



ESE ADVISORY COUNCIL MEETING SEPTEMBER 18, 2024

Indian Ridge Middle School 6.15pm

MINUTES

Call to order: 6.22pm. Chair Jacqui Luscombe.

Guest: Dr Howard Hepburn, Superintendent, Broward County Public Schools

- Staff need to be “well resourced, well supported and well guided.”
- Intro'd Trey Davis, new Chief Information Officer (Technology)
- BCPS theme: “Believe, Empower, Achieve. One Broward.” Great quality learning experiences change trajectory of kids’ lives and communities.
- “We have challenges and we sit down around the table and figure out how we can tackle those challenges. If we don’t have the bandwidth to address those challenges, we start asking additional people to come with the knowledge and skill sets that they have to help us understand our challenges the best, see what type of strategies we need to use to address them.”
- Became an ‘A’ graded district. But “all of our students do not have an ‘A’ experience, I know that. That’s our goal, to ensure that every student has that ‘A’ experience and transform all schools into an ‘A’ school.”
- “If there’s something we’re not doing right, please let us know...Feedback is a gift. It helps us get better quicker.” Re emails: “I do see them, I do forward them, I do save them.”

Parent Q&As with the Supt: (*Italics are quotes from the Supt*)

- BCPS Cameras in ESE Classrooms program: “*Transparency is our best friend...it brings a level of assurance to our parents that we don’t have things going on in that classroom that should not be going on. “We have the equipment, we’re taking the interest in having cameras in certain classrooms so we’re going to fulfil all that.”* BCPS policymaking process ongoing as state legislation expired. Diane Eagan, ESE Executive Director, said an ESE dept-led “feedback meeting” tmrw would include “a variety of stakeholders that will be impacted by the policy across the district – some Advisory representatives, some parents and also some school-based people...We’ve already had the policy with Legal, they’ve given us some feedback but we really wanted to expand that for tmrw.” After draft policy has gone to a School Board workshop for discussion, it will be ‘looped’ through bodies including ESE Advisory for input.
- Disparities in student/parent experiences between schools: Need more consistency across schools are all providing equal opportunities, positive energy & attitudes, and an inclusion mindset. Supt: “What you’re describing is variance from school to school...the way we alleviate that is you get into professional learning experiences and share best practices...that support inclusive environment and high expectations...We’ve made shifts with leaders...to put the right people in certain seats...I’m a champion of inclusion..” He has instructed Human Resources dept to provide stipends to Special Olympics coaches in schools, to bring them in line with regular athletics coaches.
- Parents of students w/Autism exploring other schools in other counties because needs aren’t being met. Some parents would like to see BCPS bring a version of the S/Fla Autism Charter School to Broward. Supt:

The current Redefining Schools process is looking at providing more innovative programs and models. Also working with Broward League of Cities to be first county in nation to be designated an Autism-friendly county. Asked to be sent follow-up about the school.

- Students w/Diabetes: in previous years BCPS has provided well for them but this past year has taken a downturn. Examples: parents not notified when nurses change at schools, at least two schools have had four nurses already this year, nurses not trained in Type 1 – resulting in one known case in a parent withdrawing their child from school due to safety concerns, schools not providing IEPs/504s and accommodations, new cellphone policy causing obstructions from the Coordinated Student Health Services Director despite the Supt's personal assurance it would not, one family unable to get a 504 now for over a year, parents being required to go through main school phone to get through to nurse - or go to voicemail – when calling to address critical medical issues, complaint from an endocrinologist that BCPS staff called their office to demand medical orders be changed minus discussion w/parents and threatened that child would not be allowed in school if they did not, student told that if he needs help he must call 911 and nurse cannot help him, staff editing a 504 draft to remove accommodations that have been standard for Students w/Diabetes in BCPS for ten years & backed by American Diabetes Assocn. Lack of compassion, understanding and customer service. Supt has tasked his team to come up with “*robust customer service initiatives*” to unwind bad practices. *“I don’t want the end-of-the-year survey crap. Nobody does that survey. It’s not good data that helps you get better in real time today.” QR codes at schools to give instant feedback about your experiences. That info will go to the school and dept heads. “We need things to be corrected in real time.”*
- Transparency: concern about the lack of it. Fears that teacher assistants (TAs) are being replaced by contract staff, and that the parent was told a teacher asst is not allowed to be part of IEP meeting. TAs need a raise, children need support, teachers overwhelmed. Supt: No plans to replace employees w/contractors – they’re only used to supplement unfilled vacancies. Re raises: *“We’re not broke but we don’t have a lot of money...if our fund balance trickles down by 0.5% the state will be swooping in to this district, taking it over and running it for us because we’re not being fiscally responsible.”* Has tasked Cabinet with finding \$100m in cost savings for employee compensation by end of semester, *“looking at every contract we sign and find what’s adding value to our district and what’s not and stop buying things that are not working, stop buying things that we’re wasting money on, to find cost savings so we can make sure we can compensate employees.”* BCPS has lost 40k+ students over the years, meaning loss of revenue.
- What are you doing to assess the state of ESE in Broward and what can be done to fix compliance issues? Supt gave a Focus-centered answer: Old info being transferred between systems, work in progress, *“the implementation was probably not the best...we’re not going back to another system, we have to work together to figure out how to improve this system.”* Parent testified that she was told only today that she cannot have an interim IEP meeting, & that it will be an off-the-record informal meeting.
- Content-related curriculum (Access Points): Parent unable to obtain this for student. Staff to follow up.
- Parents whose son has had four ESE Specialists in four years: parent had to go to regional supt to have school address concerns about her child. Parent: Non-compliance is “rampant all over the system.”
- Parent and advocate working for 11 years and “never seen such disarray within the system”: ESE not functioning the way that it should. Hepburn: *“This whole Focus thing, that accounts for a lot.”* Parent said it goes deeper than Focus; support facilitators and ESE Specialists burning out, people unwilling to take positions so now getting unqualified staff, need initiative to reduce caseloads. Diane Eagan: *“We just worked on that this past year...when we were working through the budget process we looked at those*

obscene caseloads...and we did change the caseloads across the board...budgetarily.” Supt acknowledged staffing issues: “We’re always trying to recruit and retain.”

- IEP non-compliance “rampant”: accommodations not happening, teachers won’t work with the parent to improve. Supt: “*need more professional devt*” and said Focus will make it easier to access IEPs and accommodations. Parent said teachers need retraining, BCPS needs to ask why staff/parents are leaving & retaliation occurs when parents bring up concerns to district. Supt: “*I’m trying to close that information gap for myself so we can improve the system.*” ESE Chair said we asked in a motion for exit interviews with ESE staff last year & have suggested several times to use template of Evergreen report and start acting on the e under-resourcing, the crisis of staffing, crisis of compliance, train principals to understand ESE.
- Dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia students excluded from afterschool tutoring programs: parents spend \$50-\$100 an hour on private tutoring. Supt: state has tough accountability process, some principals feel if the district has an ‘A’ grade but the school has a ‘B’ they strategise to make sure you get the best bang for the buck and “*sometimes you’re excluding kids from opportunities so we’ll make sure our schools aren’t replicating some of those past strategies I’ve seen.*” Also happens to English Language Learner students.
- ESE dept rollover of nearly \$11m in unspent IDEA funds: concerns were expressed by the Board and by Advisory last year about a rollover of \$10.5m the previous year. Now even more. Supt: Going to be providing info to the School Board too, to answer concerns “*plus there were other rollovers too. Most of the rollover’s from vacant positions that staff was not able to fill.*” Said Mrs Eagan has come up with a “*different strategy*” to analyse funds frequently through the year and not wait until the end of year to find there is rollover.
- Focus SSS module for ESE: Chair: “*It’s not just about a new software system that takes some getting used to. Until we hear that it’s understood what the problem actually is, which is that we’ve taken a leap a decade back because of a software system that’s inferior to what we had, then we can start making progress – but you’ll never get anywhere until you acknowledge you’ve got a problem.*” Read out a statement from an ESE Specialist that included:
 - “The switch to the SSS IEP system within Focus has made an already complex and, at times overwhelming job, simply unmanageable. Tasks and processes that used to be accomplished in a few moments...and jobs that used to take about an hour per student...now each take anywhere from double to quadruple the amount of time per student.”
 - “Some processes simply don’t exist in Focus at all and we are directed to use a word or PDF document that we have to go looking for in other places to then upload.”
 - “IEP meetings are taking 90 minutes to facilitate versus 50 or 60 minutes because of the bulk and inefficiency of the layout of the IEP in Focus.”
 - “There was no piloting of this system, no thought-out plan for how staff would be trained and supported in a manageable way, no input sought from the stakeholders who would ultimately be the daily end users. There weren’t even district level people trained ahead of time to be ready to assist ESE specialists competently from day 1.”
 - “It’s pretty demeaning to be berated for supporting and assisting each other outside of work on our own time at an ESE Specialist meeting, and yet that’s how district ESE staff chooses to address us and our obvious frustration with the unreasonable paperwork and workload of the new system. We are told to stop complaining publicly and to each other but there is no mechanism in place to safely voice these issues.”
 - “Please know that your over 300 ESE Specialists are not OK. We are treading water as quickly as we can to try to keep up and keep in compliance and learn what we need to learn, but this is beyond a learning curve issue. This system has made our work immeasurably harder and more complicated and has left so much room for error and non-compliance.”

- “I will feel burnt out and exhausted earlier in the school year than ever before in my career. What are new ESE specialists who do not have the background knowledge and experience going to do?”

ESE Chair meeting with Deputy Supt Dr Angela Fulton and new CIO Trey Davis tmrw to discuss. Supt: “We have to work together to move forward...Mr Davis used the Focus SSS system in his previous district.” ESE Chair corrected this, saying Lee County actually used the state system, PEER, which Mr Davis confirmed. Said Focus SSS was used in only two of the country’s top 30 largest school districts and neither had a great experience (one looking to move away from it and the other said it had taken them five years to get near where they need it) and that BCPS never evaluated the Focus SSS module because it never meant to move ESE out of EDPlan at the time it contracted for a new Student Information System. Supt: *“I acknowledge we have a lot of work to do.”* He held a separate meeting with Mr Davis and ESE Specialists.

Office of Inspector General ballot measure: Megan Turetsky, Director of Legislative Affairs

- November election ballot, there is a measure asking voters whether to extend Broward’s Office of Inspector General to exercise oversight of Broward School Board.
- When the OIG was created to oversee municipalities, BCPS was not included. This initiative to add BCPS will cost \$1.7m from district budgets.
- It will provide subpoena power, be an independent authority. This was a recommendation from the last grand jury report. Provides additional oversight looking at fraud, waste and mismanagement.
- Info on BCPS website: <https://www.browardschools.com/igamendment2024>

Presentation: Jen Valliere, Snr Manager, Sports Training & Competition (Broward), Special Olympics Florida

- Mission of Special Olympics: provide year-round sports training and competition for people with intellectual disabilities to develop fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy and participate in the sharing of gifts, skills and friendship
- No fees. Travel costs/equipment/uniforms provided free, all ability levels.
- School-based program participation by Broward schools:
 - Young Athletes program for age 2-7yrs: 39 schools
 - Little Elites program 2nd-5th grade: 31 schools
 - Rising Stars: middle and high: 21 schools
 - Motor Activities Training Program: movement-based sensory sports for athletes with severe/profound disabilities and complex support needs.
- Over 6,000 athletes in Broward. 23 sports: alpine skiing, athletics, basketball, bocce, bowling, cheerleading, cornhole, cycling, equestrian, flag football, golf, gymnastics, open water swim, pickleball, powerlifting, soccer, softball, snowboarding, stand-up paddle, surfing, swimming, tennis, volleyball
- Pilot program upcoming in Broward with the NFL for Unified Flag Football
- Often in need of volunteers to support activities and events
- Health screenings include hearing, teeth, mental health, eyes and free glasses, etc
- Unified Champion Schools program: schools that meet standards on inclusion and unified practices. Broward has 28 (19 Elementary, three Middle, six High). Four BCPS schools are National Banner Unified Champion Schools – extra level of recognition.
- Athlete Leadership provides training in advocacy skills and meaningful leadership roles.
- Andrea Ciotti, ESE Director: Special Olympics coaches at BCPS schools to get stipends in Middle & High.

Q&As:

Parent question re Focus: Asked school for interim IEP meeting but was told they have to have an annual, due to Focus issues. Already had annual in May. Also not enough characters for parent input on IEP in Focus, which needs to be in the body of the document not an attachment that will go unseen; parent observed that this was aired 18m ago at ESE Advisory and assurance given that character allowance would be fine. ESE dept: refusal of interim is

“misinformation”. Support being provided to ESE Specialists to try to help. ESE Chair said but the alternative is hours of work and ESE Specialists can’t be expected to do that; asked for written clarity on the procedure.

ESE Director Stephanie Acosta Castro said character limit issue is being worked on. What is timeline? – Mrs Castro said she doesn’t have it. Focus is working on it. Parent: parents can’t participate properly, schools frustrated, advocates frustrated. Mrs Eagan said there’s a “high priority list” and timeline is unknown: “We’re going to circle back with them again...we can’t change it, it’s an IT/Focus thing. That’s not our forte.” Parent asked if we can see list? Mrs Eagan: Not yet. CIO only been here two weeks, he’ll put together next steps.

Parent question re response time to ESE concerns: How long should ESE Specialist have to respond? 48 hours. What are expectations for mainstream teachers to use strategies and skills from a student’s IEP? Answer: they have to. Speak to ESE Specialist if problems, thereafter principal.

District report - Diane Eagan, ESE Executive Director, BCPS; & ESE Directors Stephanie Acosta Castro, Sabrina Sheib, Andrea Ciotti

- Where to go for help: teacher, ESE Specialist, Principal, regional supt
- ESE Boot camp & monthly meetings for ESE Specialists to share best practices, provide support, training,
- Shout-outs to particular schools/staff; gift cards to recognize good things
- Inclusion champion appointed at every school. Worked on inclusive scheduling and inclusive practices training. Florida Inclusion Network partnership.
- Working on increasing Special Olympics participation.
- ESE Policies and Procedures that govern how dept will adhere to state rules: valid three years and now been renewed. ESE Chair recapped concerns voiced at last School Board meeting that BCPS cannot fulfil all policies/procedures due to Focus challenges and that they weren’t mentioned to ESE Advisory prior to renewal – and that two Board members voted against validating them
- Overview of P&P change: crisis intervention plan for kids with two restraints in certain time period, requirements on districts needing to discuss age of majority with parents, changes to eligibilities for evaluations for students who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing or Visually Impaired. Private school students added to the P&Ps; 170 requests received since July for private school student evaluations.
- Rollover of \$11m IDEA funds: Mrs Castro said 57% was due to unfilled staff positions. In 2022/23: 242.8 IDEA-funded positions were open; last year down to 198. Some of the human capital funds were reallocated towards materials and services. “Delicate balancing game” because schools may yet hire into those unfilled positions so money needs to be available. State process of approval for amended budgets takes time and Budget office won’t move \$\$\$ until the amendment is approved by state. “So that’s something we learned - so this year we’ll be adjusting our benchmarks...” in Nov, Jan and March. Also going to work on job fairs for non-instructional positions to help implement resources & reduce roll forward. IDEA currently funds: ASD programs and paras, unique aides, behavior techs, interpreters, center school funding, supplemental curriculum, unique learning for access point instruction, assistive technology, Deaf and Hard of Hearing and Visually Impaired materials and contracted services, and OT equipment.
- Going to be adding parent training sessions: “Lunch with ESE” virtual 12-1.30pm October 2.

Close