

Great Schools New Jersey – The Association of High Need School Districts Meeting – Wednesday, June 5, 2019 NJASA

I. Welcome: Dr. Michael Salvatore, GSNJ President, Superintendent, Long Branch Public Schools

Dr. Michael Salvatore welcomed meeting participants.

II. Discussion with NJ Department of Education Assistant Commissioners: Wrapping Up Issues in the Current School Year and Planning for the Future

Presenters:

Linda Eno, Assistance Commissioner of Academics and Performance
Carolyn Marano, Assistant Commissioner of Student Services

Dr. Salvatore introduced Carolyn Marano, Assistant Commissioner of Student Services.

Ms. Marano began by noting that she has been a teacher and administrator and is an attorney. Her background is in urban education. She said that for her, everything is about leadership.

She reported that some of the work done in her division in the Department of Education concerns Title I and other title funding. She said her division's goal is for children to do the best they can regardless of any limitation in their abilities. She said she became very involved in special education when she realized that kids aren't getting what their IEPs say they need. She added that urban children are classified more often, and that starts in Kindergarten and continues through school. She also said the Department is asking superintendents to hold child study teams to a higher standard. She asked why boys are being classified more than girls, what standards are being used, are children in the least restrictive environment, etc.

Ms. Marano described a district in which there were no self-contained classrooms so kids can be with kids. She added that children are invited to be part of their IEPs, not just when they're 14. She said these are the kinds of things they're working on, and they really want to produce change. We don't expect to see wholesale change for five years, but we want to put things in place, she added. She noted that her division will be having a retreat.

She also said they are trying to put people together, to connect districts. They are calling their plan a Program Development Network. For example, Roxbury has a great school phobia program. The question is how to connect them with other districts that need it, she explained.

Ms. Marano said the message is not that they want to bring children back from out of district placement. Kids should be in the correct placement. She said what we're saying is the right programs should be put in place in districts in the least restrictive environments.

She also said they are looking at consultant services because it's hard to hire people, and they want the best quality people to work with districts. She added that they are looking for recommendations for consultants and planning to come out to districts.

Ms. Marano said they have found that parents of students in urban neighborhoods don't get the representation other parents get in child study team meetings. A lot of parents use advocates, and some are good, and some are just doing the best they can, she added. Her division is developing a parent advocacy training program. They're inviting a small number of parents at first and having them work with the Department, with board of education attorneys and with parent attorneys. They are also giving them letters they can use. The parents will receive a certificate at the end of the program to show to judges and others. The division is coordinating with the Statewide Parent Advocacy Network (SPAN) but feels like they need to do more.

Rocco Tomazic, Freehold Borough Superintendent, asked a question about over-classification. He said there's a bill in the Legislature about full state funding of extraordinary special education aid. He wondered if people will say that will increase classification rates and out of district placement. He wondered what Ms. Marano thought about that.

She said they don't comment on proposed legislation, but a lot of what people say about this on social media is simply not permitted. She added that they have a corrective action plan for due process. They are putting together a work group and looking at other states. She said this will save money for the district and the parents. Parents are going broke trying to get services for their children, she said. We're encouraging districts to stop digging in their heels and work with parents who will be with them for years, she added.

Patricia Camp, Rahway Superintendent, asked if there was some help available for districts when dealing with parents when their children can transition out of some forms of special education, but the parents are worried about that. Ms. Marano answered that she likes school-year IEPs, where you can prepare parents. If a child study team wasn't so involved in testing they could help administrators with this, and it wouldn't be ripping the bandaid off. She also said that if a district SEPAC invites them, they'll come.

Dr. Linda Eno took the floor after Ms. Marano finished. She explained that there was a motion to the court to extend to freshmen and sophomores the current consent order allowing juniors and seniors to use the graduation regulations that had been invalidated by the court. She said that if the court says no, the Department will need to implement a grade 11 assessment. If the court says yes, that will give the Department some time to work with stakeholders on what assessment will be going forward. But the law requiring an 11th-grade test is still in force. The new regime will affect the class of 2023 and beyond, she said.

Dr. Eno said it was necessary for everybody to come together to understand the best way to assess students in high school. That includes the Department, teachers, administrators, community groups, higher education and the business community.

She noted that about 18 months is enough for an RFP for a new state assessment.

She also said the Department is committed to another round of stakeholder engagement around high school assessment. She added that the last round was pretty successful with regard to grades 3-8, but we didn't get there with high school.

Dr. Eno also said we need to make sure we're meeting the needs of all students with enough flexibility but also enough rigor, so districts aren't shirking their responsibilities to kids.

Dr. Salvatore asked if any changes were coming for TEACHNJ. Dr. Eno responded that those regulations come up for renewal in 2021. She added that the Department had pivoted to principal evaluation this year.

Mr. Tomazic asked about chronic absenteeism in district performance reports. He noted that the Department stopped including the state average, which he could use to explain things to his board of education. He wondered what the rationale was for that. Dr. Eno said she didn't know the answer to that but could get it for him.

Dr. Eno also talked about preschool expansion. She said the current budget has fewer dollars for expansion, but it is continuing. She said information will go out before the state budget is adopted in order to give districts more time for planning.

She also mentioned that Cary Booker is leaving the Governor's staff to come to the Department to head up the new early childhood division. There will also be more hiring for the division, which will help districts get more support and provide districts with more help.

Dr. Camp asked about possible flexibility in preschool regulations. Dr. Eno said we need to look closely at all the regulatory rules. It's a very muddy landscape. She added that we need to determine those things that are getting in the way. For example, we know there are best practices around space, and we know there are space issues. We need to figure out the health and safety issues that can't be changed, but also where we can be flexible.

III. Community Schools: Julie Borst, Executive Director, Save Our Schools NJ

Julie Borst began by explaining that Save Our Schools NJ is a volunteer parent organization, and one of their incubator projects is the NJ Community Schools Coalition. She said that in three and a half years, they have become a national model for a community schools organization.

Ms. Borst noted that with the suburbanization of poverty in New Jersey and nationally, districts are now seeing changes in their student populations. They're seeing more at-risk students.

She noted that the coalition would like to see a more methodical approach to community schools in NJ. She said it's not about all schools looking alike, but rather that there is a plan to help schools become the centerpieces of their communities.

Ms. Borst reported that legislation has been introduced that would place site coordinators in schools that want that for three years. These employees would be fully trained, placed in districts

and paid for by the NJ Community Schools Coalition. This person would be responsible for creating the necessary relationships (e.g., with United Way, local food banks, etc.).

She also noted that on July 24 at NASA, two panels were scheduled to present about early childhood and social-emotional learning (SEL) using a community schools lens. She noted that the Nicholson Foundation asked the coalition to put together panel discussions on SEL. They're also looking for support for the community schools legislation.

She said they've spent a lot of time with national folks and have great models and relationships. She added that there is a national call to create 25,000 community schools by 2025.

IV. Legislative Update

Melanie Schulz, Director of Government Relations for NJASA, reported that the superintendent salary cap bill will be on the Assembly Education Committee agenda for the June 10 meeting. She said the bill had already passed the Senate.

She also reported that she and representatives from other organizations met with Assemblywoman Joanne Downey about her bill on civics. She reported that they were able to kill that bill, and instead the Assemblywoman will put in a resolution making October civics month. This would leave it up to the districts to determine how to celebrate civics, especially with high school students, instead of having to find a way to include five more credits in an already busy schedule.

Ms. Schulz also talked about the School Safety Summit focused on plans for students with physical or cognitive disabilities, which she attended. She said there was a robust discussion among participants, including fire marshals, healthcare professionals, folks from disability communities, the head of homeland security for New Jersey, and law enforcement.

V. Education Law Center Update

Sharon Kregel, ELC Policy and Outreach Director, noted that the consent decree that Dr. Eno had mentioned earlier has been accepted by the court and extended to freshmen and sophomores.

VI. Approval: GSNJ April 2019 Meeting Minutes Treasurer's Report: April 2019

The April GSNJ meeting minutes and Treasurer's Report were approved unanimously.

The meeting was adjourned at 3 p.m.