

ROCHESTER BOARD OF EDUCATION
Community & Intergovernmental Relations
Committee Meeting

May 19, 2015

MINUTES

Attending: Board Vice President Cynthia Elliott (Chair); Commissioners Adams, Campos (arrived 6:12PM), and Powell (arrived 6:25PM).

Parent Representatives: Felix Jacobs

District Staff: Ed Lopez-Soto, General Counsel; Kathleen Saville, Director of the Grants Office

Community Representatives: Rosemary Rivera, Member of the Rochester Area Community Foundation Task Force on Improving School Climate

Board Staff: Debra Flanagan

Board Vice President Elliott called the meeting to order at 6:00PM.

I. Review of the Minutes of the March 17, 2015 CIGR Meeting

Motion by Commissioner Adams to approve the minutes of the March 17, 2015 CIGR meeting. **Adopted 2-0, with concurrence of Parent Representative.**

II. Update on the Work of the Rochester Area Community Foundation Task Force regarding Improving School Climate

Commissioner Elliott introduced Rosemary Rivera, expressing appreciation for her participation on the RACF Task Force and her commitment to addressing issues within the District.

Ms. Rivera commended the collaboration between RCSD staff and members of the RACF Task Force. She noted that RCSD Deputy Superintendent Adele Bovard and Commissioner Mary Adams also serve on the Task Force, which has facilitated cooperative efforts between the two organizations. Ms. Rivera recognized that parents have been clamoring for improvements in school climate and student disciplinary practices in the District, but she cautioned that changes must be made in a thoughtful, deliberative way to maximize effectiveness.

Ms. Rivera reported that the Task Force spent a great deal of time reaching out to different constituencies in this project, such as parents, students, unions, and mental health professionals. She stated that the Task Force began with a core group of 50 members, and

35 have continued to participate on a regular basis. Ms. Rivera added that options are currently being explored for involving additional parties that have expressed an interest in this project.

Ms. Rivera noted that the Task Force identified a number of different aspects of changing school culture, and work groups have been created to address each:

- School Code and Culture
- Student, Family & Community Partnership
- Professional Development and Engaging Learning

Ms. Rivera reported that members of the Advancement Project have collaborated with the RACF Task Force from the beginning, drafting a new policy based on input received from stakeholders. The draft has been submitted to the School Code and Culture work group for review and recommendations. Ms. Rivera stated that she does not know at this point how much time the Advancement Project will need to incorporate the work group's recommendations, but the finalized policy will be presented to the RCSD Board of Education Policy Committee for consideration. She pointed out that further refinements may be needed to the policy, even after the draft has been presented to the Board.

Ms. Rivera discussed the proposed policy as a roadmap, reflecting the District's commitment to shift from a punitive approach to a restorative approach to student discipline. She stated that the bulk of the Task Force's efforts in the future will focus on implementation planning and professional development, conducting meetings with stakeholders, explaining policy changes and implications, and providing guidelines for applying the policy in practice. Ms. Rivera noted that too many policies in the District have simply been recorded on paper and not put into effect. She stated that failure to faithfully implement the new policy will result in severe consequences for students and families, so this must be a critical focus of the Task Force in the future.

Commissioner Elliott asserted that the most critical work of the Task Force is to develop the proposed code/policy to address school climate and student disciplinary issues. She contended that implementation of policies is the District's responsibility. Commissioner Elliott noted that it took approximately eleven years to implement similar policies in the Denver school district, but this process also involved modifying the policy in response to problems that arose.

Ms. Rivera explained that the Task Force has been studying model policies in NYC and other districts. She commended the Advancement Project for their work in crafting the new policy in positive, proactive language that is clear and comprehensible to parents. Ms. Rivera suggested that Board members engage in conversations with teachers to encourage them to consider the new policy as a resource.

Ed Lopez-Soto pointed out that the agreement with the Rochester Teachers' Association (RTA) was revised to allow students to be removed from the classroom for disruptive behavior. He stated that the RTA agreement will have to be modified to reflect the new policy changes. Mr. Lopez-Soto commented that it would be preferable to take the time to

thoughtfully develop a new policy to ensure effectiveness and to incorporate the concerns of stakeholders.

Ms. Rivera acknowledged that the new code/policy may not be ready by the beginning of the 2015-16 school year, but it must be implemented within a reasonable timeframe because students and families are currently in crisis.

Commissioner Adams pointed out that the District continues to have problems with the accuracy of suspension data, and too many aspects of improving student discipline are not being performed. She objected to the repeated pleas for additional time, despite the fact that no apparent progress has been made. Commissioner Adams noted that she has been emphasizing the need to address student suspension issues concurrently to expedite resolution of these problems, but her pleas have remained unheeded.

Mr. Lopez-Soto commented that the accuracy of RCSD data is dependent on the quality of information entered at the school level.

Ms. Rivera confirmed this assessment, noting that six different responses and forms were presented by RCSD staff when asked about the process for referring students for suspension. She noted that targeted professional development is needed to address these types of inconsistencies among school staff.

Mr. Lopez-Soto contended that these problems were exacerbated by former Superintendent Brizard's approach in devolving greater responsibility and autonomy to the schools.

Ms. Rivera stated that the organization "Attendance Works" offers many useful tools on their website for improving student attendance and discipline.

III. Discuss Advocacy in Obtaining Grant Funding

Commissioner Elliott introduced Kathleen Saville, RCSD Grants Director, explaining that she was invited to attend this evening's meeting to inform Committee members of ways to effectively advocate for grant funding at the federal and state level.

Ms. Saville stated that her background is in financial management, having administered budgets and programs in the public sector for approximately 25 years. She offered to share the knowledge and insights she has gained through her extensive experience with grant funding.

Ms. Saville asserted that the key to securing grant funding is through securing trust, building relationships, and addressing community-wide issues and concerns. She discussed the importance of expressing passion and commitment regarding RCSD concerns, relating personal accounts to illustrate key points, concerns and outcomes. Ms. Saville noted that the majority of District funding originates at the state level, but local foundations and organizations should also be considered.

Ms. Saville pointed out several organizations and opportunities for advocating for grants: Council of Great City Schools, National Association of School Boards, and a conference recently conducted by U.S. Senator Gillibrand about navigating the funding process. She emphasized the importance of reaching out to partners and organizations within Board members' networks to share ideas and collaborate in pursuing grant opportunities. Ms. Saville stated that many organization websites also contain links to advocacy opportunities.

Ms. Saville noted that legislators and prospective funders frequently check media reports, so it is important to enhance the District's presence and provide perspective from the RCSD viewpoint, highlighting positive information and accomplishments.

Ms. Saville stated that email is the preferred mode of communication with legislators and prospective funders, and regular follow-up contact is essential in conveying commitment to an issue or initiative.

Ms. Saville suggested adopting the following overall approach to advocacy:

- Learn about the legislators involved in education law;
- Establish yourself as a helpful expert and provide targeted, pertinent data;
- Communicate often (approximately every two weeks to follow up);
- Listen to lobbyists to learn about their agenda and strategies; and
- Stay positive.

Ms. Saville also discussed the importance of having a presence in advocacy organizations that address issues relevant to the District (e.g. New York State School Boards Association, Office of the Big Five School Districts, Monroe County School Boards Association, etc.).

Commissioner Elliott inquired about the lobbying efforts of District business officials. Ms. Saville replied that these officials typically lobby against the NYS property tax cap and for additional funding for education. She recommended focusing on a few topics, rather than trying to cover the breadth of education issues.

Commissioner Powell pointed out that Board members could be much more effective in their lobbying efforts if they had information regarding the specific grants being sought by the District. She asked if the Grants Office could provide this information to Board members.

Commissioner Campos asked if the Grants Office has a work plan regarding the grants to be sought during the year. She suggested sharing the work plan with the Board, with information of the specific grant opportunities for which Board advocacy would be beneficial.

Ms. Saville explained that it is difficult to prepare a very definitive work plan because of variations in the length of the grant periods and opportunities for renewal. She stated that some grants are renewed on an annual basis, whereas others are only provided for a limited time period.

Commissioner Campos noted that the District has had problems historically in sustaining programs because of the limited period for which grant funds are awarded. She contended that the District could benefit from the Board's advocacy and reporting of the impact of these term-limited grants.

Ms. Saville suggested writing letters of thanks to funders who have awarded grants to the District. She stated that this would be useful in building relationships and encouraging sustained funding by reporting the positive impact of the grant award.

Commissioner Campos maintained that it would be helpful for Board members to have a plan of the specific grant opportunities being sought by the District, with information of the purpose, term, and status of each grant.

Commissioner Adams concurred, pointing out the importance of indicating whether each grant is intended to develop or to sustain a program.

Ms. Saville acknowledged the importance of carefully examining the purpose and terms of grants to ensure that the funds will be of long-term benefit to the District. She reported that staff in the Grants Office are quite deliberate in seeking and applying for grants, typically conducting a cost-benefit analysis before determining whether to submit an application.

Commissioner Elliott asked about the amount of revenue anticipated in 2015-16 from grant funding. Ms. Saville replied that the District is expected to receive approximately \$92M next year in grant funds.

Commissioner Adams pointed out that some school districts require approval by the board of education to submit grant applications. She noted that significant improvements are needed in communicating with Board members about funding priorities and the grants being pursued by the District.

IV. Miscellaneous

Commissioner Elliott inquired about the status of the transportation bill in the NYS legislature. Mr. Lopez-Soto replied that the District is waiting to hear about contract negotiations with the Rochester Transit System (RTS). He noted that RCSD is the only school district in New York that has door-to-door pickup for students.

Commissioner Powell corrected Mr. Lopez-Soto, stating that RCSD is the only urban district in the state that provides door-to-door transportation for students. She pointed out that a number of suburban and rural school districts also provide this level of student transportation.

Motion by Commissioner Powell to adjourn. Seconded by Commissioner Adams. **Adopted 4-0, with concurrence of Parent Representative.**

Meeting adjourned at 7:02PM.