

ROCHESTER BOARD OF EDUCATION
Excellence in Student Achievement Committee Meeting
October 20, 2016

Attending: Malik Evans (Chair); Commissioners White and Hallmark.

Parent Representative: Toyin Anderson

District Staff: Dr. Christiana Otuwa, Deputy Superintendent of Teaching & Learning; Dr. Robin Hooper, Executive Director of Early Childhood Education; Andy MacGowan, Project Administrator.

Board Staff: Debra Flanagan

Commissioner Evans called the meeting to order at 6:37PM.

I. Review Minutes of the September 8, 2016 Excellence in Student Achievement Committee Meeting

Motion by Commissioner Hallmark to approve the minutes of the September 8, 2016 Excellence in Student Achievement Committee meeting. Seconded by Commissioner White. **Adopted 3-0, with concurrence of Parent Representative.**

II. Update on Early Childhood Education

Dr. Robin Hooper distributed a handout of BEDS enrollment for RCSD PreK programs, noting that the District has exceeded all enrollment targets. She and Andy MacGowan gave a presentation regarding:

- The size and scope of the PreK program at this point;
- Results of the Parent Satisfaction Survey;
- Update on NYS funding concerns;
- Preview of 2015-16 findings regarding student outcomes;
- PreK attendance; and
- Results of a NYS Education Department audit of PreK Special Education.

Mr. MacGowan reported that there has been steady growth in the PreK program, which currently serves approximately two-thirds of four-year-old children and one-third of all three-year-old children residing in Rochester. Dr. Hooper noted that there is a waiting list for three-year-old children to get into the program. The District's PreK program is offered at 66 sites, through 29 programs in RCSD schools and 25 through community-based organizations. Mr. MacGowan pointed out the importance of partnerships with community organizations, since space in RCSD schools is limited.

Commissioner Hallmark requested an overview of the PreK placement process. Dr. Hooper replied that student placement in PreK programs was not managed by the Early Childhood Education Department at the beginning of last year, but the Deputy Superintendent of Teaching & Learning supported this shift. She emphasized the criticality of having accurate data, particularly due to the large

number of funding streams for PreK – each with their own requirements. Dr. Hooper reported that the Early Childhood Education Department now has its own staff to manage student placement.

Commissioner Hallmark clarified that she was referring to the criteria used for PreK student placement, particularly in terms of location (i.e. within the City and zone). Dr. Hooper noted that PreK student placement differs from placement at the K-12 level because parents have to either provide transportation or obtain a bus pass from the District to use mass transit to bring their child to a PreK program. For these reasons, parents of PreK children need greater flexibility in choosing a placement/program, whether in proximity to their child care provider, home, or workplace. Dr. Hooper noted that offering this flexibility to parents has increased enrollment in the program.

Commissioner Hallmark expressed concern about the differences in student placement processes at the PreK level and other grade levels and the impact on parents' choice of schools. She stated that while most children in PreK are in community-based programs, the parents of children attending PreK in RCSD schools may become attached to the school and want their child to remain there for their elementary education. Commissioner Hallmark pointed out that this can create problems in expanding out-of-zone student placement and cross-zone transportation, substantially raising costs to the District for the entire time that the student is in elementary school. She inquired about actions being taken to address disparities in student placement practices to try to keep PreK children in programs within their zone. Dr. Hooper replied that she has not been invited to join these types of discussions about the Parent Preference/Managed Choice policy (5153) and the implications for student placement and transportation.

Commissioner Hallmark noted that Dr. Hooper should be included in discussions regarding the Parent Preference/Managed Choice policy to ensure that the PreK perspective is represented.

Dr. Otuwa voiced concern about changing placement practices for PreK students because of a number of grant requirements regarding parent choice.

Dr. Hooper explained that the grant for three-year-old children is based on high needs, which has been defined as:

- Eligibility for free or reduced-price meals;
- English-Language learners (i.e. a language other than English is spoken at home); or
- Special Education services

Dr. Hooper reported that these criteria cover approximately 85% of children residing in the City School District.

Commissioner Hallmark asked whether the Special Education services for high needs students are more available through community-based programs. She expressed concerns about the variability of services offered by schools, which often determines placement of students in need of these services.

Dr. Hooper reported issues state-wide in filling positions for early Special Education services (e.g. Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, and Speech Therapy) because opportunities are much more lucrative in other aspects of these fields (e.g. hospitals, rehabilitation centers, geriatric care). She noted that this is a particular problem for nonprofit community-based programs, which do not have the

resources to compete.

Commissioner Hallmark requested an explanation of the differences between EPK and UPK. Dr. Hooper explained that UPK is the original grant for the PreK program, which extended eligibility and funding for all four-year-old children in the City of Rochester. The program was later expanded from a half-day to full-day, and a Priority PreK (PPK) grant was provided to fund the other half of the day. However, the PPK grant is specifically for high-needs children. To provide greater continuity in the program for families and children, the high-needs criteria were examined for each PreK student population in the school and community-based programs. This review indicated that all but three schools (School Nos. 52, 23, and 46) would qualify under the PPK grant to expand to a full-day program.

Dr. Hooper clarified that the Early PreK (EPK) grant funds the program for three-year-old children with high needs, who attend PreK for 6 hours per day.

Mr. MacGowan pointed out that a previous analysis provided to the Excellence in Student Achievement Committee indicated that the majority (approximately 75%) of PreK students attend a program within their zone.

Mr. MacGowan discussed preliminary results from the 2015-16 Parent Satisfaction Survey, pointing out that the results of the four surveys conducted over the last two years are remarkably consistent. The vast majority of parents gave each of these programs a rating of at least "A-" (80% of Early PreK parents, and 83.5% of UPK parents). Both programs were very highly rated by at least 95% of parents on each of the following indicators:

- How well the program meets their child's needs;
- Quality of teaching;
- Their child's sense of safety at school;
- Learning social skills and how to get along with other children;
- Bringing home books for parents to read with their children;
- Learning skills in hygiene and basic self-care;
- Teachers' respect for parents and students;
- Cultural sensitivity; and
- Assistance provided by teachers to help students talk through their problems and generate solutions.

Mr. MacGowan commented that it is striking to obtain such similar responses from parents whose child has only been in the PreK program for five months and from those whose child has participated for over one year. He pointed to an increase the percentage of parents reporting that their children bring home books for to read, largely due to the use of lending libraries.

Mr. MacGowan noted that the only area in which the Parent Satisfaction Survey indicated a clear need was in the response of almost 21% of parents stating that they do not have anyone with whom they can discuss problems. He added that this is a particular focus in the District this year, with Adult Family Educators and Social Workers playing a pivotal role in providing assistance and support to parents.

Mr. MacGowan announced that additional information will be provided in the annual RECAP Report, which will be shared with Committee members after it is released on November 17th. He added that the RECAP Report is based on a collaboration between the District, the Children's Institute, Rochester Area Community Foundation, and Rochester's Child.

Commissioner Hallmark pointed out that the Children's Institute has been examining early literacy and the District's initiative for students to read on grade level by 3rd grade. She reported that significant work has been done at School No. 9 using a phono-visual approach. Commissioner Hallmark inquired about the types of basic steps and approaches currently used to promote early literacy in the RCSD PreK program. Dr. Hooper explained that the PreK program requires teaching of emergent literacy skills, such as:

- Phonemic awareness
- Components of a book
- Letter Links program (in conjunction with High Scope): a picture and label are associated with the first letter of each child's name, which has been effective in teaching letters and their concomitant sounds
- Beginning writing

Dr. Hooper acknowledged that the PreK curriculum currently is not synchronized with the Kindergarten curriculum, which does not discuss the names of letters. In PreK, children are encouraged to make the connection between phonetic sounds and the names of letters.

Mr. MacGowan reported that early literacy is a critical focus in the PreK program, particularly since many children arrive with a paucity of language exposure and expression. Dr. Hooper added that it is common to enter PreK classes at the beginning of the year and find that none of the children are speaking. She noted that students often require considerable encouragement to express more than one-word utterances.

Commissioner Evans asked about the extent to which the lack of verbal communication at the beginning of the year in PreK classes may be due to shyness. Dr. Hooper acknowledged that this may account for some of the lack of verbal expression, but observed that these same children are not shy about expressing themselves in non-verbal ways. She stated that many children are accustomed to receiving directions or questions that only necessitate a one-word response (i.e. "Yes" or "No"). She reported that efforts will be made to work with parents to help them use longer and more descriptive sentences in conversing with their child.

Mr. MacGowan discussed NYS funding for PreK programs, noting that a proposal has been put forward to consolidate seven different grants. He reported that in a recent meeting, the NYS Assistant Education Commissioners assured that the grant consolidation would not reduce funding for RCSD PreK programs. Mr. MacGowan pointed out that the District has had bipartisan support in the NYS legislature for early childhood education.

In terms of student outcomes from participation in the RCSD PreK program, preliminary 2015-16 results indicate an average of approximately 20 months of growth in one school year for four-year-old children, and an average of about one year's growth in six months for three-year-old children. Mr. MacGowan explained that these results are based on the High Scope Child Observation Record. He

noted that the children with the greatest needs experienced the highest degree of growth from PreK participation. He acknowledged that approximately 3% of children in UPK had lower ratings in the spring than in the fall, indicating a loss of skills developmentally. Mr. MacGowan stated that further investigation revealed that all of these children had experienced some type of significant loss or trauma during the year.

Despite the tremendous gains that young children derive from participating in RCSD PreK programs, many are still lagging developmentally upon entry into Kindergarten. Mr. MacGowan reported that 53% of PreK students were found ready for kindergarten at the end of the year, which is comparable to the findings from 2014-15. He stated that 32% of children tested at the lowest level on the Brigance scale upon entry into Kindergarten, reflecting the profound needs of these children early in life. Mr. MacGowan reported that most children enter PreK with *at least* one problem in vision, hearing, gross and fine motor skills, language, cognition, and social/emotional skills, which is typically ameliorated by the end of the year. Despite the substantial growth attained from participating in the PreK program, it is not enough to overcome the significant developmental delays that children have experienced prior to their entry into PreK.

Mr. MacGowan discussed the District's participation in the STRIVE initiative, which involves educating and informing families and community members of the critical importance of early development and learning. He emphasized the need to involve families and community members to support efforts to mitigate the impact of developmental delays among the children in the District.

In terms of measures of teachers, Mr. MacGowan reported that the District uses the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS), which is a low-stakes assessment tool. He stated that a new version, ECERS 3.0, was recently released and the District is one of the first to adopt this measure. He noted that there has been reluctance to accept this new assessment nationally and in Europe because of the level of difficulty.

Mr. MacGowan explained that the District also uses the Classroom Assessment Scoring System, which yielded a slight drop in scores from 2014-15 (-0.2 points), but still well above the national average (RCSD: 5.4; U.S. average: 4.5). He attributed the decline to the large number of new teachers entering the RCSD PreK program in 2015-16, which will lead to slightly lower scores for the next few years. Mr. MacGowan emphasized that the ECERS and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System offer teachers a pathway toward improvement, which enables PreK teachers to attain mastery in an average of six years. He observed that this is just over half the amount of time needed for teachers in other grade levels to attain mastery, which requires an average of ten years.

Commissioner Hallmark questioned the screening of young children entering PreK programs, and the large number of PreK students (900) with Individual Education Plans. Mr. MacGowan responded that all children are required to be screened upon entry into the school system. Dr. Hooper pointed out that 900 students out of a total of 2600 have Individual Education Plans, and the total includes children who have been screened or evaluated but who do not necessarily participate in a PreK program. She explained that parents can request screening or evaluation without placing their child in a PreK program. Dr. Hooper noted that children are often able to overcome developmental problems when provided with early intervention, so it is preferable to give these services earlier in a child's life when more amenable to remediation.

Mr. MacGowan reported that the District has established a benchmark of 87% attendance for PreK programs, and the federal Head Start program uses an 85% attendance target. Dr. Hooper asserted that PreK attendance levels cannot be compared to attendance for other grades because young children's immune systems are still developing and they are also just learning about basic hygiene to prevent contracting infections (e.g. covering mouth when coughing, wiping nose with a tissue, washing hands regularly, etc.).

Commissioner Evans stated that he looks forward to receiving the RECAP Report, and would like a presentation on this report in the December 8th Excellence in Student Achievement Committee meeting.

Meeting adjourned at 7:27PM.