

Great Schools New Jersey – May 20, 2020

Great Schools New Jersey – The Association of High Need School Districts Virtual Meeting – Wednesday, May 20, 2020

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

Dr. Salvatore welcomed everyone to the meeting, and said he hoped everyone was healthy. He congratulated North Bergen Superintendent George Solter on being named Superintendent of the Year in Hudson County.

II. CARES Act Funds and the Digital Divide, Projected School Aid in FY20 and FY21, School Reopening Plans, Other Issues of Concern

Dr. Salvatore started the discussion on funding and the CARES Act. He asked how districts were handling the application process and making plans for using the funds. He said he wondered how the CARES money would affect state aid.

Melanie Schulz, Director of Government Relations for NJASA, said districts should have received the application from the state for the CARES Act funds with questions about how they plan to use the money. She said she believes the faster districts submit their applications, the faster they will receive the funds. The cutoff date for applications is June 19.

She also said Governor Murphy has a separate pot of money (\$69 million) that will be split between K-12 and higher education, but she is not sure how the money will be divided. A third pot of money is coming to the state as well, and she believes a piece of that will be for school districts. When the furlough bill passed in the Senate and Assembly last week, the notion was that a portion of this money might be set aside for unemployment. However, it looks like the furlough bill will be vetoed by Governor Murphy.

Ms. Schulz reported that she was on a call with the National ASA, and there was discussion about the federal Heroes Act that passed Congress. The bill allocates \$3 trillion dollars for COVID-19-related expenses, including \$58 billion for K-12 education, \$5 billion for closing the digital divide, and \$4 billion for K-12 and higher education-related activities.

She added that 75% of the states on the call did not have solid plans for reopening schools. Some states, such as Nevada and Arizona, will have a soft opening this summer. Maryland has released a plan.

Dr. Salvatore said that it is great to be provided additional funding for the transition to a remote environment and other expenses associated with COVID-19, but not if state aid will be reduced. He said districts do not want to use CARES Act money on devices and closing the digital divide and then have a reduction in state aid in the fall and have to reduce staff.

Ms. Schulz agreed and added that CARES Act funds do not need to be spent until September 2021. She said if districts are in a position to hold on to any funds they don't need to use immediately, that would be a good idea. She also suggested keeping an eye on the HEROES Act passed by Congress, which would provide additional money for education.

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Ms. Schulz added that Indiana put together a PPE marketplace that started off as a way for businesses to purchase supplies together, including masks and cleaning supplies. The school community will now also be part of that marketplace. Senator Ruiz recently brought up the idea that the NJ Department of Education (DOE) should have a purchasing program. She suggested it might be useful to talk to the Murphy administration about this, and that regions might work together to purchase cleaning supplies and PPE for schools, municipalities, etc.

Rocco Tomazic, Freehold Borough Superintendent, said cuts in state aid equal to the funds provided by the CARES Act would be detrimental to GSNJ districts. He also expressed concern that state aid will not be redistributed under S2 in the coming year. He wondered if districts will have to wait until August 25 for FY21 budget proposals before knowing what might happen.

Ms. Schulz said districts that rely heavily on state aid are in a bind, but other districts will also be experiencing significant revenue cuts as a result of large decreases in property tax revenues. She added that she does not think S2 has been discussed yet.

Tony Trongone, Pemberton Superintendent, reported that his district approved their budget April 30, but put a freeze on hiring and, just to be safe, set aside about \$2 million because they receive approximately \$80 million in state aid. He said in their CARES Act application, they're putting the money towards virtual learning and to tackle the regression they expect to see when schools reopen. He said he believes the money should be earmarked for staff because of the short notice with regard to cuts. He said he'd like to put additional funding toward technology and infrastructure but added that the public isn't going to be concerned about district issues with aid cuts, and therefore his recommendation is to save the money.

Ms. Schulz said she thinks there will be DOE flexibility if a district needs to amend a CARES Act application later.

Dr. Salvatore next turned the discussion to reopening schools. He asked if anyone wanted to shed light on reopening plans they've been looking at.

Dr. Richard Bozza, NJASA Executive Director, said the DOE is bringing people together and soliciting input. Based on the four areas of focus in the [CCSSO model](#), the DOE has divided stakeholders into four subcommittees: continuity of learning, conditions for learning, leadership and planning, and policy and funding. The DOE would like to have a report out by mid-June, and it will go to the Governor's office for final approval. He said that an NJASA officer has been placed in each of the four groups.

Dr. Bozza also talked about the Senate Education Recovery Task Force, which NJASA is part of. He said teachers, school nurses, and pediatricians presented during the task force's second meeting, and the next meeting will focus on special education and school funding. Senator Ruiz, who chairs the task force along with Senator Thompson, has also been talking about topics such as summer programs, graduation, and school reopening.

He added that he would be shocked if school buildings can reopen in September with students. It would be impractical to take every students' temperature before they enter the building, and

school nurses will be overwhelmed with health issues. He noted that the pediatrician asked, what happens in November during flu season, what happens in the winter with whooping cough? He added that they've explained on these calls that educators need to know things now.

Ken Greene, Newton Superintendent, said there are a lot of uncertainties, but he encouraged superintendents to submit input to county workgroups. He said this is an opportunity to spell out what is needed in various areas, for example: what a hybrid school year might look like, if online learning counts toward the 180-day school year when there isn't a declared state of emergency, etc. He added that districts need flexibility.

Dr. Salvatore agreed there is an opportunity to have a voice in these working groups and added that superintendents don't want to miss the opportunity to present solutions to problems, even if they're out of reach now.

Kenyon Kummings, Wildwood Superintendent, added that there are funding concerns in all of the topic areas that are being discussed. He gave the example of something as simple as sanitation protocols, which would require multiple custodians on every floor wiping down every touch point.

Dr. Salvatore said one of the biggest challenges is the uncertainty of funds, and while the solution is more funds, will they be available?

III. Presenter:

Deborah Cornavaca, Deputy Chief of Staff for Outreach, Murphy Administration

Deborah Cornavaca started by thanking GSNJ for inviting her to speak. She thanked all the superintendents for their tremendous efforts, good humor and perseverance during this difficult time. She said she understood that from their perspective there were a thousand things the administration could be doing better and more quickly. But she added that the administration is deeply appreciative and in awe of everything superintendents are doing.

She said the administration is now focused on reopening NJ's economy and society. With this comes many questions about schools, graduation, the end of the school year, requirements for going back to work, etc. The administration is trying to use the data provided to make the best and most informed decisions. She added that the administration knows educators need to know what will be happening, and they're trying to balance a lot of different pieces.

Dr. Cornavaca said the administration needs superintendents' collaboration and input, and that she would take that input back to the Governor's office. She added that the DOE is putting together a stakeholder's table with various groups. The DOE recognizes that this must be an inclusive process. They're also looking at questions about daycare and summer camp and hoping to have answers on those sooner rather than later. She added that they're acutely aware of the connection between education and the economy, but that the two things are also different.

Mr. Trongone asked about the furlough bill. Dr. Cornavaca said existing furlough plans were not suited for this type of situation. She added that she could not say whether the bill would be

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vetoed, but that it is under review. The administration is trying to create policies that allow for flexibility and maximize efforts to respond to this crisis. For example, they're looking at workshare and other furlough options. She said they are also balancing huge budgetary unknowns right now, including the next iteration of CARES Act funding. She noted that they know there are time pressures for municipalities and schools.

Dr. Salvatore asked about summer instruction, which he said is right around the corner. He asked when there might be an update on whether this will be remote or face-to-face, and especially with regard to special needs populations and providing them with additional services.

Dr. Cornavaca said that the Governor's recent announcement closed schools through June 30, so there will be no in-person instruction until at least that date. She said the administration is looking at what might be feasible in July and August, adding that decisions will be made based on available public health data rather than public outcry. The administration recognizes that mental health must also be part of the discussion, and that parents will need to return to work. Everything must be done in increments to open the state back up in the safest way possible.

Sharon Kregel, ELC Policy and Outreach Director, asked about the DOE survey on the digital divide in districts. She noted that the last one found that 90,000 kids were still not connected and/or didn't have access to a device. She asked if new results were available.

Dr. Cornavaca did not know but said she would get back to her with this information. She added that a number of programs have helped with the hardware piece, but connectivity has been more challenging. Some companies offered to help, but they were also committing people to a contract after the free period ended.

Patricia Camp, Rahway Superintendent, mentioned that there has been a lot of public pressure to hold graduation ceremonies. She asked if there will be changes to the original guidance.

Dr. Cornavaca said graduation ceremonies, even if outdoors, would increase contact significantly, and there could be negative public health impacts. The administration is not at a point where they can support something more permissive, though they could support ceremonies happening in cars. She added that while testing has increased, about 25% of positive cases are asymptomatic. If the data shows a decrease, this issue will be addressed, she said.

Dr. Tomazic noted that GSNJ districts are more reliant on state aid than other districts might be. He asked if districts are under adequacy and had received some money from S2, would they still get that money? He asked, as we go into the second round of the FY21 budget cycle, is the discussion only about new money from the state being cut or also about redistributed S2 money or even the entire fiscal increase originally proposed for FY21?

Dr. Cornavaca said she couldn't give an answer about what state aid numbers would look like. The administration is waiting to see what funding streams are available, and where losses can be recouped. The administration will then work on equitable distribution of available funds. The first concern is districts under adequacy, the second is districts losing money under S2, and the third is districts that can't do anything without aid.

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Ms. Schulz said that having an update on graduation sooner than later would be helpful so plans can be made. Some districts have already invested money in graduation plans, and that money will be lost without a decision soon, she added.

Dr. Cornavaca responded that it is sometimes hard to justify decisions about what is permissible and what is not. She gave the example of Easter, when religious communities were upset that folks could go to the beach but not to worship. She said the administration is trying to make decisions that make sense, but that doesn't always make sense to everyone. She added that if people can gather before the end of June, they will receive guidance about hosting graduations. However, districts should make plans with currently available data.

Ms. Schulz also mentioned that the Indiana Governor put together a PPE marketplace that now includes schools and asked if NJ has similar plans, maybe for a regional cooperative for better purchasing power.

Dr. Cornavaca noted that NJ is part of a multi-state consortium for purchasing PPE. She said it has taken a while to set up because each state has different procurement requirements. She said she did not know if regions within the state will be able to participate in a similar marketplace.

Lori Moore, Lindenwold Superintendent, said she is struggling with day-to-day issues and the individual situations of district families and students. Many families are saying that they cannot do remote learning for a variety of reasons, even when the district has figured out the device piece. Families are missing in action in large numbers, with explanations that vary from “we don't feel like bothering” to the fact that they are essential workers or students can't figure out how to log on. There is also no equitable way to track daily attendance, though they are trying to balance empathy and accountability. She said they try to focus on performance-based measures. They are also trying to be thoughtful about this in the fall, putting some degree of teeth in it and looking at the quality of instruction, the day to day, and working under teacher contracts when teachers might have to do packets and online learning and in school learning. She added that they have a large ELL population and an 84-85% poverty rate.

Dr. Cornavaca said we know you are dealing with this in a granular way every day. She added that her experience has been that you don't want the state involved in those granular things because it works for one and not for another. She said we want the task force to talk about the big issues and help formulate that space and then put out general guidance at the state level. The more micro the state gets, the more problems we create. The level where we engage has to be supportive and not inhibitive. But she added that she knows educators need the general set-up from the administration.

Dr. Salvatore thanked Dr. Cornavaca for participating in the meeting. She said she was there to listen and that what the superintendents tell her has an impact. She added that their input helps inform the administration, and so please don't be shy. She said she appreciates solutions as well as all the problems.

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Dr. Salvatore then asked Sharon Kregel if there was anything to report from ELC. She mentioned that ELC sent the administration two letters concerning CARES Act funds for schools and the issue of what percentage of that funding should be set aside for private schools.

Dr. Salvatore noted that it would be good to know something about the state budget and revenue shortfalls. Ms. Schulz said the State Treasurer will have something to report later that week or next.

Ms. Schulz asked if districts had sent out reduction in force notices to staff.

Dr. Tomazic and Dr. Salvatore said they have not sent out notices. Dr. Tomazic said his district is still going by the FY21 state aid notices until they know more.

Olga Hugelmeyer, Elizabeth Superintendent, said her district put a clause in contracts that allows the district to reduce personnel if there is a change in state aid. She said the clause will not put them in a position to have to give 60 days notice.

Sancha Gray, Asbury Park Superintendent, said that since her districts is facing a significant loss in state aid, she did not fill positions that opened up through attrition and reduced the number of vice principals.

IV. Approval: GSNJ March and April 2020 Meeting Minutes

The meeting minutes were moved and approved.

V. GSNJ Meetings This Spring and in 2020-21

It was decided that GSNJ would meet on Thursday, August 27, two days after Governor Murphy's August 25 address about the reworked FY21 State Budget. Danielle Farrie, ELC Research Director, will be asked to present on the state aid numbers in the new budget.