

Advisory Committee on Education Gathers for Second Meeting of the Year

The Advisory Committee on Education held its second meeting of the 2018-19 school year on Wednesday, Oct. 10, at the Gordon M. Anderson Leadership Center. With the school year well underway, the committee gathered to discuss a variety of topics related to curriculum and lesson plans, attendance and student engagement, testing preparedness, special education services, professional development, and the common experience of mid-fall fatigue for classroom teachers. The group also received a brief presentation covering the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) Growth assessment data and the ways that data is being used to support instruction.

Helping to organize the meeting were the group's recently selected elementary and secondary ACE co-chairs, Eli Parker from Bammel Elementary School and Gail Podaridis from Spring High School. In particular, Parker and Podaridis gathered questions from committee members in preparation for the meeting's main agenda item, a panel discussion featuring district leaders, administrators and principals.

District Leadership Panel

After welcome and greetings from Superintendent Dr. Rodney Watson and Chief of Staff Dr. Julie Hill, the bulk of the meeting was made up of a panel discussion featuring a number of administrators and subject-matter experts who were in attendance to answer committee questions and share relevant information on the topics discussed. The members of the invited panel included:

- Dr. Natasha Watson, Asst. Superintendent of Administration, Elementary School Zone II
- Dr. LaTracy Harris, Principal, Beneke Elementary School
- Kimberly Culley, Principal, Middle School #8
- Dr. Angeles Perez, Principal, Reynolds Elementary School
- Winford Adams Jr., Spring ISD Trustee, Position 4
- Dr. George Flores, Principal, Bailey Middle School
- Pamela Farinas, Asst. Superintendent, Workforce Development
- Dr. Rodney Watson, Spring ISD Superintendent

Dr. Hill helped facilitate the discussion, and she also described the goal in organizing the panel for this month's ACE meeting.

"We want to make sure that the ACE committee has an opportunity to really talk to their leaders and to know that we're here to support them," Hill said. "We want to make sure that they don't just hear from us as senior leaders, but that they hear from campus leaders and the central office leaders who support our campuses directly."

During the discussion, panelists addressed questions from the committee members and also spoke generally on a number of topics, including the following areas.

SPED/ELL

There was some discussion, including comments from several teachers, about the convergence of special education and ELL scholars, and, in particular, questions about support for teachers balancing instruction for students in these programs. Ms. Farinas, in response, discussed newly targeted professional development trainings, as well as enhanced coordination with the district's multilingual department to ensure robust and

effective approaches in the classroom. Dr. Watson indicated that the district would like to have more coaches in place to support teachers – there are currently just over 100 coaches serving teachers across the district – but that expanding the coaching staff would require additional funding. He also emphasized that the district was doing everything necessary to ensure appropriate classroom ratios while maintaining an inclusive and least restrictive environment for SPED scholars to learn in, as required by law.

Attendance

A point from the committee was raised about student absences, noting that, for many teachers, the biggest problem leading to failure in their classrooms is excessive absences. The question was asked regarding resources and tools in place to recover these students. Dr. Natasha Watson noted a few of the measures being taken.



“One thing we’re requiring every campus to do,” she said, “is create an attendance committee so we can find out where the problems are, and to ensure we’re working with every scholar at every level.”

Dr. Flores also spoke in response to the attendance question, noting that, at the middle school level, a clear pattern could often be seen of absences increasing in the eighth grade year, even for students who hadn’t previously had problems with attendance. He emphasized that active – and proactive – communication with parents and students was helping combat the trend.

“Attendance in middle school is an issue that we have to focus on across the whole campus,” Flores said. “We’ve put on a parent workshop to tell them about the implications attendance has on their students’ college readiness. The challenge I’ve given our teachers is, when they see students missing classes, that they reach out immediately. We can’t engage parents unless we know who these kids are. And if students don’t get that call or feel noticed when they’re out, then they don’t feel that sense of belonging.”

Curriculum/ICLE Framework

Questions about curriculum – and the ICLE Rigor Relevance Framework – were also addressed, with Dr. Watson speaking to several points. He noted that the need for greater rigor – together with a unified curriculum – was an important reason for implementing the framework.

“Rigor, relevance, and relationships – these are the key three elements that have to be in place for us to make progress,” Watson said. “When these aren’t in place, the district fails its students.”

He noted that many teachers reported finding the scripted lessons useful. “We’re putting more tools in our teachers’ toolkits,” Watson said.

Dr. Hill added that administrators had also gone through an intensive ICLE training to help them better understand the coaching framework and know how best to support teachers.

ARD Process Clarifications

Members of the panel discussed updates to the Special Education service continuum being made this year as part of the district’s Special Education Improvement Plan. In particular, several members of the committee requested clarification on the revised role of ARD facilitators. As the superintendent explained, their roles had been clarified in response to feedback from the Texas Education Agency indicating that the district’s model was not meeting the needs of the scholars and was placing too much of the work on a limited number of people, who in turn were being stretched too thin to work effectively.

Under the revised system, the facilitators/diagnosticians will spend less time leading ARD meetings and performing administrative duties and spend more time performing educational evaluations. Members of the panel – including Ms. Culley – emphasized that the revised system allows campus administrators and teachers to have more of an impact on student outcomes.

“Now, as principals, we are the chair of the ARD,” Culley said, “reviewing the data with the particular child in mind before going into the meeting. As principals, we need to have ownership over that.”

Dr. Harris supported that idea with her comments, stressing that the new model would help personalize services offered.

“The students are on our campus,” Harris said. “We see them every day, and we’re in a good position to know what they need and how to provide that.”

Dr. Hill also mentioned that an extensive review of ARD folders over the summer showed that a new workflow was needed, one that ensured more complete and correct record-keeping from the outset to avoid corrections having to be made later.

Trustee Adams shared his perspective, both as a board member and as a former teacher, on why the changes would help the district.

“One of my goals is to make Spring ISD a district of choice for families and students,” Adams said. “One of the ways we can do that is by addressing issues in this area. I think it’s our responsibility, from the top down, to do what we can to improve Special Education services.”

Additional items covered during the panel discussion included:

- The ongoing review of teacher stipends to ensure the effectiveness and impact of the stipends.
- The need for more robust testing software available in Spanish.
- How updates to eSchool were impacting teachers’ access to student data and reports. There was some discussion of the need to provide customized solutions in some cases to ensure timely access to relevant data.
- The role teachers and principals can play in promoting substitute teacher retention and their active participation when working in district classrooms. Principal Perez noted that being nice to subs and expressing appreciation for their work can go a long way, while also emphasizing the importance of teachers setting up their classrooms for success when they must be absent (e.g., through leaving well-organized plans and materials for the sub).
- The importance for teachers of backwards planning to ensure students are prepared for upcoming checkpoints and assessments. The panel discussed the fact that the district has moved toward a model where checkpoints are being created by teachers for teachers (rather than having them created by the curriculum department).

Members of the Leadership Panel also took time near the end of the meeting to make final comments and offer encouragement to teachers dealing with the stresses and struggles of the fall semester. Selected comments included:

“This is a critical time of the year to really accelerate learning, before we get into the testing season.”
– Dr. Julie Hill

“Just keep learning, and really be engaged in the work. Don’t be afraid to ask questions. We’re here to help, we’re here to support you. We want you to be successful so that our scholars can be successful.” – Dr. LaTracy Harris

“Embrace positivity. Negative people draw negativity towards them, and the kids see that. Embrace your calling. We’re here for our students. We all got into education in the first place to help students and make a difference in their lives. Gripping and complaining isn’t going to help fix the issues. Just stick to the heart of it. Look your students in the eyes. Think about what they need.” – Kimberly Culley

“Being magnificent requires you to take risks. Be magnificent.” – Dr. Angeles Perez

“Your school, your principal, and your students need you to stand up for what’s right. It’s our responsibility to stand up together. Your students are relying on you. Never settle for anything less than your expectations.” – Dr. Flores

“Thank you for what you do each and every day. We know that your job is hard. When you think about your most challenging days, also think about your best days.” – Dr. Natasha Watson

“See obstacles as just that: obstacles. They are things we plan to overcome. Teaching isn’t easy. It’s exhausting, but when you do it right, it’s the most rewarding thing. Your commitment is to the village, to the children.” – Pamela Farinas

Workforce Development Professional Development Day Update

Pamela Farinas gave a brief recap and overview of the first districtwide professional development day on Sept. 21, including sharing some details from the surveys taken by teachers after the event. In all, Farinas said, the day was a success, with high demand for many of the more than 50 PD sessions offered in multiple locations across the district.



Survey data showed that more than three-quarters of teachers surveyed felt the trainings would help them to be effective at their job, while more than 80 percent of respondents (across both morning and afternoon sessions) felt the training and the work of the trainers to have been “effective or higher.”

Farinas also discussed new training models that allowed instructors to follow up with teachers on their campuses to assist them in implementing strategies. The campus-based support and follow-up, Farinas emphasized, is all about giving teachers tools and helping them actually utilize those tools in their work.

“It’s a commitment from us to make sure we’re supporting you,” Farinas said, “especially when you’re trying something new in your classrooms.”

It was mentioned that some teachers requested more of these types of trainings at the outset of the year, a need the district will try to meet in 2019 with summertime professional development opportunities in the month of June. Farinas told the committee members to keep encouraging their fellow teachers to take the surveys to let Workforce Development know how things are going.

“Your feedback is so crucial,” she said. “Have your teachers fill out the survey after PD. We want to know. We’re listening.”

Beginning of Year MAP Conditional Growth Percentile (CGP) Data

The committee also received a brief overview of Measuring Academic Progress (MAP) Growth Assessment data presented by Dr. Miguel Perez. The presentation centered around high-level assessment results in the MAP Growth areas of Reading, Mathematics and Language. In comparing the conditional growth percentile (CGP) data from beginning of year (BOY) MAP Growth Assessments (see charts below), Perez discussed how the district and, in turn, campuses and individual teachers, can see where progress is being made and where more work needs to be done.

Figure 1. Median Conditional Growth Percentile and Interquartile Range for Fall 2017 BOY to Fall 2018 BOY MAP Growth READING Assessments, by Grade Level, 2018–2019



X

Students who have met their growth projection for the year exactly, Perez noted, will have a CGP of 50, meaning that their growth was equal to student growth norms. Because the data can be sorted at multiple levels, and at different intervals within the year (i.e., beginning, middle, end), the MAP Growth Assessment data provides another way for teachers and the district to evaluate and support student progress.

While discussing MAP during the earlier leadership panel discussion, Dr. Flores described the MAP Growth Assessment as a tool that was helping to support effective teacher intervention.

“This is an additional way we can look at student data and progress,” Flores said. “It’s important for students to know how we’re using that data to shape instruction. It tells you exactly where students are struggling with their fundamentals, but MAP is not a one-stop shop. It isn’t an intervention tool. It’s up to us to decide how to implement that information.”

The next ACE meeting will be held on Wednesday, Nov. 7 from 4:30 to 6 p.m.