

ROCHESTER BOARD OF EDUCATION
Policy Committee Meeting of the Whole
December 5, 2013

Attending: Commissioner Cruz (Chair); Commissioners Evans (left at 6:37PM), White, Powell, Campos, Adams, and Elliott (arrived at 6:08PM; left at 6:27PM). Parent Representative: Barbara Van Kerkhove. District staff: Brenda Pacheco, School Chief; Lori Baldwin, Director of Safety & Security; Beverly Burrell-Moore, Deputy Superintendent for Teaching & Learning; Ed Lopez-Soto, Chief Counsel.

Board staff: Debra Flanagan.

Commissioner Cruz convened the meeting at 6:05PM.

I. Student Suspension

Commissioner Cruz stated that the purpose of this meeting is to discuss the current student suspension process, issues to be addressed, and the role of the Superintendent, Board, and management in making necessary corrections. He emphasized the need to devise strategies that are supported by all parties to ensure that the outcome will be successful.

Commissioner Adams commended staff for the work performed regarding suspension issues, and emphasized the need for the Board to establish an overarching vision and guidelines to direct this process. She contended that a consistent district-wide behavioral management and student support approach is needed to promote enhanced instruction for students.

Brenda Pacheco stated that behavioral supports for students have been a concern, particularly because of the impact on school climate and instruction. She described attending a recent symposium that focused on social and emotional strategies, and noted that RCSD has moved away from providing these types of supports to students.

Ms. Pacheco emphasized the need to be more proactive and to focus on prevention in interacting with students, rather than reacting to negative behavior and adopting a punitive stance. She stated that guidelines must be developed that link specific behaviors to interventions, and that the District currently does not have a range of supports to meet the needs of students or their families. Ms. Pacheco asserted that 5-10% of students are responsible for multiple behavioral incidents, and this is the group that the District focuses on --- to the detriment of the other 90-95% of students.

Commissioner Evans stated that the Board and Administration have had this same discussion many times over the years, but no action has been taken. He stated that an excellent report was prepared by Kirsten Barclay, Special Assistant to former Superintendent Brizard, and he inquired whether any of those recommendations have been implemented.

Ms. Pacheco acknowledged that the District has failed to follow through on process and procedure, and that improvements are needed in planning and communication. She stated that the Auditor General has shared many recommendations for improving the suspension process, and the Deputy Superintendent of Teaching & Learning has formed a committee to examine these recommendations.

Commissioner Evans stated that the Administration must examine the processes and practices at schools that are successful, such as School No. 9. He noted that School No. 9 has a low suspension rate, particularly for African American and Latino boys.

Ms. Pacheco replied that there has been a lack of consistency among schools in applying policies and procedures, and that implementation has been left to individual staff members at each school. She described her tenure as principal at the School of the Arts, in which behavioral expectations were clearly delineated to students at the outset of the year. Ms. Pacheco stated that the consequences for different behavioral violations were also clarified, so that students knew the expectations and potential penalties for violating school rules. She asserted that clear behavioral guidelines must be provided consistently in each school.

Commissioner Evans questioned the causes underlying high levels of suspension, particularly at the elementary level. He asked whether this is the result of teachers' lack of capacity or ability to manage classrooms effectively.

Ms. Pacheco responded that teachers have not been adequately prepared for the 21st century classroom: managing challenging behavior, teaching children behavioral expectations, and cultural awareness. She contended that a great deal of professional development is needed in these areas.

Lori Baldwin reported having visited School No. 9 last year, and found that the school identified one group of boys that were responsible for 80% of the disciplinary incidents. She stated that the principal made a point of checking on these students daily: attendance, appropriate dress for school, completion of homework, and adherence to behavioral expectations. Ms. Baldwin cited this consistent focus by the school administrator as a significant factor in minimizing incidents and suspension in the school.

Commissioner White declared that the current situation is embarrassing in terms of the failure of the District to implement processes with fidelity, even when given prescribed guidelines. He stated that these issues have been examined over the years and continue to persist, indicating a failure to manage and to meet students' needs.

Commissioner Adams pointed to a number of serious concerns in the District that have persisted: overuse of suspensions, racial disparities, inconsistencies among schools in implementing processes and programs, insufficient instructional time ----- reflecting a failure to take these issues seriously. She emphasized the need for an overarching vision/guidance and leadership through Board members sustaining focus on these issues, collaborating with District staff and community members, and basing decisions on data analysis conducted by the Auditor General. Commissioner Adams asserted that these steps would provide significant opportunities for improvement in a number of areas in the District, such as behavioral/disciplinary issues, attendance, and student achievement.

Ms. Pacheco discussed the importance of re-examining the Code of Conduct to ensure that the rights of students, teachers, and administrators are clearly delineated in the policy.

Beverly Burrell-Moore noted that families are often challenged as to managing children's behavior, and may be overwhelmed in terms of options for responding. She stated that many parents attended RCSD schools and may have had quite negative experiences, which has led to a deep distrust of the District.

Ms. Burrell-Moore asserted that the school climate determines the behavior that will be tolerated and the opportunities to develop relationships with students and families. She described visiting schools in which there was a complete lack of student engagement, and use of a large number of itinerant staff teaching students in 7th and 8th grade in which students' needs are the greatest.

Ms. Burrell-Moore emphasized the importance of a social/emotional curriculum because these supports are not necessarily provided to students in their home life. She discussed the need to have counselors and social workers available to all students in the early grades to facilitate early intervention, particularly when the foundation for behavioral expectations and self-esteem are being formed. Ms. Burrell-Moore stated that the District must also engage in serious conversations with community leaders to help create a holistic solution, as the level of violence has reached a crisis in schools and in the community.

Commissioner White contended that the District must first focus on following legal and policy guidelines and due process, and ensuring that teachers are performing their job. He asserted that there are no problems with the existing policies, but with the fact that they are not being implemented.

Ed Lopez-Soto concurred, stating that the existing Code of Conduct contains six pages of behavioral expectations and violations, penalties, due process, and guidelines for suspension ---- but this is not being followed at the school level. He described principals attempting to remove "problem students" because of the disruption they have caused, but without due process. Mr. Lopez-Soto observed that the District has a history of pursuing new initiatives, only to have serious problems arise in another area. He asserted that this continual crisis management impedes being proactive in addressing issues.

Ms. Burrell-Moore discussed the problem of school staff and administration not knowing how to de-escalate situations when a child becomes upset or exhibits "problem behavior". She stated that a fundamental shift is needed in focusing more on recognizing needs than on punishing behavior.

Commissioner Campos recalled that she had strenuously objected to eliminating funding for the Positive Behavioral Support program (PBS) during the 2013-14 budget season, yet national studies have recommended this program to minimize student suspension.

Ms. Burrell-Moore responded that there are quite a few positive behavioral support programs, and the District needs a universal system. She described an effective program at School No. 4, which was developed with parent and community support.

Commissioner Campos declared that the District's failure to support programs for more than a few years leaves little incentive for principals and teachers to implement it. She stated that if a principal or teacher does not like a program, they can simply wait a few years until a new initiative is promoted. She emphasized that the lack of consistency in sustaining programs over time leads to considerable waste of resources and no incentive for implementation.

Ms. Pacheco concurred that consistency is the most critical factor, and stated that the problem is that each staff person wants to implement what works for them but not necessarily what is best for the students or for the school. She asserted that most of the problems begin in the classroom, and teachers must be trained to build relationships with their students and to pay attention to events in students' lives before and after school.

Parent Representative Barbara van Kerkhove contended that the District must begin with addressing compliance issues, and then focus on effective ways to revise the Code of Conduct. She stated that all stakeholders must be involved in this revision: teachers, students, parents, and community members.

Commissioner Powell spoke from the perspective of a parent with an at-risk child, reporting that she has been deeply disappointed by the school's failure to notify her of problems. She stated that she has often had to deal with her child's truancy on her own; since her child has not caused problems at school, she has not received any attention. Commissioner Powell stated that she has been left with a sense of overwhelming apathy on the part of the school.

Mr. Lopez-Soto asserted that the problems discussed with regard to suspension also apply to Special Education: students with "problem behavior" are classified for Special Education, while students not exhibiting behavioral problems have needs that go unidentified.

Commissioner Campos emphasized the need for positive behavioral supports, particularly in the early grades, because children will not be able to overcome problems if they do not have a foundation of self-esteem and self-respect.

Ms. Van Kerkhove discussed the use of the PBS program at School No. 12, noting that her daughter was initially enthused about the program but the effect seemed to taper off as she got older.

Mr. Lopez-Soto discussed the importance of focusing on positive behavior and expectations in early childhood, and adapting programs to align with the child's development so that it will continue to be meaningful. He stated that all programs must be adapted in this way, just as parents' disciplinary approaches also have to change with their child's development.

Ms. Pacheco asserted that the District has to recognize positive behavior and character to the same extent as academic achievement, and suggested providing honors and awards to emphasize the importance of character.

Commissioner Cruz summarized the main insights gathered from this meeting:

1. Improve data collection and reporting to ensure accuracy and consistency throughout the District
2. Explore specific areas in which the District is performing well with regard to student discipline, problems with implementing policy, and options to address barriers to implementation
3. Discuss changes that need to be put in place (e.g. social/emotional support curriculum, professional development, etc.) and include in 2014-15 budget
4. Examine models that are effective in specific situations, and identify the factors critical to success
5. Review the report and recommendations from the Auditor General for follow-up

6. Examine strategies for handling difficult behavioral situations, ways to approach the child, and determine whether teachers are capable of handling these situations.

Commissioner Cruz stated that a Policy Committee Meeting of the Whole will be scheduled in January, and it will be vital to have the Superintendent present to discuss these issues.

Commissioner Adams suggested evaluating the implications and costs of policy and programmatic recommendations before including them in the budget.

Motion by Commissioner Campos to adjourn. **Adopted 5-0, with concurrence of Parent Representative.**

Meeting adjourned at 7:41PM.