

## Advisory Committee on Education Holds Sixth Meeting of the Year

Superintendent Dr. Rodney Watson opened the sixth ACE meeting of the 2018-19 school year on Wednesday, Feb. 20 at the Spring ISD Community Engagement Center. Dr. Watson welcomed committee members, thanked them as always for their time and contributions as members of the group, and introduced the meeting's main agenda item – a visiting panel of Spring ISD high school students representing the Superintendent's Student Advisory Group (SAG).

### Student Advisory Group (SAG) Panel

The SAG was originally formed in the spring of 2015 as an outgrowth of the dialogue begun between Dr. Watson and students during the previous fall's district listening tour. Including representatives from each of the district's high school campuses, the evolving group has continued to meet several times a year with the Superintendent and other senior administrators to voice their opinions and give district leaders feedback on projects, initiatives, and ways Spring ISD can better support student growth and success.

"The dialogue with our students has been really valuable," Dr. Watson said. "Students give unfiltered feedback, and they're very 'on' with the feedback they give." He noted that previous input from the student group had led to several changes, including updates to the dress code and the district's hiring of a chef to help develop new menu items for campus cafeterias.

For the Feb. 20 ACE meeting, 11 SAG members were in attendance. As Dr. Watson explained, the group has been focusing their discussions this year on the student experience in Spring ISD. The SAG members were instructed, during the discussion, to refrain as much as possible from referencing their own campus or specific teachers by name, in order to ensure that their comments would remain appropriate to the full ACE committee and the districtwide nature of the conversation.

In further introducing the student group, Chief of School Leadership and Student Support Services Dr. Lupita Hinojosa said that she, Dr. Watson and Chief of Staff Dr. Julie Hill had all found the direct student feedback to be a valuable aid in their work as district leaders.

"Dr. Hill and I had the opportunity to meet with these students, and we thought it was really powerful," Dr. Hinojosa said. "So take your notes today, and then take the time to reflect. Ask yourself, 'How does this inform my practice?'"



In opening up the panel discussion, Dr. Hill asked the students to tell the ACE members about some of the classes they've really enjoyed and what makes those classes stand out.

Students offered a range of answers – English, Biology, Human Geography, Physics, Health Science, Spanish, Chemistry and Mathematics. Common themes behind their answers included teachers who struck a balance between being personable and caring while at the same time communicating high expectations for student achievement. Several students said that their favorite teachers aren't afraid to use humor to round out a difficult lesson, and that their best teachers exhibit both a knowledge of their subject matter and a strong capacity to engage students in the learning process.

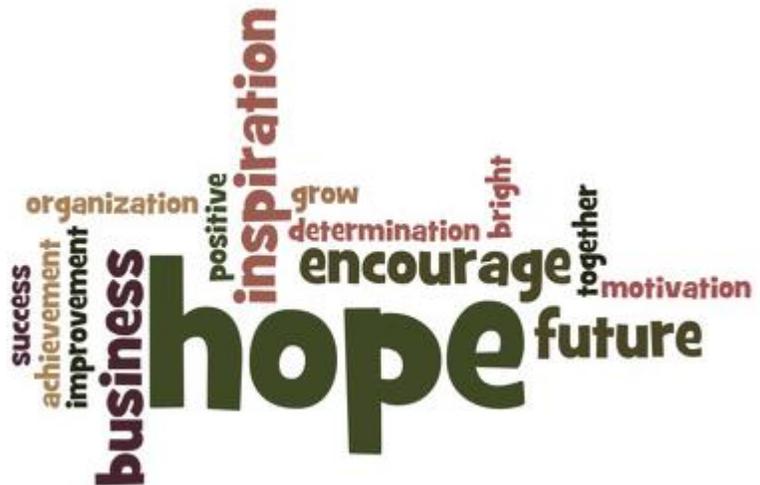
Several students mentioned how much experience can help set some teachers apart from others – especially when that experience has developed in the teacher a facility for communicating the nuances of difficult subjects in ways that make sense to each student.

Asked by Dr. Hill to offer two or three words that described their best teachers, the students' answers included the following:

- “Engaging, wise and fun”
- “Chill, explanatory and funny.”
- “Understanding, dedicated and organized.”
- “Kind, supportive and knowledgeable.”
- “Organized, ingenuity, funny.”
- “Laid back, prepared, caring.”
- “Goofy, relatable and interactive.”
- “Engaging, funny, smart.”
- “Sympathetic.”

Asked next to consider a class that wasn't a favorite, or one that had been frustrating or disappointing, the students spoke – sometimes at some length – about difficult classroom experiences they had been through. Although the students agreed that some material will always be more challenging or difficult to learn, they also spoke passionately about the need for teachers to present lessons in ways that are relevant, interesting and well planned.

In describing teachers whose classes they had struggled with, the panelists emphasized that there can often be a difference between knowing a subject and being adept at teaching it. Teachers who rushed through lessons without offering time for reflection, questions and additional explanation were a source of frustration for several members of the group, as were teachers who regularly seemed angry and ill-tempered or who seemed often to be taking out their general frustrations on students for little or no reason.



One of the strongest recurring themes among the students' descriptions of their most frustrating classroom experiences involved faculty members who lack the ability to control the class, who fail to establish reasonable norms for student behavior to ensure everyone is respected and that every student can learn. A number of the students talked about classroom situations where students were regularly loud, unruly and disruptive, or where a general sense of chaos was a common element, making it difficult for those looking to learn. Many of the students were quick to defend their teachers' personalities while explaining that, without control of the classroom, student success was far from assured.

“Sometimes, when a kid is failing, it's not their fault, it's yours,” one student pointedly told the group.

Continuing along these lines, Dr. Hill asked the students to elaborate further.

“Why is it important to you that teachers have control of the class,” she asked, “and what happens when they don't?”

The students took turns giving their take on the subject, with several talking about the fact that they rely on their teachers as one of their most important sources of knowledge and information.

“Teach me, please,” one said in explaining her feelings on the topic.

A number of the SAG members were quick to acknowledge the difficulties teachers often face in dealing with tight lesson schedules, short class periods that don’t always allow the time for a deeper dive into the material, and students who can sometimes seem uninterested or unwilling to learn. But they also emphasized that, in spite of these difficulties, teachers have a responsibility to prepare students not just for the next test, but for life after graduation.

The group included a few transfers into the district, along with several who had spent their entire school careers here. In discussing what it meant to them personally to be students of Spring ISD, many of the students expressed pride overall in the district and what their time in Spring ISD schools had meant to them. One student who grew up in a neighboring district before moving to Spring said that she far preferred it in Spring ISD. Another said that she could recall each and every one of her teachers, all the way back to Pre-K.

“Spring ISD basically raised me,” she said. “That’s how much I’ve loved this district.”



Before the students left for the evening, ACE members had an opportunity to ask the panelists a few follow-up questions, focusing especially on the theme of classroom control and classroom management the students had touched on previously.

Although the students didn’t claim to have all the answers, they suggested that taking control of the classroom starts on the very first day of school, with teachers good-naturedly but firmly establishing the guidelines that would govern acceptable and unacceptable classroom behavior. They also mentioned that younger and less-experienced teachers might benefit from talking with older, more experienced teachers. They also indicated that there was often a direct correlation between an instructor’s commitment – both to their subject and their students – and students’ willingness to engage with the material.

“First, they must be dedicated to their class,” one student said, going on to explain that teachers who seem out of their depth or who let students repeatedly run them over will have a hard time commanding the respect of their students.

While being overly harsh and strict with students might not be the answer, the SAG panelists agreed that students have the ability to rise up to high expectations when they know their teachers are fully invested in their learning and success.

“Teachers will sometimes say they care about us, or care about our education,” one student said. “But don’t just say it. Make us believe it.”

Dr. Watson thanked the student panelists for their time and honest input, and asked them, briefly, for some of the areas they’d like to hold him accountable as superintendent. They gave several answers, ranging from student safety, to putting the best teachers in classrooms, to ensuring that the district was providing opportunities for relevant real-world learning experiences.

“Help prepare us for life,” one student said in summary.

## **Post-Panel Discussion by ACE Members**

After the SAG panelists had left, the remainder of the ACE meeting mostly involved a discussion among the committee members as they reflected on the students’ comments and suggestions. The conversation focused heavily on how the district should distinguish itself as a leader in public education by continuing to insist on excellent teaching as the driving force behind student success.

“I thought that it was great to hear kids giving feedback,” one committee member said. “It’s painful to hear some of that, but it’s also a wake-up call. Teachers need to know that these kids are being affected by the behaviors going on, and by the lack of management. It hurts all of the kids in the classroom when the classroom isn’t managed well.”

Others agreed, adding that stronger mentoring programs for new teachers – and teachers new to the district – could pay long-term dividends in terms of teacher effectiveness and student success.

“One of the young ladies said it really well,” a committee member added. “Learning classroom management isn’t a one-year thing, and we’ve got to help them. I think maybe we need to look at a longer mentorship for new teachers.”

The group briefly discussed what an expanded mentorship program for new teachers would look like, while others said that an additional goal of ongoing teacher development should be to help identify those teachers most in need of continued development and intervene to help them be more effective.

Several committee members discussed the importance of building strong relationships with students, and one committee member in particular recalled what distinguished some of her own strongest learning experiences when she was a student.

“The places I grew the most were where I knew the teachers valued me,” she said. “You’re not just a name on the roll call, you matter. We’re looking at timelines, benchmarks, the teachers are in a rush, but you sometimes forget that these students who you’re trying to teach are people. But if you build a relationship, you can show them that they are valued.”

Dr. Watson closed the discussion by asking whether the committee members thought that teachers around the district would benefit from hearing this kind of direct feedback from students on their campuses. The committee was in favor, and Dr. Watson and Dr. Hill indicated they would move forward to arrange those meetings.

Although the student panelists left the committee members with plenty of food for thought, Dr. Hill said that the main themes rang out loud and clear.

“Our students want teachers that engage them in the work, and they want teachers that build relationships with them,” she said. “They actually want a learning environment that they can learn in, so they want teachers to manage the learning environment – and manage the students in the learning environment – so that they can all learn.”

She echoed Dr. Watson’s praise for the SAG student representatives, noting that they could always be counted on to speak what was on their minds.

“They’ve talked with us before, but they weren’t rehearsed in any way. What you heard was just their hearts tonight. It was very heartfelt and genuine.”

## **Next Meeting**

The meeting ran longer than planned to give the student panelists plenty of time to speak and answer questions. Committee members were given review copies of the recently approved Board Policy AE (Local) item (on Spring ISD’s Educational Philosophy) but additional planned agenda items – including discussion of the new board policy item, as well as an employee engagement discussion – were deferred.

Dr. Watson said those items and others would receive more attention during the group’s next meeting on Wednesday, April 17, at 4:30 p.m.