsch
 - c. SEAC General/Public Members: Elizabeth Lynch, Lindsey Eisenstein, John Hamel, Patricia Minicozzi, Theresa Fox, Joseph Baynes, Suzanne Coyne, Michelle Friedman, Krista Larson, Tina Musilli, Michele Mathews, Danielle Polizzi, Carol-Ann Ball, Amanda Finn, Sabrina Motta, Amanda Finn
- B. Welcome and Opening Remarks from Chairperson
 - a. Jenni Reynolds welcomed everyone and asked that general public members write their names in the comments for attendance/minutes.
 - b. Jenni shared that the SEAC web page has been reorganized, and encouraged people to visit and share ideas for additional engagement with the community.
 - c. Jenni shared updates that the new working committees are underway, both having their first meetings this month. We will have updates from these committees at the next SEAC meeting.
 - d. Jenni shared that we had a successful lottery for new members - lots of interest resulting in 6 new and enthusiastic new SEAC members and many new general membership who are participating in and even chairing the committees.
- C. Welcome to new SEAC members and introductions
 - a. Jenni welcomed the 6 new council members. Because not all were present at this time in the meeting, Jenni postponed formal introductions to the next meeting.
- D. Approval of Meeting Minutes for 9/20/22
 - a. Motioned by Don McGuire
 - b. Seconded by Abby Anders
 - c. All in favor, none opposed
- E. Enrichment Committee Update by Enrichment Co-Chair John Hamel
 - a. New Enrichment co-chair (along with Toni Stabile) presented updates from the enrichment committee
 - b. Winter enrichment (Jan after MLK weekend): considering a disability self advocate (possibly combined with an educational component)
 - c. Vote on topic? Motioned: Caroline Lerum Seconded: Jennifer Dunn
All in favor, none opposed

- F. Q and A with Dr. Jones regarding mental health resources and interventions in the district
- a. Jenni Reynolds noted that there was a lot of discussion around mental health concerns in the district at our last meeting, and that we've asked Dr. Jones to join us tonight to discuss this further with us. Questions were submitted to Dr. Jones ahead of time by Council members. Attendees were encouraged to put their questions in the chat, but Jenni noted that live questions were dependent on time constraints.
 - b. SEAC: The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported that, "one in five children and adolescents experience a mental health problem during their school years." With a continuing rise in mental health issues, would you reconsider implementing anonymous alerts at the middle school grade level?
Dr. Jones (TJ): *Some districts use this at the middle school and many don't - the negative is there can be false alerts between student peers that lead to serious action. GPS does not see the same degree of issues as they do at the high school level. More issues between students in middle school. They will have another discussion about this to determine need.*
 - c. SEAC: How does GPS screen students for mental health?
TJ: *We do not have a formal screener for mental health in Greenwich. It's something they've been talking about - the state has a screener that they are sharing state-wide. GPS is giving it a lot of thought. There are many parents who do not want their kids screened at school.*
 - d. SEAC: As a mandated reporter, what is GPS's responsibility for identifying mental health issues amongst its students?
TJ: *When looking at "mandated reporter", we're talking about if we see signs of neglect or abuse. Whether it's signs pointing to issues at home or in the school environment, they are mandated to report. Mental health doesn't fall into this category unless neglect or abuse are suspected contributors.*
 - e. SEAC: What methods are used to identify children suffering from mental health disorders? What is the staffing model for mental health positions?
TJ: *In the district we are staffed well, but if you ask the administrators we could use more, but are happy to have part time social work staff in all 11 elementary schools (new during COVID). In MS/HS, we also have social workers, counselors. We do have psychologists but a lot of the psychologist time is spent doing the assessment component for special education. Psychologists are very difficult to hire right now. If you ask school leadership, they'd always love more but we are staffed well and very happy to have social work in all 11 elementary schools for the first time in a very long time.*
 - f. SEAC: What is the process that GPS takes to report mental health disorders? Who can report?
TJ: *Not our role to be mental health experts and assessing mental health disorders would be out of the boundary of what we do as a school district. This is where we work with families. If we see something that rises to the level of concern, we work to connect families with the right resources to the families that*

the student needs.

- g. SEAC: Is the report part of the child's record? Where does the report go?
TJ: *Medical records are between the doctor and the child and family. Many children in the district see mental health providers and the district doesn't know about it. GPS does not have access to those outside providers. Those records are between the child, the family and the doctor and are not part of their school record.*
- h. SEAC: What support does GPS offer to students once identified/diagnosed?
TJ: *It really depends on what's brought to the table. For example, if there is anxiety and the team is planning through the PPT process to think about ways to alleviate anxiety, that would absolutely be appropriate.*
- i. SEAC: Does GPS have a responsibility to comply with behavioral treatment plans prescribed by the child's physician?
TJ: *This goes a bit beyond what we do as a school district. If the PPT convenes and there's something that we can do that is part of what a doctor has prescribed, we try to work as closely as we can with the families. Sometimes a physician may want a school district to do something without fully understanding how a school district works and may be outside their capacity to do. It's all case by case. Individualized Education Plans are truly individualized.*
- j. SEAC: With the recent uptick in "swatting calls" across neighboring schools and the broader mental health impacts of these incidents on students and teachers, would you consider having a mental health resources page for ALL Greenwich students/ families and not just for sped families? Neighboring districts do have resources pages available on their school websites with community accessible, quality resources.

TJ: *This is something we are working on right now. We totally agree. We are rebuilding the entire website and it is in development and hope to have these resources up for our families before too long. We want resources easily accessible for all families. We feel very resource-rich in Fairfield County and feel very lucky to have so many options for families.*

- k. SEAC: How can a parent intervene on behalf of their teenager if they suspect a mental health issue or have concerns about potential self harm? What would the initial steps be for a parent to reach out for help within the school district? What is the protocol or follow up after a student expresses suicidal thoughts?
TJ: *This is very individualized, but if the parent wants assistance from the district they can reach out to counselor/social worker/psychologist depending on grade level. They will help problem solve or refer out depending on the situation. If the parent is looking for outside resources or hospitalization we can help with these. Reach out to our staff and can help determine the correct route to take.*
Dr. Heiligenthaler (SH): *Also 211 is available, mental health helpline that can provide resources for those in crisis. School might call if there is extreme behavior against self or others, and parents or students can call directly. Can be used in a crisis and non-crisis times to provide support.*

Provided via chat: *This was created by a district social worker and available for all families: https://padlet.com/kristen_mulhearn/6of9rzzo7s1w1j66*

- l. SEAC: Where can a parent find an outside organization/practitioner for help with their struggling child?

TJ: *This starts with reaching out to your school. If you're in elementary, you can start with the principal if you're most comfortable, or you can reach out to the social workers. In secondary, you can reach out to counselors. Reach out to whoever the family is most comfortable with.*

- m. SEAC: What staff/ administrator is in charge of communicating this information to parents and students?

TJ: *It really starts from the relationships that we build from the beginning of the year - at parent night parents meet the essential staff and making sure parents know what resources are available in their environment. The principals are the point person. In Dr. Heiligenthaler's bi-weekly newsletter, she provides bios on all the service providers available in the district.*

- n. SEAC: Are there any resources or programs being considered for siblings of students with disabilities?

SH: *There are no specific sibling programs, however the school mental health staff if aware, can address issues through other services at the school.*

Shared in the chat: Abilis has a sibling program with activities.

- o. SEAC: What interventions/ staff training is in place to address bullying and bullying intervention?

TJ: *This is one of the most challenging things when you talk about discipline because when you get a bullying case it's often a he-said/ she-said/she-said situation. They do their very best in their investigation to talk to all the right people, actively listen, document everything. From a staff training perspective, it is everything that has to do with 2nd step (k-8 program). 2nd step talks about bullying, how you treat others, respect to one another. Staff are a part of it in managing their classroom, how students interact with one another and how staff interact with students. I think we do a good job. From an investigative standpoint also, we make sure we follow up. We discussed this at our summer leadership - there's no policy/regulation that goes along with this.*

- p. SEAC: A number of parents who reported bullying have shared with us that their children were not treated appropriately and felt that their were punished for reporting. Who can parents go to if they feel this is happening?

TJ: *Parents should start with the principal or in HS, the house administrator. If they feel like that, that's not ok. Don't want anyone to feel punished for reporting. Sometimes bullying can be frustrating because the evidence might not be there to validate how the child felt which can be challenging for the administrator as well. But definitely go directly to the leaders in your building if you feel this is happening.*

- q. SEAC: What is the process for tracking and reporting on bullying? How and with whom are they shared?

- r. TJ: *We have to keep the data at the building level. Data is collected and stays*

at the building level. If a student had an incident to the level of being part of their cumulative folder that would be different. In most cases it stays at the building level.

- s. SEAC: While mental health issues remain on the forefront for students, I feel strongly that parents need an increase in support on how to deal with their children's mental health. What if any opportunities for outreach to parents are there? Even for the most basic issues such as depression or anxiety.

TJ: *The district is offering a lot of opportunities for workshops through the Office of Special Education and Student Supports, SEAC and PTAC most in the evenings, and virtual component, to allow more parents to engage. They've had guest speakers on these issues, several this year already on anxiety and depression. She encourages families to really watch out for these. They try to put most of them in the Friday notes as a recorded link. PTA usually puts these in their newsletters as well. GPS staff also trying to do more of this for more to be available for parents.*

- t. SEAC: Is there a workshop hub on the GPS webpage?

TJ: *There isn't one workshop hub. The website has so much content because there are so many schools that they really have to weigh what to put on without having visitors to the website get lost. Curriculum has a really good structure that allows you to expand at each grade level and perhaps there's a way to do this with workshops as well. Will look into that.*

- u. What is being done to improve consistency across all middle schools as far as mental health is concerned?

TJ: *We have 2nd step (K-8). One building that has been eager/focused - Eastern- on giving teachers capacity to help students understand their emotions, self regulation, day to day feelings and how to respond to students that have a different behavior than normal. They've also had staff opportunities to look at their own self reflection. Dr. Mark Bracket was recently in the district, joint sponsored with PTAC, so people could learn from him.*

- v. SEAC: What is the district doing at the administrative level to increase empathetic responses to unexpected behaviors?

TJ/SH: *She feels we have a very empathetic staff who care deeply about the students. We have 950 educators, some more skillful than others. But even at the high school, they all trained on how to respond to students and were trained on how to be more empathetic. They were trained in restorative practices. It went all year, not just one training. This is something they think the staff are very good at.*

- w. SEAC: Is GPS expanding the budget to hire more counselors for mental health related issues? The schools have stated that they've had an influx of issues since the pandemic and they were all stretched thin. Which makes me concerned that kids whose problems aren't seen as being that "big" are not getting the care they need.

TJ: *We have added the social work component in elementary school and are fairly well staffed at middle and high school. We can always use more. What we*

are seeing more of now is one or two students who are having significant issues who can take more time for one counselor or psychologist. It's trying to look at what are the resources we have in place with our students who have more significant issues, how are we helping the schools...this is something that has been more challenging since COVID. We do try to do a job to reach every student. Some students may find support not just through a counselor but through a teacher, principal or other staff member. We feel we are much better off than we were. The elementary social workers were originally put into the budget through federal grant money. In this current budget we've funded 2 of them and in the next budget (24-25) we'll need to put in 3 more so we can maintain those.

- x. SEAC: If a parent, teacher or student expresses concern regarding anxiety for a student, what is the protocol and next step that is taken?

TJ: It depends, if a parent is expressing, who are they expressing to (counselor/outside psychologist)? What is making the student anxious? Do they have school avoidance because they have trouble leaving their house? Entering the building? We have staff that do home visits. Others have anxiety regarding finals, grades, getting into college. Covid added to a lot of different types of anxiety. It is about individual situations on what is causing their anxiety and working together to find the right help.

- y. SEAC: In middle school and high schools most children interact with the guidance counselors. Are these staff members trained in signs of anxiety and mental health concerns?

TJ: To be a counselor, all of that is part of your programming. Biggest challenge in high performing school district is that a lot of counselors are being sought out by parents for college advising and schedules. They get pulled in different directions so the challenge is finding the balance of time but their training is great.

- z. SEAC: There was a recent article in the Greenwich Times entitled "Greenwich Public Schools Counselors Report Fewer Students with Alarming Behaviors in Post-Covid Era". Can you describe the changes responsible for this reduction?

TJ: We were talking about threat assessments, and what you are hearing across the country is that they are going through the roof. There was a previous GT article that made it sound like our local levels were up. Looked at data this summer pre-COVID and the first year of COVID and saw reports went up, and last year fell back down again. She thinks part of the reason for this is being proactive vs reactive. The social workers in elementary have helped us. I think adults are more aware of anxiety because of their own anxiety in covid, and this has made educators stronger and more aware of their environment with young people

- aa. SEAC: Can you explain what a threat assessment is for anyone who is unclear?

TJ: If we think a student is rising to the level of something like self harm, there is a process the district does. Forms are on the BOE website in the policy section.

SH: Whenever a student is showing heightened anxiety, behavior, self harm -

assessment is done and parents are communicated with and decide together best next steps.

bb. SEAC: What prompts a risk assessment and has the number of reportings decreased?

TJ: It did decrease over the last two years (spiked in fall of 2021, and dropped significantly in 21-22). She'd have to look to see what it is compared to pre-COVID.

cc. SEAC: What is the breakdown of risk assessments for elementary school, middle school and high school?

TJ: We can send that out to you. It was in the achievement report but I don't have it right in front of me. It's not as high as you would think when you look at what is happening nationally.

dd. SEAC: How long does it take for the children with a risk assessment to access mental health services? Do we track this data?

TJ: Some families are open about mental health and others see it as a private matter. One challenge can be if child needs hospitalization and if you can find the right placement, if a bed is available. Very individualized by how families deal with mental health.

ee. SEAC: How is GPS addressing the mental health issues that arise after a student is restrained and secluded?

TJ: This is a challenging one, and a circumstance where you're working directly with the families. The good news is that our district does not seclude students, and restraint is last resort. If it is happening, looking at why and what we can do to get the student in a better place.

SH: We had 3 students in the district last year who have needed restraint, some multiple times, but overall a low number within the district.

ff. SEAC: How do you view in-school suspensions, out of school suspensions, expulsions and other similar discipline practices which could potentially alienate a student further?

TJ: Dealing with individual circumstances, hard to give general statement. Not in favor of out of school suspension unless it is a major fight and risk to the greater student community. In school suspension can be great - the students are right there and still getting what they need. Expulsion is not something school districts ever want to do. Sometimes from a legal standpoint you're looking for an alternate placement. You're still supporting the student if they're expelled, it may just not be at Greenwich High School for a period of time. As a state, CT does a good job with this.

gg. SEAC: What other interventions are being offered to these students?

TJ: If a student is suspended, they are still getting their work, but if there is expulsion they also still get their education, just in different ways.

hh. SEAC: What mental health resources are available to staff?

TJ: We have an employee assistance program, so if a staff member wants outside counseling for themselves, that is available. If we see a staff member

struggling we will offer and encourage it. It's their choice but it's available.

- ii. SEAC: Teachers have experienced new levels of stress during the pandemic and in recent BOE meetings across the country. Is GPS building in mental health support for teachers?

TC: *We try to do this in a number of different ways. Last two years there were extra early releases to give back time. Teachers needed more time to set up their rooms, working with GEA to give teachers more time. Trying to support teachers and families/students.*

- jj. SEAC: How do we as a district talk about learning differences and mental health and the lack of empathy around these issues?

TJ: *I think our staff is very empathetic. So many of our staff experienced anxiety during COVID so there is even more empathy around mental health. From a learning difference standpoint I think there is a lot of support for families. This is something we really value.*

G. Live Q and A

- a. What is the plan for social workers at ES level once COVID funding expires? How can we continue to be proactive?

TJ: *Built into next year's budget 2 of 5 positions in operating budget, then 3 in the next year in operating budget (24-25) instead of on grant.*

- b. What role does the school have when a psychiatrist specifically requests outplacement for a child who has severe mental health issues?

TJ: *School works with families. We have a lot of resources that parents may not be aware of that can be utilized instead of outplacement. ESS program (therapeutic day program) where students can stay in middle or high, Wellness Center available at HS, alternate education site at the Bank building. Small environment, personalized teaching, welcoming. Need to help families understand what is available, and can do that in PPT.*

- c. ESS has been used for 14 months without success

TJ: *That's not what I've heard from our families. Dr. Heiligenthaler has had the discussion of whether we should build our own program. Some districts take the ESS model and build their own so that is something that we are researching every program and discussing. We evaluate programs annually to make sure they are working as effectively as possible.*

- d. Is there a dedicated team to mental health in the district?

SH: *Alina and Fabian Boie head up the PBIS and SEL programming, parent*

workshops on mental health. They are our go-to for crisis management. They help support our safe school committee. There are teams in each school but they are the top district go-to. They are out at all of the schools.

- e. You mentioned Eastern doing increased work with the staff. Looking at kids with behaviors who get dysregulated, and with the recent research showing co-regulation as a go-to strategy to help kids who are dysregulated, are there programs that you're doing to give teachers tools for self regulation?
- f. *TJ: I love what Eastern is doing. We explored taking on more PD on this and surveys showed they felt that Second Step provided them the info and they have the support they need. If the teachers don't feel it's a weakness we're hesitant to throw additional PD with all the new curriculum. It's been a balance. Eastern used a grant and felt that it was beneficial to their staff and it's been great. We're doing a lot of components of it in different ways. Second Step is lesson based and gives tools to manage various situations*
- g. Our mental health professionals appointed to PPT meetings?

SH: If a student is working with a mental health provider, that person would be part of the PPT team.

- h. We need more bilingual mental health professionals and could benefit from a crisis support team.

TJ: We could definitely use more. It's difficult to recruit individuals who have that capacity. We agree it's a huge help and continue to work on that.

- i. Is the district considering allocating more funding for special education as funding has decreased since 2013 but need has increased?

TJ: I don't think that data point is 100% correct. This year alone we added 5 positions in special ed and some unique programming. We can always use more. It's being an advocate for the budget. Show support for positions such as the proposed social workers - it's a community effort.

- j. Where is the programming added?

TJ: Two co-teaching classes at Cos Cob and Unique Learner Program for kids with significant special needs. We are hearing that preschool parents are wanting us to consider a Unique program for K-1. We're discussing this when looking at the 24-25 budget. We've reallocated some of our existing positions to have more of that co-teaching at the high school. We also built into the budget assistive technology.

SH: Also added our inclusion specialist to the district and our reading lab specialist.

- k. I agree that a crisis response team would be helpful! We see gen Ed students

and students with IEP's, but when a crisis arises, that takes a lot of our time and we can't see our scheduled students

SH: *Each school does have a crisis team, determined at the building level. If it needs to be reconsidered at a school, please reach out to me. There is a safe school climate staff member assigned from each school that's part of the district safe school committee.*

- I. Will a second teacher be added back to community connections to enhance staffing and support?

SH: *Staffing is dependent on the number of students that are in the program. Always looking at who is coming who is leaving. Community connections has students who turn 22 and leave throughout the year.*

H. Adjournment

- a. Jenni thanked everyone for coming and encouraged involvement in the committee work. Next SEAC meeting is January 10th, 2023.