

Beaufort County Board of Education work session

July 19, 2012

Executive session

Chairman Washington called the meeting to order at 8:45 a.m., and the Board went into executive session to discuss contractual matters.

Following executive session, Mr. Wilson moved to amend the day's agenda to add a discussion about the district's iPad initiative. Unanimously approved.

Pledge of Allegiance, invocation, statement of media notification

Mr. Burnes made a brief statement, expressing his appreciation for the Board's and district staff's thoughts and prayers following the recent death of his mother.

Points of celebration

Dr. Truesdale gave a presentation on how the Board's vision, expectations and proposals have been implemented across the district and its schools. A particular focus of her presentation was a series of charts that showed steady and sometimes dramatic improvements in student academic achievement. "We have evolved," Dr. Truesdale said, "from a collection of schoolhouses into a professional learning community."

Mr. Campbell emphasized the importance of the community investing in students and teachers, and Mr. Washington saluted the district's employees for their hard work.

Attendance zones

Mr. Washington says that the Board must find ways to convey to the public how demographic changes can force the Board to make changes in attendance zones. He proposes that the Board communicate to the public in advance that if certain demographic shifts were to occur, then the Board would have to entertain specific steps to adjust to those shifts.

Phyllis White explored the idea of a more public and transparent communications policy that would let parents know in advance that if they move into a high-growth area of the county – the Bluffton cluster of schools, for example – they should not be surprised by future changes in attendance zones in schools serving that area. The district's website would be one way of making those possibilities known to parents and citizens.

Dr. Truesdale proposed that in addition to the Board's annual review of grade configurations and school attendance boundaries, that future attendance zone changes be included in those discussions.

Mr. Wilson suggested that in addition to sharing district communications about the possibility of future changes in school attendance with local Realtors, those communications should also be shared with elected leaders of the county's municipalities. He proposed adding specific language to that effect in the Board's official policies.

Ms. Bush says that every parent whose child will be affected by planned attendance zone changes should receive personal communications, by mail, rather than limiting those communications to e-mails and website postings.

Ms. Bush moved (Mr. Campbell seconded) that the Board accept the administration's recommendations for changes to PE 8.3 regarding changes in school attendance zones.

Employee Effectiveness Plan development

Dr. Truesdale said that the Board had directed the administration to develop a pay-for-performance plan to take effect during the 2014-15 school year. She then gave a summary of pay-for-performance aspects of the Teacher Advancement Program model that 15 district schools are already using. A total of \$1.4 million in stipends went to teachers and instructional leaders in those schools based on improvements in student performance.

She also said that the South Carolina Department of Education is seeking a federal grant to help implement pay-for-performance systems, and Beaufort has an opportunity to partner with SCDE in this initiative. Dr. Truesdale proposed that the Board pursue that partnership with SCDE while also commissioning a 2012-13 evaluation of other pay-for-performance programs across the country.

Board members engaged in a discussion of a variety of issues surrounding pay-for-performance in general and TAP specifically.

Mr. Wilson moved (Mr. Campbell seconded) that the Board commission a pay-for-performance/merit pay study for all district employees. Motion approved unanimously.

Mr. Wilson moved (Mr. Campbell seconded) that, within the constraints prescribed in state law, salary increases be frozen for employees who are in improvement plans due to issues with their performance. After Mr. Washington expressed an interest in clarifying whether such a policy would conflict with state law, Mr. Wilson tabled his motion until that question could be answered.

Mr. Wilson moved (Mr. Evans seconded) that the district partner with the South Carolina Department of Education in applying for the federal TIF grant.

Discussion of student grading practices

Dr. Dereck Rhoads gave Board members background on grading practices and a brief summary on research concerning those practices. Educators, he said, are constantly evaluating the most accurate and effective ways to measure student progress. Dr. Rhoads also gave some detailed examples of how student grades might be affected by the use of minimum grade floors such as those used at some district schools.

Ms. Bell said that she has a problem with some schools using grade floors and some not using them. She said that all schools should use the same practice.

Mr. Evans said that he served on the group that developed South Carolina's Uniform Grading Policy, and that policy intentionally did not cover minimum grade floors. He also mentioned that local high schools piloted the concept of grade floors a few years ago and analyzed thousands of student grades. Mr. Evans said that grading must be the responsibility and the purview of the teacher, but he believed Ms. Bell had a valid point consistency from one school to the next.

Dr. Truesdale said that in her personal view, district leaders should respect the professionalism of individual teachers and respect the collegial dialogue within individual schools, the ability of teachers within a school to come together and determine what their practices will be. She also pointed out that as a practical matter, grade floors are used almost exclusively in grades 3-8.

Mr. Washington moved (Mr. Burnes seconded) that the grading practice policy of the Beaufort County School District shall be that no school or teacher will engage in grading practices that violate state policy, and all grading practices developed by teachers and/or schools shall be approved by district administration.

Mr. Wilson agreed with Ms. Bush that grading practices should be consistent across the district. He said that he believed the use of minimum grade floors should be a policy decision rather than a decision made by individual teachers or schools.

Mr. Washington said that he believed individual teachers are in a better position to make decisions on student grades than district administrators.

Ms. Bush said that grading practices should be school-based and not micro-managed by district-level administration. She said the Board should put its faith in the professionalism of classroom teachers and school leaders.

Dr. Truesdale advocated the insertion of a sentence in Mr. Washington's proposed policy that specified that "grading practices are the purview of the teacher."

Mr. Washington talked about what he viewed as a community perception that in our schools, throughout the district, there are policies that involve grade floors, and that different schools are addressing that in different ways.

At the conclusion of discussion, the Board approved the motion by a vote of 6-2.

District iPad initiative

Dr. Truesdale and Cory Tressler, the district's Director of Virtual Learning, gave Board members an update on the district's iPad initiative, including a preview of how teachers will be trained and how the devices will be employed in schools.

Discipline/alternative education

Gregory McCord, the district's Student Services Officer, gave Board members an update on the results of student disciplinary hearings, including school-by-school data on out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. Mr. McCord told Board members that he would work with all schools during the upcoming year to analyze suspensions and expulsions on an ongoing basis to determine why some schools and some demographic groups may have disproportionate numbers of suspensions or expulsions.

Mr. McCord also explained how students will get more personalized assistance and counseling when they are readmitted to school following time spent attending alternative education programs.

Mr. Wilson suggested the possibility of allowing leaders at Right Choices to consider individual students' behavior and progress in determining whether to modify the number of days students spend at Right Choices.

Executive Session

Ms. Bush moved (Mr. Rivers seconded) that the Board go into executive session to discuss personnel matters.