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Education

Pittsburgh Public Schools renews $80K contract for board coaching

Critics had questioned the value of the program, also questioning its shifting of power to the superintendent

By **Kellen Stepler**

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Pittsburgh Public Schools will continue a contract for board coaching but with a stronger focus on clarity, consistency and community engagement, school board members said Wednesday.

The board voted 6-3 to renew a contract with the Council of the Great City Schools' "Student Outcomes Focused Governance" model, a plan that will cost no more than $80,000 over two years.

The renewal had faced criticism — voiced at Monday's public hearing — that it cedes power to the superintendent without much accountability and that it limits public discussion and input. Some questioned how much Pittsburgh Public has accomplished under the plan.

The model aims to set goals for student achievement, monitor progress and allow the superintendent to delegate responsibilities. Pittsburgh Public's goals are to improve third grade reading and math proficiency, graduation rates and industry certifications through career and technical education programming.

Supporters say that, since Pittsburgh Public adopted the framework two years ago, board and administrative work have been more clearly defined and that the board is stronger from a governance and operations standpoint.

At Wednesday's meeting, board members acknowledged that more work needed to be done. The Council of the Great City Schools provided board members with a document

outlining what has and hasn't yet been accomplished throughout the first two years; President Gene Walker said that information could be made public.

According to Walker, the district completed about 63% of listed activities throughout the first two years of the contract.

"What frustrates me is having felt like we've been behind the eight ball throughout the Council of the Great City Schools engagement, and I don't necessarily fault them for that, but it is my sense that every time we meet with them it feels like we have to do a refresher because it's stuff we talked about six months previously," said Emma Yourd, who voted against the renewal.

"If we do move forward with this contract, I think we should be more cognizant on having these meetings on a scheduled cadence so that we're continuing the work and the momentum."

Discussions and early implementation around the district's Future-Ready Facilities Plan — which closes nine buildings and realigns many others starting next school year — is a factor as to why Pittsburgh Public didn't complete everything in the first two years, Walker said.

"I think it was probably a fairly aggressive schedule to think that we could get through all of this in two years, considering the work that we have been doing in regards to the Future Ready Facilities Plan," he said.

What's key, Walker said, is for the board to continue and finalize the design of Superintendent Wayne Walters' evaluation, develop and implement a board self-evaluation and a focus on community engagement.

"We've done some community listening sessions, but there is a piece of this work around developing the ongoing two-way communication engagement with the public that I think will take some significant work, planning and time that I would really look forward to getting to," he said.

Walters said the first $40,000 would be paid from the superintendent's budget.

Walters and Walker are on the Council's board because Pittsburgh Public is a member of the organization. District Solicitor Ira Weiss said there is not a conflict of interest in Walker voting on the contract because there is no financial impact to him.

Walker, Dwayne Barker, Eva Diodati, Erikka Grayson, Tracey Reed and Devon Taliaferro voted in favor of renewing the contract. Yourd, Tawana Cook-Purnell and Yael Silk were opposed.

Taliaferro said the model was vetted by the district years ago, and was more thought-out than other plans the district considered. She believed it was important for the district to see the work through.

“Moving forward, we have to be able to dictate who is responsible to move this work forward — should it come from us, should it come from board leadership,” Taliaferro said. “I don’t know if it has been the priority or the focus, and I understand the timing of us doing this work aligned with the Future-Ready work, but to me that’s not an excuse for not moving something along that we’re paying money for, no matter who’s budget it came from.”