

**Minutes
Transylvania County Board of Education
February 1, 2021**

Call to Order/Welcome

Discussion Topics:

1. School Calendar 2021-2022
2. Pre-K Update & Federal Programs Overview
3. Science of Reading Update
4. Online Learning Path Update
5. Social-Emotional Health Update

Adjourn

The Transylvania County Board of Education held a work session at 6:30 p.m. on February 1, 2021 at the Morris Education Center in order to receive updates on important educational topics. In accordance with the remote meetings statute from the General Assembly and the Governor's guidelines, the meeting was conducted remotely and public access was not permitted. The meeting livestream failed and the meeting was recorded. Chairman McCoy welcomed everyone and called the meeting to order. The following individuals were in attendance (* indicates remote attendance). Social distancing was observed for in-person attendees.

BOARD MEMBERS:

Tawny McCoy, Chair
Ron Kiviniemi, Vice Chair
Courtney Domokur
Marty Griffin
Kimsey Jackson

BOARD ATTORNEY:

None

MEDIA:

John Lanier, Transylvania Times*

STAFF:

Dr. Jeff McDaris, Superintendent
Jenny Hunter, Administrative Assistant
Dr. Brian Weaver, Assistant Superintendent*
Carrie Norris, Director, K-8 Curriculum/Instruction*
Missy Ellenberger, Director, 9-12 Curriculum/Instruction*
Audrey Reneau, Director, Pre-K, AIG, Federal Programs*
Kevin Smith, School-Community Relations Coordinator*
Chris Whitlock, Director, Technology Services
Blake Tesnow, Technology Specialist
Kelly Cook, School Resource Officer

The start of the work session was delayed to 6:44 p.m. due to audio problems.

1. School Calendar 2021-2022

Dr. Brian Weaver presented a first read of the proposed school calendar for the 2021-2022 year. He reported that two calendar committee meetings were held virtually and were comprised of parents and a minimum of one staff representative from each school. He noted there is little flexibility in NC schools' calendar design due to state calendar legislation; however, our system regularly qualifies for a weather waiver (which allows systems that miss a certain number of days to start earlier in August). Therefore, the calendar committee selected Monday, August 16, 2021 as the first day. This will allow first semester exams to be completed before Christmas and the last day to be the Friday before Memorial Day. Spring break will take place in April. Chairman McCoy noted that the 2022 high school graduations potentially could be held on May 27 and 28. Dr. Weaver addressed questions from the board. Members commended the proposed calendar and thanked the committee for their work. Approval of the 2021-2022 school calendar will be requested at the next regular meeting on February 15.

2. Pre-K Update & Federal Programs Overview

Audrey Reneau reported there are currently 48 total children enrolled in Pre-K classes at BES, RES, and TCH. Enrollment is full at each site and there is a waiting list. If space

allows in the future, we would like to open a Pre-K classroom at Pisgah Forest Elementary School and add more Pre-K classrooms at the current locations. There is a definite need.

Mrs. Reneau reported that funding for federal programs is based on free and reduced meal numbers. Due to the pandemic, this year's free/reduced numbers are much lower than normal. Not all students are doing in-person learning, and because children can eat for free right now, many parents have not submitted the usual free/reduced applications. This lower free/reduced count will equate to decreased funding for next year and negatively impact important programs such as Title I (improving basic education for disadvantaged children), Title II (supporting quality, effective instruction), Title III (supporting English as a Second Language); and Title IV (student support and academic enrichment). School districts have reached out to DPI regarding this issue. Other options to qualify for federal funds may be considered.

Ms. Reneau reported there are currently 254 identified students in the Academically/Intellectually Gifted (AIG) program. AIG screening is done each fall, and there are multiple pathways to AIG identification. We have one AIG teacher at each school.

3. Science of Reading Update

Carrie Norris gave an update on the Science of Reading (SOR) which is a compilation of 20 years of cognitive research into how the brain learns to read, where challenges occur, and what preventative or remedial instruction can be implemented. Science of Reading is included in the NCDPI plan for reading achievement. The four main differences with SOR are 1) a structured and explicit phonics instructional time; 2) less reliance on the cueing system, i.e., picture clues, guessing what would make sense, etc.; 3) focus on daily spelling instruction and writing in grades K-5; and 4) structured literacy block vs. balanced literacy. Professional development and teacher training will start this spring, and over 100 teachers have already signed up. A reporter from EdNC will be following our district's progress with SOR.

Board members asked if teachers would have to change the way in which they teach. Mrs. Norris reported that SOR will be a supplement to what teachers are already doing. Board members were excited about the SOR approach. Mr. Kiviniemi stated that as a former elementary principal, he is pleased to see that Open Court will remain as a teaching tool of SOR. Mrs. Domokur added that the Spellography program at RES, another component, has been great for her son.

4. Online Learning Path Update

Missy Ellenberger and Carrie Norris gave an update on the online learning path (OLP) that was created this summer to meet the needs created by COVID-19. The OLP option was designed to encompass the entire school system as one. For example, OLP teachers at PFES could teach students from RES, BES, etc. Teachers at BHS may teach RHS students online and a course in-person at BHS. During first semester there were 470 elementary students, 310 middle school students, and 264 high school students enrolled in OLP. Spring semester OLP numbers dropped to 344 elementary, 186 middle school, and 123 high school as more students returned to in-person learning.

A typical day in the elementary and middle school OLP includes 8:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. live interactive instruction with small groups, independent work, and 1:1 conferencing, interventions, etc. All lessons are recorded and posted for later access. A typical high school day in the OLP is similar to a typical day for face-to-face students—students log in to the class at the scheduled time (i.e., World History, 1st block, 8:05 a.m.). If the class is completely OLP, students meet 4 days a week for 45 minutes of instruction for each

class. If the class is blended, students log in during A day or B day (depending on last name) and participate as if they were seated in the class.

Looking ahead for the 2021-2022 school year, the goal is to eliminate blended classes if possible. It is challenging for teachers to manage face-to-face and virtual instruction at the same time. Other potential goals for next year include K-8 OLP school (numbers to be determined) and 9-12 continuing along a similar path based on student need and OLP enrollment.

Mr. Griffin asked how schools make sure that OLP students keep up with their assignments. Mrs. Ellenberger reported that teachers have been diligent about making calls to the parents of students who don't log in or turn in their work. When teachers can't reach the parent, the administration steps in and home visits may take place. Staff have come up with some unique strategies to keep students engaged. Reaching out is key.

5. Social-Emotional Health Update

Dr. McDaris shared observations and anecdotal evidence on the social-emotional health, resiliency, and impact of COVID-19 on our schools and students:

- We continue to have low numbers of contact positives.
- We are not experiencing positive spread by students in our schools. Positive contacts are occurring outside our school buildings.
- We have multiple conversations a day with our school nurses.
- Contact tracing and enforcement of rules are keeping schools moving forward safely.
- Contact tracing identifies who needs to quarantine and who is not required to do so.
- Many students previously on OLPs have returned to in-person learning.
- From September to November we had two employees utilize the Employee Assistance Network. Only one of those was due to job stress.
- Student numbers for extra-curricular activities have remained consistent with last year.
- Initial failures are up as students adjust to more online interaction and less face-to-face interaction.
- Principals and counselors report that loss of routine, family struggles with food or finances, and social isolation away from friends is having an impact on many students.
- Some students appear to be thriving with the half-virtual schedules while others are struggling with anxiety.
- The extra isolation paired with less stability in some homes is impacting many of our students.
- 360 classes were failed last semester. Most of this is the result of students not being self-disciplined enough to complete work online (OLP).
- Students crave to be at school for the organization and consistency. Many students tell us that being at home is not preferred to being at school.
- One of the saddest conversations I have had this year was with an OLP student and his mom. The student was begging to come back to Plan B, but the mom admitted she was scared of him and their entire family dying. The student kept crying aloud and asking to come back. I followed up with some counseling suggestions.
- Students are more anxious, stressed, worried, and nervous than ever before.
- Overall student discipline has plummeted. Students want to be with their peers.

- Educators are seeing a large number of students lose stamina and discipline for learning and the activities that go with learning.
- Some students are struggling with the dynamics of only coming to school 2 days a week.
- We are getting fewer Gaggle alerts than we have in the past.
- We are seeing fewer student behaviors requiring disciplinary action.
- In terms of staff, it depends. Some are more stressed than others.
- Students are having difficulty creating and maintaining relationships and difficulty navigating differences between peers.
- The general “feel” in the buildings is much different. Teachers are struggling with wanting to stay in school for the kids, but also balancing keeping themselves and their families safe.
- The most common thing heard is “I am so glad we are in school. I missed my friends and teachers.”
- I truly believe that kids are more resilient than we give them credit for and they are happy to be in school despite the distancing and masking.
- We did some virtual counseling while we were out, but that cannot compare to in-person counseling.
- I have met with many students regarding food insecurities. Fortunately, our “Free Food Fridays” have really helped with this, but we continue to see students without daily snacks or coming in hungry.
- I am finding that students who never had problems before are now having problems connecting and making friends.

Other observations:

- CDC: Federal health officials indicated the “preponderance of available evidence” supports in-person instruction.
- In-person instruction can be carried out safely as long as mask-wearing and social distancing are maintained. This includes hybrid attendance models as needed to limit the total number of contacts and prevent crowding.
- The CDC team reviewed data from studies in the United States and abroad and found the experience in schools differed from nursing homes and high-density work sites where rapid spread has occurred.
- There has been little evidence that schools have contributed meaningfully to increased community transmission.
- “The conclusion here is with proper prevention efforts . . . we can keep transmission in schools and educational settings quite low.”

Board members discussed the importance of encouraging children and teens who are experiencing anxiety to seek help and talk with counselors. They emphasized that proper masking and distancing are key to keeping transmissions low and schools open. They expressed thanks to the teachers and staff for all they are doing to educate kids and keep them safe.

Mr. Griffin asked for an update on employee leave benefits. Dr. McDaris reported that schools have received permission to extend eligibility for COVID19-related leave until March 31 (it originally expired in December). This means that an employee who has to quarantine or be out due to COVID-19 illness does not have to use their accumulated personal leave or sick leave. At this time, it is unclear whether this option will be extended beyond March 31.

Mr. Griffin asked about protective equipment for staff. Dr. McDaris reported that the school system has been able to provide masks and shields for teachers thanks to donors. Some staff have chosen to wear their own masks as a matter of personal preference.

Mr. Griffin asked when teachers could expect to receive vaccines and whether the COVID-19 vaccination would be a requirement to attend school in the fall. Dr. McDaris reported there has been no word yet on vaccine dates for educators or entry requirements for next year.

There was no further business, and ON A MOTION BY MR. GRIFFIN, SECONDED BY MR. JACKSON, the work session was adjourned at 8:28 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Chairman

Secretary