

ROCHESTER BOARD OF EDUCATION
Excellence in Student Achievement Committee Meeting of the Whole
January 18, 2018

Attending: Commissioner White, Powell, Hallmark, Sheppard, Elliott, and Adams.
Prospective Board Members: Beatriz LeBron and Melanie Funchess

Parent Representative: Toyin Anderson

District Staff: Superintendent Deane-Williams; Dr. Linus Guillory, Deputy Superintendent for Teaching & Learning; Lawrence Wright, Deputy Superintendent for Administration; Theresa Wood, Chief of Special Education and Student Support Services; Everton Sewell, Chief Financial Officer; Shirley Green, School Chief; Itonia Owens, School Chief; Toyia Wilson, School Chief; Dan Fontanez, Director of Special Education; Kisha Morgan, Director of Special Education; Harry Kennedy, Chief of Human Capital Initiatives

Board Staff: Debra Flanagan, Executive Assistant to the Board

Commissioner White called the meeting to order at 6:55PM.

I. Update on Special Education and Plans for Redesign

Superintendent Deane-Williams stated that the overview of the Special Education redesign plans will include actions taken to improve supports for students with disabilities, and information regarding addressing issues related to organization, structure, compliance and service to families.

Dr. Linus Guillory emphasized that the redesign is intended to shift the focus in the District from compliance to providing exceptional service and improving outcomes for students with disabilities. He introduced Theresa Wood, Chief of Special Education and Student Support Services.

Ms. Wood described the plans for the redesign of Special Education in the District, noting the importance of collaboration and continuity between General Education and Special Education. She referred to an organization chart showing five Special Education Director positions, four of which will be assigned to a set of RCSD schools and one assigned to all non-public schools (e.g. charter schools, BOCES, special programs, and agencies serving students with disabilities). Previously, each Special Education Director had a set of RCSD schools and non-public schools and agencies for which they were responsible. Ms. Wood explained that creating a new position of Director of External Special Education will enable the other directors to have the time to provide instructional support in classrooms.

Ms. Wood pointed out that a new position has been created, Associate Director of Special Education, which will assume primary responsibility for compliance. She added that the responsibilities of this position will also include managing projects and strategic plans, and monitoring reviews.

Commissioner Adams inquired about the relationship between the new Associate Director of Special Education for Compliance and a new compliance position in the Law Department. Ms. Wood replied that the staff members in these positions will be in close collaboration, and the Associate Director for Compliance will ensure that all submissions to the NYS Education Department (NYSED) comply with

federal and state law, regulations, and NYSED requirements.

Commissioner Adams asked whether the new Special Education Associate Director for Compliance and Director of External Special Education positions have been approved by the Board and have been reconciled in the RCSD budget. Everton Sewell responded that these two positions will be included in the RCSD budget after being approved by the Board, and the cost will be covered by eliminating other positions that are not being used (e.g. Executive Assistant).

Action Item: Mr. Sewell will provide information to the Board for the January 25, 2018 Business Meeting of the positions proposed to be eliminated to cover the cost of the new Special Education Associate Director for Compliance and Director of External Special Education positions.

Commissioner Elliott requested information regarding the Special Education classification rate in the District. Ms. Wood reported that the classification rate is 21%, which includes all students residing in the District and receiving Special Education services – whether in RCSD schools or elsewhere (e.g. BOCES, charter schools, agencies, etc.). She cautioned that the percentage of students classified for Special Education increases when there are decreases in overall enrollment. Ms. Wood noted that the process used by the Committee on Special Education (CSE) is being examined carefully to ensure appropriate classification of students, as the classification rate in the District has been increasing over the years.

Commissioner Elliott asked about the percentage of students in Special Education graduating from high school, and requested detail of the graduation rate and classification rate by race, ethnicity, gender, and zip code.

Action Item: Ms. Wood will provide Board members with information of the classification rate and graduation rate for students in Special Education, disaggregated by student subgroup (race, ethnicity, and gender) and by zip code.

Commissioner Adams inquired about the percentage of Special Education Directors' time spent in classrooms to provide instructional support. Ms. Wood replied that instructional support in the classroom accounts for approximately 50% of the Special Education Directors' time, which was confirmed by Dan Fontanez and Kisha Morgan. Commissioner Adams pointed out that the redesign does not seem to reduce the number of schools/students for which Special Education Directors are responsible, and questioned how they are able to provide instructional support 50% of the time. She asked about other ways in which the Special Education Directors' duties are being restructured to free up 50% of their time.

The Superintendent clarified that a number of other Special Education staff work in the schools, and are not shown on the organization chart that has been presented (e.g. Committee on Special Education members (CSE) and TCOSE instructional positions). Superintendent Deane-Williams explained that TCOSE instructors were to spend 15 days during the school year conducting annual reviews. She stated that these positions were filled last year by highly experienced teachers, who went on to accept positions as administrators. By the end of August and early September 2017, a decision had to be made whether to remove another 15 teachers from classrooms to fill the vacated TCOSE positions. It was decided not to disrupt students in classrooms, which led to a shortage of TCOSE instructional positions this year. The positions remain in the RCSD budget and the hope is to fill them with

experienced special educators this spring.

Ms. Funchess asked about plans to recruit teachers of color for the 15 TCOSE positions that need to be filled. Harry Kennedy replied that the District has been collaborating with Action for A Better Community, the Urban League, and local churches to recruit teachers of color. He added that over 55 historically black colleges have been contacted and RCSD teaching opportunities have been posted on their job boards. Mr. Kennedy discussed efforts at early recruitment, reporting that an event was held in November at which 58 teachers were hired and 25 of these new hires were from minority groups. He reported that a similar event is planned for February. Mr. Kennedy emphasized that the aim of the District is to attain a workforce that reflects the diversity of the student population.

In terms of organizational structure, Ms. Wood noted that each Special Education Director has a network including a School Chief and Committee on Special Education (CSE), with 26 Coordinating Administrators of Special Education (CASE) distributed among them:

Petrina Johnson: School Chief Toyia Wilson
Dan Fontanez: School Chief Shirley Green
Kisha Morgan: School Chief Pam Kissel
Teresa Root: School Chief Beth Mascitti-Miller

Ms. Wood explained that each Special Education Director, School Chief, and Coordinating Administrator of Special Education form the leadership of a network that collaborates to address all of the issues and concerns that may arise in their network schools.

Commissioner White observed that many staff members are involved in Special Education, so compliance issues should not be a problem. He asked about the points at which the system is failing, so that efforts can be targeted effectively in these areas. Ms. Wood responded that the problem historically has been with the CSE decision-making process and the lack of collaboration between General Education and Special Education – particularly in terms of the referral process (e.g. Response to Intervention and MTSS). She stated that these factors have contributed to the high classification rate in the District.

Superintendent Deane-Williams discussed the significance of providing support in early childhood education, early intervention, tutoring and academic support to promote reading and math on grade level, social/emotional support, counseling, and trauma services, especially in early grades to prevent students from getting to the point of being referred for Special Education.

Commissioner Hallmark requested information regarding past approaches used in Special Education, and the rationale for proposing the current model. Superintendent Deane-Williams replied that the redesign effort is focused on aligning the General Education and Special Education systems for curriculum and support. She noted that these two systems have operated in isolation in the past and neither has had supervisors that were necessarily aligned with the school-based plan or the framework for the school. Superintendent Deane-Williams reported that students and families have experienced a great deal of disparity from school to school. She stated that networks were created last year to enable each School Chief to work with a particular set of school principals. Since the School Chiefs report directly to the Superintendent, barriers are minimized between school and District administration. The Superintendent stated that she wants each academic department director to collaborate with General Education and Special Education to create a seamless set of expectations. She pointed out that

students in Special Education have had difficulties with writing, reading, and math, and attendance and suspension have been major contributing factors. She asserted that the focus should be on credit accrual and providing support services, particularly for students who are not able to stay on grade level (e.g. students with disabilities, and English-language learners).

Shirley Green described the collaboration within the Special Education networks to examine the specific needs in each school and to find effective resolutions early in the process to mitigate the impact on students. Ms. Green cited an example in which a number of schools had missed deadlines for annual reviews, reporting that she and Mr. Fontanez worked together to resolve the issue.

Commissioner Elliott expressed concern about the information provided to parents of students with disabilities to ensure their understanding of the Special Education process and to empower parents to participate as equal partners in decision-making. Ms. Wood reported that a Special Education Parent Advisory Council was established in September 2017, with monthly meetings to provide educational opportunities and listen to parents' concerns.

Commissioner Elliott noted that parents may be intimidated in Special Education meetings because they are often outnumbered by RCSD staff, who tend to engage in discussions using a great deal of technical jargon. Ms. Wood stated that parents are able to speak individually with any of the Special Education staff members in the Parent Advisory Council meetings (e.g. herself, Special Education Director, or School Chief).

Beatriz LeBron stated that she attended a recent meeting of the Special Education Parent Advisory Council, and expressed concern that the information provided was highly technical and not comprehensible to parents. She added that none of the information was provided in Spanish, and no interpreter was available to enable Spanish-speaking parents to participate in the meeting.

Melanie Funchess reported that she also attended a recent Special Education Parent Advisory Council meeting, noting concerns as a prospective Board member and the parent of a child in Special Education. She pointed out that the ability to speak individually with Special Education staff members may be useful in addressing specific problems, but prevents staff and parents from becoming aware of larger trends. Ms. Funchess referred to a number of trends discussed in the Special Education Parent Advisory Council meeting:

- An insufficient number of Coordinating Administrators of Special Education (CASE);
- Parents not knowing the CASE assigned to their school or who to contact with questions or concerns;
- Parents not having sufficient time to meet or speak with the CASE

Ms. Funchess stated that the interpretation of a problem guides the approach to its resolution, leading an individual concern to be addressed very differently than a trend. She emphasized the importance of parents being able to share and discuss concerns together to know that they are not alone, and to facilitate their ability to act collectively to advocate for change.

Ms. Funchess also pointed out that the information packet given to parents was quite lengthy and not structured in a useful format. She asked District staff to collaborate with parents to restructure the information to improve its usefulness as a guide through the Special Education process. Ms. Funchess noted that a more comprehensible information packet available in Spanish would enable Spanish-

speaking families to follow up with District staff, even if an interpreter was not available at the Special Education Parent Advisory Council meeting.

Action Item: The Special Education information packet will be reviewed and revised by District staff in collaboration with parents to make it more useful and comprehensible to parents. The revised information packet will also be translated into Spanish.

Commissioner Adams expressed support for efforts to break down silos by creating networks, but noted that networks have been used in the past and cannot solve all of the problems in Special Education in the District. She stated that she is confused about the plans for the front-line staff directly involved with students in Special Education (e.g. psychologists, CASEs, principals, service providers).

Commissioner Sheppard requested information about the way in which responsibilities have been defined for each staff position in Special Education. She stated that the duties for some of these positions seem to be increasing without any increased time available, creating considerable strain on staff. Commissioner Sheppard emphasized the importance of adequate support for staff members involved in carrying out the Special Education redesign.

Action Item: Information will be provided to Board members of:

- **The role and responsibilities associated with each staff position in Special Education**
- **Detail as to the specific responsibilities that have been changed or increased for each position with the redesign**
- **Description of the structural and organizational changes in the redesign and the impact on these staff positions**

Commissioner White noted that the questions raised in this evening's meeting will be included in the Board's Outstanding Questions Log, which will be submitted to the Administration.

The Superintendent discussed the relational work being conducted in the District, which involves examining goals, roles and responsibilities, and navigating the relationships that staff need to have with parents, the community, and each other. She stated that job descriptions and expectations must be examined, although not every staff member in the same position will be performing exactly the same job. The Superintendent explained that staff members must go beyond the job description to consider students' backgrounds, instability/disruption that the student has experienced (e.g. moving to a different home or school), and trauma that their family has experienced. She pointed out that shifting the District from a traditional model to this type of customer care is a major effort.

Commissioner Adams stated that she would also like information about the proposed changes in the structure and organization of Special Education, and the impact on different staff positions (e.g. psychologists, CASEs, etc.). Superintendent Deane-Williams responded that job descriptions have changed, and are subject to modification when there are staff shortages and/or new hires. Ms. Wood replied that CASEs are responsible for students with disabilities in the schools to which they are assigned, CSE processes involving the possibility of a more restrictive placement, comprehensive re-evaluations of students with disabilities (e.g. every three years), all initial eligibility determinations, assisting in training Building Designees, and training teachers to improve the quality of Individualized Education Plans. She stated that Building Designees are responsible for simple changes to

Individualized Education Plans (IEP), simple annual reviews, and less complex CSE meetings (i.e. changes in Individualized Education Plans (IEP) in which there is agreement between the District and parent).

Ms. Funchess raised a number of questions about the proposed redesign:

- The rationale for the clustering of schools assigned to each Special Education Director
- Whether a full continuum of care is available within each cluster of schools
- The actual proportion of students with disabilities within each cluster of schools
- The distribution of students with disabilities among each cluster of schools
- The distribution of the staff members' workload across the clusters
- The staff member responsible for monitoring to ensure that the IEP is being implemented, and that progress is being made *between* annual reviews

Superintendent Deane-Williams explained that the clusters of schools were determined by the School Chiefs because of their knowledge of each school. She stated that one of the recommendations of the Path Forward initiative is to rebuild the Special Education continuum of services within each zone because budget cuts over the last 5-10 years have resulted in very uneven capacity among the zones. The Superintendent reported that the uneven distribution of Special Education services in the District has led to multiple placements for students with disabilities to obtain the services and instruction that they need, thereby also increasing transportation services and costs.

Commissioner White requested information about assignment of the remaining 22 CASEs among the Special Education Directors (after accounting for the 4 CASEs assigned to the network led by Dan Fontanez and Shirley Green). He also asked where compliance problems arise in the Special Education process. Ms. Wood provided the following information about assignment of CASEs to each Special Education Director:

Petrina Johnson and School Chief Toyia Wilson: 6 CASEs
Dan Fontanez and School Chief Shirley Green: 5 CASEs
Kisha Morgan and School Chief Pam Kissel: 5 CASEs
Teresa Root and School Chief Beth Mascitti-Miller: 3 CASEs
Director of External Special Education (TBD): 4 CASEs

Ms. LeBron pointed out that the District's classification rate of 21% divided among 23 CASEs would amount to an average caseload of 63 students per CASE. She asserted that this sized caseload is quite substantial because of all of the responsibilities involved (e.g. CSE process, monitoring each IEP, annual reviews, compliance reviews, and evaluations). In light of these concerns, she recommended hiring additional CASE staff rather than administrators.

Superintendent Deane-Williams affirmed that the Path Forward Report will provide data regarding the percentage of students with disabilities in each school, indicating a great deal of variation in the distribution of these students and Special Education services. She asserted that the District has to improve the ability to meet the needs of students, particularly those with disabilities and English-language learners. She explained that this is the impetus for the Path Forward plan, which integrates the education needs of students with the facilities that exist in the District.

Superintendent Deane-Williams noted that additional staff members are involved in supporting students with disabilities in the schools: teacher coaches, instructional specialists and staff from the

Office of Parent Engagement. She stated that the Board also needs these job descriptions to understand the various staff members working with these students. The Superintendent also discussed the fact that many staff members in Special Education have been using a manual paper process, which is cumbersome, time-consuming and creates delays in communication.

Ms. Funchess pointed out that her question has not yet been answered about the staff position ultimately responsible for ensuring compliance in implementing students' Individualized Education Plans (IEP). Ms. Wood responded that everyone involved in working with the student is responsible for implementing the IEP: the Special Education teacher should know the Plan and the services to be provided; the building leader has to know the IEP to monitor implementation; and the CASE, Building Designee, and School Chief should review and discuss IEPs on a regular basis.

Ms. Funchess contended that everyone cannot be accountable for monitoring IEP implementation, and parents need to know specifically who to go to with questions or concerns. Ms. Wood replied that the CASE Manager and CASE are ultimately responsible for ensuring that the IEP is implemented.

Action Item: Information will be provided to the Board regarding:

- **The number/percentage of IEPs in the District that are compliance with Special Education requirements and how these are distributed among CASEs and Building Designees;**
- **The specific positions occupied by Building Designees;**
- **List of Building Designees and CASEs;**
- **The number of students with disabilities in each school and the caseloads of each of the CASE staff members (i.e. distribution of caseloads among the CASE staff)**

Toyin Anderson noted that parents are extremely frustrated with the Special Education process. She stated that the District attempts to portray parents as knowledgeable experts about their child, but their concerns are frequently dismissed or disregarded by staff. Ms. Anderson emphasized the importance of parents knowing who is responsible for addressing their questions and resolving their problems. She asked about plans for providing this information to parents and for offering parents opportunities to discuss concerns with the appropriate staff members in the future.

Ms. Green asserted that the same administrator (i.e. school principal) that meets with parents of General Education students should also be able to meet with parents of students in Special Education. She stated that while the administrator may not have the depth of knowledge about Special Education, they have the authority to involve the appropriate staff members and the resources to help resolve the issue.

Commissioner Sheppard asked which staff member should serve as the Special Education Building Designee. She expressed concern that staff members in other positions are being expected to assume responsibilities for which they were not trained or hired, resulting in their departure from the District and creating staffing shortages in other areas.

Ms. Funchess inquired about the specific skill set required for serving as a Building Designee or a CASE.

Superintendent Deane-Williams explained that the redesign is intended to expand the number of staff

members knowledgeable about Special Education to counteract the perception that this is an isolated, highly specialized area. She stated that information should also be obtained regarding Special Education staffing and caseloads in other districts to use as a basis of comparison.

Ms. Wood stated that the guidance provided by the NYS Education Department indicates that administrators could best serve as Building Designees, but the capacity and knowledge must be built within the network in each school. She reported that at least 100 professional development opportunities have been planned for CASEs and Building Designees, and additional training is needed regarding the IEP Direct system. Ms. Wood added that training will be provided in each school to be accessible to these staff members.

Commissioner Elliott asked about the projected timeframe for attaining proficiency in Special Education in the District. The Superintendent responded that this will require an extended amount of time because of the separate lines of administration, reporting, curricula, and professional development between General Education and Special Education. She stated that the Path Forward will delineate a step-by-step process over the next ten years, and the Board should require future superintendents to provide data to monitor implementation at each stage. Superintendent Deane-Williams pointed out that the redesign involves a major shift not only in terms of the work performed, but in power dynamics as staff learn to partner with parents of students with disabilities.

The Superintendent referred to a new plan to improve customer service for parents at the District.

Lawrence Wright discussed difficulties reported by parents in terms of navigating the bureaucracy in the District, and stated that the existing “At Your Service” call line will be improved to reduce response time and assign a navigator to assist parents until the problem has been resolved. He emphasized that parents will no longer be referred to other departments or offices, and a navigator will be responsible for responding and guiding them through the process to ensure that their problem has been adequately addressed. Mr. Wright showed a new feature on the District website, “Let’s Talk”, enabling parents to report problems or concerns online in writing, in addition to the call-in service that is currently offered.

Commissioner Elliott asked whether the “At Your Service” feature on the website will include a tutorial to assist parents in navigating the District bureaucracy. Mr. Wright replied that he will explore this idea with the team.

Ms. LeBron reported hearing from a number of parents that they did not receive a response after contacting the “At Your Service” telephone line. She also suggested offering parents a video/visual tutorial in the “Let’s Talk” online feature to assist in navigating the RCSD bureaucracy.

II. Review Minutes from the Following Excellence in Student Achievement Committee Meetings: September 26, 2017; October 24, 2017; and November 14, 2017

Motion by Commissioner Hallmark to approve the minutes of the September 26, 2017; October 24, 2017; and November 14, 2017 Excellence in Student Achievement Committee meetings. Seconded by Commissioner Sheppard. **Adopted 6-0.**

Meeting adjourned at 8:50PM.