



ESE ADVISORY GENERAL MEETING, November 20th, 2024, 6.15pm Plantation Middle School

MINUTES

Meeting recording: <https://shorturl.at/XdQ2q>

Call to order 6.23pm (No quorum yet)

Presentation/discussion: Get to know Children's Services Council (CSC)

- Ken King, Director of Public Affairs & Communications, CSC Broward

CSC Broward was established by voter referendum in 2000. Quasi-govt organisation funded by property tax to provide programming for children and families in Broward. Events include Read for the Record, 120k books to pre-K and first graders annually for growing literacy including for students with visual or hearing impairments, and 10k backpacks and school supplies for Back-to-School extravaganza. Help for parents to prepare for Kindergarten. Food programs, homeless support. Committees in strategic plan include Special Needs and Inclusivity.

Eleven-member council; some mandated by statute, some appointed by governor. Mission: leadership, advocacy, resources. Four-month campaign starting January focused on keeping children safe, child abuse etc. Maternal health. Mentorship programs. Looking at expanding Swim Central program to adults; program currently provides reduced rate swim safety lessons for children including transportation from schools. Drowning is the leading cause of death for children under four in Broward. Twenty years of informative CSC shows on YouTube channel.

CSC provides funding to entities incl. ARC Broward, Broward Healthy Star, 211, afterschool providers ASP Sunshine, Forever Families, Museum of Science and Discovery, for services to families and children. A CS rep will endeavour to attend future ESE Advisory meetings.

Family Resource Guide: 200k produced a year in four languages, of which 50k go into schools for parents to pick up. Also downloadable version. It provides info on community orgs and resources. Includes solicited articles for parents on gun safety, mental health resources. Would like assistance from ESE Advisory for an article directing parents to help within the school district. CSC gets a lot of calls from parents asking about services for students with disabilities (SWDs), testing, advocacy, and resolving problems.

Questions:

- Are there resources in the Guide for students to learn a second language? Answer: no. Suggestion noted for next edition.
- Swim safety program: question re inclusion of SWDs. Answer: we look at inclusivity in all our work and we know there aren't enough instructors trained to work with SWDs, Collaborating with Dept of Health to offer more opportunities for young people to get trained in that area.
- Aftercare providers; some not accepting SWDs; how to create enough places for ALL students. Answer: CSC funds \$23m in afterschool programs K-12 and writes into contracts that providers must be inclusive. CSC often gets calls about needing more provision for SWDs. Going to provide info in Guide on providers that work specifically with SWDs in afterschool and summer programs.
- Parent community training provisions? Will look into potential new ways of providing this. About to put training needs out for procurement.

Old business:

Presentation/discussion: Why was nearly \$11m of federal funding for ESE unspent by BCPS last year? - What happened, where do the challenges lie in adequately staffing and servicing students with disabilities, and what happens to that funding now? - Stephanie Acosta Castro, ESE Compliance Director and IDEA grant manager; and Sabrina Sheib, ESE Director of Curriculum.

- We inherited from previous administration....We've been working really hard on the IDEA grant. Including the rollover now all funds allocated for this school year. Have met several times with Chief Financial Officer and budget analyst to put proactive solutions in place to check funds being spent. "It will be spent".
- The only way there could be some rollover again is if money is held back to pay a bill that's not yet been submitted or fulfilled before the end of the year.
- State opens allocation period annually and allocates grant. Every dollar of the money requested has to have a purpose. The state reimburses district expenditures, so BCPS never actually sees/handles the money. In spring, state identifies any rollover amount.
- The money allocated on the grant last year was spent; the rollover from the prior year into last year was not spent. There were other grants during Covid that got used.
- *"It seems like an easy thing...We have to be super careful about what we're spending the \$ on."* Can't just use the rollover on creating new staff because next year that money won't be there and they'd be let go.
- *"We've been working really hard to build positions."* Partnered with universities; just filled three positions from doing that. Increased ways to recruit and retain. If you build positions in a grant, the money for them becomes 'encumbered' and can't be touched. If only some of those positions are filled, that unspent money remains in the grant. Now reviewing them weekly and working with schools to recruit.
- Grant is \$75m, of which \$4.7m is set aside as a 'proportionate share' for BCPS to provide certain private school services - e.g. funds ChildFind, evaluations, private school service plan, instructional resources and related services, consultation, technology, professional devt, parent engagement, printing (posters etc).
- When any of that proportionate share is rolled over, it gets allocated back into the general grant for use by the district after the second year.
- \$65m (including rollover from previous year) is available this year for preK to 22; of which 67% is for instructional services and supports incl. specialized teachers, Autism coaches, paras, program specialists, Assistive Technology specialists, consultative services incl nurses, interpreters, psychiatrists, Deaf and Hard of Hearing interpreters, specialized equipment to help SWDs access their environment/education.
- One per cent of overall grant goes to charter schools.
- *"We feel really really comfortable with how to allocate this grant"*. Next year grant will be \$55m, so will start going through budget in January to project spends. Met budget reviewers monthly last year but due to a lot of unfilled positions the money was being encumbered and gave the appearance of being used when they were not. Monthly budget reviews being held to examine what's encumbered/allocated and what's spent.
- This year, *"now that we really understand"* budget amendment system, staff will ensure spending.
- *"Last year we got to see all the moving parts of why it is a little difficult...what's good about that is the lessons learned that we're now able to take into this year...we know to be super careful...we need to know if there's money that's not being used we need to redirect it and use it on other things."*
- BCPS Chief Financial Office *"taking a vested interest in sitting down with us and looking closely at the grant and to work with the budget analyst..."*

Questions/feedback:

- Chair provided context for the presentation: last year rollover (unspent funds) totalled \$10.9m and previous year was \$10.7m. *"We haven't had explained what did that \$11m incorporate, what went so wrong"* - need lessons learned. *"This isn't a process that can have training wings; we want the grant manager to be*

actually managing the grant.” Where were the vacancies, how many, and how as the year went by did no one identify this? Sheib: budgets are projected on average salaries and money is then encumbered on that basis. Now “we’re recruiting even more; our fill rates are better.”

- How do you make sure principals are filling the positions, if ESE dept doesn’t have authority over principals? Answer: dept does have influence and is finding candidates for interview by principals.
- Concern about principals not making callbacks to candidates, slow/inefficient process of recruitment. Answer: Dept goes to schools to assist with “*tons of training*” and on-campus coaching and mentoring, weekly follow-ups and reviews.
- Can parents expect their children to get more services this year than last year? Answer: that’s an IEP team decision. But we have additional resources for training, in-school support, reducing staffing deficiencies. *“If a student needs something we need to make sure they have it”* - such as assistive tech. Teachers get in-service points for attending trainings, but can’t be mandated to do so. If they take it on Sat or out of hours, they get paid extra for taking training.
- Please can someone communicate to schools not to call parents telling them to take student home due to behavior challenges/incidents. Lack of behavioral staff to support schools, schools without ESE Specialists, students suspended instead of provided necessary supports. What’s being done to plug staffing gaps? Where are the numbers of what was left unfilled, what’s the forward plan for how that will be rectified? Answer: many different funding resources so unless you look at the school staffing report you don’t know who funds it - e.g HeadStart.
- Chair read quote from principal: *“To hear that kind of money is left on the table and I’ve got a teacher and a para with 12 students who are non-verbal and aggressive and we could have had more people that’s not OK. We need people and the only way to have people is to have money...to know that kind of money was left on the table I just don’t get it...”* and *“We call ESE, they tell us call budget. We call budget they say call ESE. We don’t bother calling any more because we’re just fed up.”* Mrs Sheib: *“If it’s a budgeted allocation the budget office is really good about saying if you need it...they look and if they have the numbers they get to approve. There’s no reason why we’d want to say ‘Nah’ we don’t want to approve”* but positions ‘above and beyond’ would need evaluation and approval through the IDEA ‘unique allocation’ process.
- Training needs: why does it have to be so complex. *“I can’t say I’m taking you to this training...so you have to go”* but it is incentivized; teachers get paid a stipend if they take trainings after hours or Saturdays. ESE Dept meets with staff to look at their student data to ensure programming is good, *“if they can’t come to training we bring the training to them. Principals say ‘walk my campus, give me strategies and let’s do a better job for our students...my team and myself are in schools almost every day.”*
- Chair: *“I’d just like to see there’s acknowledgment of the horror seeing there’s any money left on the table for our kids.”*
- Meaningful Inclusion chair: *“What has to be done to get principals to accept support for SWDs because if the school is not friendly to these kids... principals will advertise positions but not do anything about it. We have to get principals on board...we’ve got a lot of parents who are frustrated...you’ve got the money to support it...If a kid has assistance on IEP and still doesn’t have it in Nov...”* Mrs Sheib: *“It’s a mindset shift...there’s not a quick fix. If there was a quick fix the world would be a better place...it’s about recruiting and retaining.”* Steve Moyer: *“If you were waiting to change minds our children are going to be doomed. I’ve been hearing that for decades. Somebody has to be in charge and make things happen not wait for 240 kings in their own little kingdoms to do the right thing.”*
- Statement from a paraprofessional who said there’s minimal training in ESE and it was online only.
- Who determines the IDEA expenditures: - Stephanie Acosta Castro, director of ESE Compliance, is grant manager, plus exec director of ESE, director of ESE specialised instruction, director of ESE curriculum, budget analyst and bookkeeper and recently added Chief Financial Officer.
- Support facilitators are overstretched and caseloads are exceeding 60-70 students. “Small group instruction” can now mean up to 12 students. What’s being done? Answer: Caseloads aren’t as small as

we'd like, working on caseloads, schools may get influx of students through School Choice, ESE dept working with principals to discuss.

- How many schools don't have an ESE Specialist? Diane Eagan, exec dir of ESE: currently two vacancies and one on leave. Dept works with schools to create action plan on how to support IEPs. Question: reports at Bair Middle that there was no ESE Specialist and students not having IEPs serviced? Eagan: *"As far as I know they're getting their services."* Staff were sent to work with school. *"There were some issues with hiring at that particular school"*. If there is no ESE Specialist at a school, a staff member or principal will be designated the Local Education Agency (LEA) rep, ESE dept sets up support plan for school, district staff help organize IEP meetings and works with LEA. Question: is there outreach to parents to give them that point of contact and create communication? *"That's something we'd have to talk to the principal...we wouldn't as an ESE dept..."* Chair asked Regional Supt Dr Ted Toomer if he could follow this up; ensure parent communication is happening, look into how ESE Specialist full-time role is being covered when there isn't one in a school. Sheib: *"I do hear your point and maybe it's important...how do we communicate w/families and make sure they know who that LEA is"* - promised to work w/Dr Toomer to pursue.
- Parent reported that ESE Specialist at her school is new, not sufficiently trained, unsure of what she's doing. Eagan: we have monthly meetings with all ESE Specialists and a half day training every month for new ones, and a hotline to a compliance person, plus Focus training, applied learning. Taking new people to train as ESE Specialists. *"It's a huge job and a lot to learn....we have a lot of supports in place and a lot of training in place."*
- Parent said they asked for an interim IEP review but were told they could only have an annual. ESE dept will follow up. Chair: it's worrying that any ESE Specialist would not know this to be incorrect; suggested it be re-emphasized at the ESE dept's monthly ESE Specialist meeting. Also asked for data on how many parents have been made to bring annual IEP meeting forward due to Focus requirements when one wasn't due.
- Chair: *"We need written clarity what is the deal if parents request an interim IEP meeting or wish to make a no-meeting amendment to an IEP. We need commitment and clarity..the requirements of Focus are complicating this...why can we not get in writing what the deal is?"* Can we make an amendment to an IEP without a meeting; yes or no, without a meeting? Stephanie Acosta Castro, ESE Compliance Director: IDEA and Florida state do allow for tweaks to IEPs with agreement *"however we get into concerns when we start making unilateral decisions outside the IEP team"*. Asked for a previous example from a parent of what might be an appropriate amendment; parent gave example of an IEP goal not being met, said that goal had two components so they asked the school to break it into two goals instead of one without having to convene the whole IEP team for a meeting. ESE teacher, SLP and ESE Specialist agreed breaking down the goal, wording was drafted, agreed by all, amendment made, accomplished through email and 'phone conversation. Acosta Castro: *"Now that ESE Specialist gets pregnant, wins the lottery, takes time off, and you get to your next IEP meeting...what if that IEP doesn't now make it to you...If we're setting a best practice or gold standard we want to make sure we're not having unilateral conversations outside the IEP team."* Parent stated gen ed teacher also agreed the tweak and all parties attached to the goal were aware and agreed. Acosta Castro: *"So in that situation it was (OK), but...v difficult to give a blanket yes or no because what may be appropriate for you might not be appropriate for the next...what if that SLP wins the lottery tonight and never shows up and you never get those documents...by those teachers coming to the IEP meeting and signing and having that attendance...that person cannot come back and say 'I didn't know.'"*
- Chair: parents are being told we can't do this because of Focus, not because of best practice; it is a right under IDEA, with criteria and conditions to be met - but some are told No because of the Focus software requirements - *"That's where the concern lies."* Acosta Castro: *"Because Focus is a new platform I cannot go in an open up a new document and have all the PCG/EdPlan information populate. But if you've had an IEP meeting in September and today you walk into your school and you say 'I want to have an interim because I want to discuss accommodations, you can go into the Focus platform and you can select an interim meeting and all that data you put in there is going to be populated. So if the question is 'Once an IEP is held in Focus, can an interim be done because of the capability of the system' - yes."* (Note: this was **not**

the question). *“But if you’ve never had your child - and this is only during the transition year (from EDPlan to Focus) ...if you’ve never had your IEP done in this system yet, there is no way to populate information from another system in this system without having to put the information into it.”* Chair: Software is overruling law. Acosta Castro: *“The law says we can do an amendment in writing on a sheet of paper and attach it to the back of your IEP. Now do I think that that’s the best practice?...I went to a meeting in a v small district for a family member and they took out a sheet of paper from the copy machine and wrote an amendment on it and that’s what they documented as an amendment and they stapled it to the back of the IEP. Is that allowable? Yes. Is it best practice? No. And unfortunately yes we changed (from EDPlan to Focus) and now we have to populate that data into the new system...because of the transition....we’ve talked a lot today about gaps and deficits and things we’re training and working on so I think if we’re going to move to that gold standard...can you do it? Yes. But is it the best?...”*

- Chair: We have asked for this in writing. *“Please put in writing if I want to make a minor tweak to IEP and law states there’s a way of doing it, why can’t I. Or can I?”* Multiple requests for this have been made....we’re being told we can’t because of Focus...or if ESE Specialist spends hours copying and pasting. Credit to all doing good work *“but we need to square with parents about where the deficits are. We want to hear acknowledgment, not pushback.”* Meaningful Inclusion chair: *“It would be moving forward if we stepped back to EDPlan.”* Schools can’t do ESY determination on IEP; ESE Specialists having to make manual notes and reminders relating to hundreds of students. *“It’s a problem, there are some really really serious issues with the system and its holding everything up...and parents are really up in arms about it.”* Chair: *We need to know how the deficits are being covered, how our IEPs and their fidelity and compliance is being monitored because we’ve had zero answers....from meeting to meeting to meeting....We’re not bringing new things here, we’re bringing things that were warned about up front...We get zero answers other than “it’ll be fine.”*
- Bach Todaro, chair of Down Syndrome subcommittee and sec of ESE Advisory has Hero’s Award from Exceptional Theatre Company in her role as Executive Director of the Broward Gold Coast Down Syndrome Org.

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