

Meeting Minutes for the Governor's Commission on Access to Sound Basic Education

April 11, 2019

North Carolina State Construction Office Board Room

In attendance

Dr. Fouad Abd-El-Khalick, Dr. Charles Becton, Ms. Melody Chalmers, Mr. Jim Deal, Mr. Alan Duncan, Mr. Mark Jewell, Ms. Leigh Kokenes, Dr. Helen "Sunny" Ladd, Dr. Patrick Miller, Mr. Mark Richardson, Mr. Nick Sojka, Mr. Michael Williams, Mr. Brad Wilson, Hon. Leslie Winner, Ms. Henrietta Zalkind

Welcome

Mr. Wilson, Chair, called the meeting to order at 9:35 am and welcomed members. The Chair read the Conflict of Interest statement.

Commission Business and Updates

The Chair presented the minutes from the February 28, 2019 meeting of the Commission and asked if members had any edits. Hearing none, the Chair approved the minutes as presented.

Community School Model

The Chair recognized Mr. Bryan Proffitt, President, Durham Association of Educators, and Anna Grant, Community School Coordinator, Lakewood Elementary School and Director, Bull City Community Schools Partnership, for a presentation on the Community Schools Model. The model encourages school leadership and staff to work with parents and the community to transform struggling schools focusing on six pillars: authentic parent and community engagement; inclusive leadership; high-quality teaching; positive behavior practices; challenging curriculum; and wraparound support services. Coordinators focus on answering the questions: "how do we solve problems together?" and "how do we harness the expertise and skills of all of our people?".

Ms. Grant and Mr. Proffitt shared about opening pilot schools in Durham. The Durham Association of Educators (DAE) completed an assessment of principals who were open to the model, but to enter the pilot, principals and staff had to self-nominate, self-organize, and vote. Four elementary schools opted in: Club Boulevard, Lakewood, EK Powe, and Southwest. The NEA currently funds the Community Schools Coordinator positions as part of a national cohort (\$60k/coordinator); it also provides funding for Mr. Proffitt's work through a grant. The schools and DAE will continue to advocate for continued funding for Community School Coordinator positions.

The first phase focuses on completing an asset and needs assessment, finding opportunities for "low-hanging fruit" interventions, forming problem-solving teams, and introducing the role of Community School Coordinators. The team then completes a listening project, conducting interviews with staff and parents to get data about the school's top priorities and challenges. Then, problem-solving teams work to get at the root causes of the challenges and to come up with potential solutions.

Mr. Richardson and Mr. Wilson noted the importance of the school being able to show measurable impact (e.g. how much money it saved the district, decrease in staff turnover, increase in parent engagement, etc.) of the Community Schools Model over time.

Ms. Zalkind inquired about whether principals committed to stay at the schools to maintain stability. Ms. Grant noted that they do not require a commitment from principals to stay, but that many

community schools experience less staff turnover over time. Noted that some schools have worked through superintendent changes and that it's important to get buy-in from district leaders.

NC's Statewide Assessment and Accountability Systems

The Chair recognized LaTeesa Allen, Interim Deputy State Superintendent of Innovation, NCDPI, to present on NC's statewide assessment and accountability systems. Ms. Allen introduced two members of her staff, Maxey Moore, Section Chief of Test Development, and Dr. Kinge Mbella, Lead Psychometrician, with the NCDPI Division of Accountability.

Ms. Allen gave an overview of the history of testing in NC, explaining that it began as a program evaluation tool, not aligned to content standards or administered at every grade, with low stakes for students. In the 1990s, End-of-Grade tests were developed, focusing on school accountability/content alignment, and administered more frequently, with higher stakes for students. *No Child Left Behind* made testing even more high stakes with the inclusion of achievement levels. Since then, testing requirements have continued to expand through Race to the Top, the ESEA Flexibility Waiver, and the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA).

In 2013-14, NC began reporting School Performance Grades (SPG) to meet the federal requirements of ESSA. SPGs measure achievement indicators (80%) and school quality/student success indicators (20%). The State uses SPGs to designate low-performing schools. Commission members expressed their desire to move away from 80% proficiency/20% growth measure and toward a more balanced measure.

Commission members requested an example of a diagnostic assessment. DPI staff gave an overview of NC Check-Ins, given three times per year, and used as a diagnostic test for teachers to gauge student performance on content standards and to identify what content or skills they need to reteach. There were concerns from Commission members about the time the Check-Ins were taking away from instructional time. Ms. Zalkind asked if parents are provided the feedback from the NC Check-Ins so that they can help their kids. She also asked when teachers and students have time to do all this testing and what percentage of teachers use the data from these tests to inform future instruction. Ms. Chalmers noted that she gets feedback from teachers who are using the NC Check-In results and they like having that data available to them.

Dr. Ladd inquired about the legislative proposals to phase out EOG tests. Geoff will get that information to the Commission.

Mr. Richardson asked if an emotional quotient evaluation has been considered. NCDPI staff noted that there are a lot of legislatively required assessments and they do not want to add more. Mr. Jewell noted that administrators and teachers are not against assessments, but are concerned about the pressure put on students around assessments. Assessments are driving curriculum instead of the reverse, watering down experiential learning and creativity.

The Chair recognized Sherri Miller, Director of Literacy, Wake County Public School System, to provide an overview of NC's statewide literacy assessment system.

Ms. Miller explained the "Journey to Reading," or the reading levels at which children enter Kindergarten. Five percent of students will have an *easy* journey to reading; 35% will have a *relatively easy* journey; 40%

will have a *difficult* journey; for 15%, the journey will be a *formidable challenge*; and for 5%, it is as difficult as it is for someone with *Dyslexia*. She noted that 60% of students (for whom the journey will not be *easy* or *relatively easy*) will need research-based instruction and a good teacher.

Ms. Miller noted that K-3 literacy assessments are necessary to determine when students are struggling and what they are struggling with. Teachers must focus on the “5 Big Ideas in Reading:” phonemic awareness, phonics, accuracy and fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension. If a student is having trouble, the teacher can use these 5 big ideas to figure out what is causing the student to struggle.

In 2012, the NC General Assembly passed the *Excellent Public Schools Act* (EPSA), which aims “to ensure that every student read at or above grade level by the end of third grade and continue to progress in reading proficiency...” Ms. Miller noted that this standard, reading at or above grade level by the end of third grade, is too late – students need to be reading at or above grade level by the end of second grade. EPSA also established the Read to Achieve Program, out of which literacy assessments were born.

mCLASS Reading 3D is the literacy assessment tool used statewide in NC. There are two parts to it – DIBELS and Text Reading Comprehension (TRC) – which help teachers identify student needs and monitor progress. All K-3 students are assessed three times a year to get their benchmark. Tests are 30 minutes and take 1-2 weeks of literacy instruction time to complete for a class of students.

Mr. Wilson asked what percentage of Kindergarten students that are passing the kindergarten benchmark. Ms. Miller noted that 5 years ago, only 20% of students were passing the benchmark, now 42% are hitting it.

Dr. Ladd asked at what point does a teacher make the determination of whether a student is slower to pick up reading or if they have a developmental delay/disability. Dr. Patrick Miller noted that’s where benchmarks come in. Teachers track student progress by completing benchmark assessments. Mr. Wilson asked for the point at which a school psychologist would make a clinical diagnosis on whether a student has a learning disability/delay or dyslexia. Dr. Kokenes stated that with the proper benchmark information, observations, and tools in place, she could make a diagnosis very early and very quickly.

Committee Business and Updates (over lunch)

The Chair shared information on upcoming Commission meetings. The next meetings will occur on May 14, June 4, and June 25, and will focus on the recommendations the Commission will provide for the final report.

The Chair recognized Geoff Coltrane for an update on WestEd’s progress. Mr. Coltrane shared that WestEd is expected to complete their report by the end of May.

Creating a Balanced Assessment System (virtual presentations)

The Chair recognized Dr. Scott Marion, Executive Director, National Center for the Improvement of Educational Assessment, for a presentation on the challenges and opportunities of balanced systems of assessment.

Dr. Marion noted a key trade-off in the current assessment design is accountability vs. instructional support and improvement for individual students; both provide useful data, but for different parties (accountability is for policymakers and instructional support is for teachers). For this reason, states

should strive for a balanced assessment system that provides a variety of evidence to support educational decision making at all levels – from classroom to policymaking. A balanced system should exhibit comprehensiveness, coherence, continuity, efficiency, and utility and be designed based on the unique needs of the state and school districts so that the results are useful.

Dr. Abd-El-Khalick expressed concerns about the balance in North Carolina, noting that related to the iceberg shown in Dr. Marion’s presentation (slide 5), NC’s system is flipped – assessing more on district or state assessments and less on classroom and school assessments. He shared that he would like one of the Commission’s recommendations to address this.

Dr. Marion explained that a balanced assessment system faces many barriers, including politics and policy, weak ties to curriculum and learning, proliferation and commercialization, and assessment literacy.

The Chair recognized Jessica Cardichon, Director of Federal Policy, Director of Washington, DC Office, Learning Policy Institute, to present on designing an accountability system that measures opportunities for a sound basic education.

Ms. Cardichon gave an overview of indicators of opportunity, which included measures of: exclusionary school discipline; school climate; chronic absenteeism; extended-year graduation rates; and college- and career-readiness. States can use opportunity to learn indicators for accountability purposes – to identify schools low-performing schools in need of support in their accountability systems – to target resources and inform improvement efforts.

Ms. Cardichon showed that research finds that student growth is a better indicator of school performance than achievement, so we can’t effectively measure student performance by focusing solely on achievement. She noted that there is a difference between low achievement, but showing improvement, and low achievement but showing no improvement. It is important for states to identify which schools are closing the gaps and which schools are not so that the state can partner with the schools that are struggling, potentially replicating the programs from schools that have shown improvement. States should monitor improvement across all indicators and use data to drive school improvement and funding allocation decisions.

Ms. Cardichon explained that there is no requirement under ESSA that states produce a “single summative score” to identify the lowest-performing 5% of schools or adopt an index or grading system. Rather, the state’s accountability system should be designed to measure progress towards providing a sound, basic education across all schools and identify the appropriate remedies.

Dr. Ladd asked about an inspectorate system. Ms. Cardichon explained that other states are successfully using alternative models to the A-F grading scale (e.g. rubric system, matrix, decision rules, etc.).

History of NC District and School Transformation

The Chair recognized Dr. Pat Ashley, Director, Leadership Program, and Teaching Assistant Professor in Educational Leadership, NC State University, to present on the history of NC’s district and school transformation efforts.

Dr. Ashley explained the Turnaround Challenge - significantly increasing student achievement in sustainable ways. Part of the challenge has been misalignment between the federal and state definitions of and strategies for addressing “low-performing schools.” Over time, the state and federal governments have engaged in trying to help turnaround low-performing schools. Assistance to low-performing schools often included overlapping programs such as the ABCs, *NCLB*, NC Turnaround, and the District Transformation effort. There were approximately 100 schools identified as low-performing at any given time under these programs.

In 2010, Race to the Top drastically increased that number with the requirement that states identify the bottom 5% of schools as low achieving. This bumped NC from 100 “low-achieving” schools to more than 500, which changed the mindset to a more negative view of public education in North Carolina, and put more pressure on teachers and administrators. A small percentage of these schools (approx. 13%) received direct support from NCDPI. In recent years, due to budget cuts, NCDPI has decreased the number of schools to which they provide direct support and eliminated the District and School Transformation Division. Additionally, the Innovative School District was created, which allows the state to transfer responsibility for the very lowest-performing schools to an education management organization or a charter management organization.

Commission members asked what percentage of the 580 low-achieving schools are located in high poverty areas. Dr. Ashley noted that it is a high percentage and that the schools with the lowest grade on the A-F grading scale are usually the schools with the highest need.

Dr. Ashley provided an overview of what has worked, historically, to turn schools around. She noted the importance of a flexible multi-year turnaround model that matches the needs of the school; a customizable, accessible school improvement plan that can be refined over time; efforts to enhance principal and teacher pipelines; professional development opportunities for teachers and school leadership; and external support. It’s also critical that schools focus on the whole child and engage the community in the improvement process.

The challenge, then, is recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers and administrators to hard-to-staff areas. Commission members noted the importance of continuing and expanding the Teaching Fellows and Principal Fellows programs as well as encouraging “grow-your-own” efforts and a variety of teacher career pathways for students.

Statewide Regional Support Structure

The Chair recognized Dr. Maria Pitre-Martin, Deputy State Superintendent of District Support, NCDPI, to present on the new statewide regional support structure, born out of recommendation #6 from the Ernst & Young report on NCDPI transformation. The report recommended that NCDPI “redesign the regional structure to better coordinate and differentiate identified supports to LEAs.” The transformation is in Phase II, the Installation Phase, and will enter the Initial Implementation phase for the 2019-20 school year.

The redesign will place a Regional Case Manager in each of the state’s eight education regions. Regional Case Managers (new hires) will oversee a Regional Support Team (current positions). These teams will include at least 10 staff focused on: Career and Technical Education, literacy, early learning, Exceptional Children, digital learning, and behavior support systems. Though these staff are already in place, under this model, they will work more collaboratively to assess district needs and current services, coordinate and plan support services, and evaluate supports and services. Desired outcomes are: increased coordination at NCDPI;

more efficient deployment of agency resources/less duplication; clear articulation of NCDPI's priorities; increase use of data-driven decision-making; and improved field perceptions of the consistency and quality of NCDPI supports.

Commission members asked what role school social workers will play in the system and whether they will have a state support person. Dr. Pitre-Martin explained that the Department is working on this issue and may potentially partner with local health departments where there are not enough school social workers.

Discussion and Next Steps

The Chair shared again the upcoming Commission meeting dates.

At the request of Commission members, Geoff will find and share information on pending legislation related to assessments, the history of the school performance system design (move from focus on growth to focus on proficiency), details on literacy testing accountability for charter schools, and loan forgiveness programs to attract administrators to hard-to-staff locations.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:45 pm.