

THE GLOUCESTER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Our mission is for all students to be successful, engaged, lifelong learners.

Program Subcommittee Meeting Minutes

Friday, April 10, 2020

Held via Zoom

3:30 p.m.

Members Present

Joel Favazza, Chairman
Samantha Watson, Vice Chairperson
Laura Wiessen, Member

Administration Present

Dr. Richard Safier, Superintendent (3:36)
Gregg Bach, Asst. Superintendent
James Cook (3:41 p.m.)

I. CALL TO ORDER – Chairman Favazza called the meeting to order at 3:31 p.m.

II. REPORTS/DELIBERATIONS/DISCUSSION

- A. Combating Absenteeism** – Mr. Bach stated that he believes chronic absenteeism is an issue that requires community-wide involvement and messaging over a period of time, including by elected officials. He reported that the principals have created their own school-based plans for dealing with chronic absenteeism, including increased outreach and recognition programs. He noted that 30% of GHS students miss 18 or more days of school per year, which has tremendous impact on their education and social/emotional well-being.

Ms. Watson indicated that Attendance Works has many resources on how to address chronic absenteeism and suggested planning a public awareness campaign for the fall. Mr. Bach indicated that Attendance Works also offers consultant work and stated that there is probably money in our current grants for a consultant. He stated that he will look at the status of grant funding and budgets on Monday.

Ms. Wiessen suggested reaching out now to people outside of the School Department, such as the applicants who were not chosen as members of the superintendent screening committee, to brainstorm ideas on how to address chronic absenteeism.

Mr. Bach reported that a committee was previously formed to discuss absenteeism and they have met three times to date. He indicated that the members of that committee include Amy Epstein of the Gloucester Health Center, Nikki Marin from the COMPASS Youth Program, someone from Gloucester Dental Center, PACE teacher Rory Gentile, GHS Principal James Cook, Attendance Supervisor Gail Avery, someone from Wellspring, Nurse Leader Cindy Juncker, the two School Resource Officers, and someone from Justice Resource Institute (JRI).

Mr. Bach also reported on a recent Chamber of Commerce meeting where social/emotional issues and regional coordination were discussed and during which

Project Adventure made a presentation. He indicated that he subsequently met with Project Adventure and the United Way to talk about writing a grant to focus on leadership, mentoring and absenteeism.

Ms. Watson noted that addressing absenteeism is likely to lead to other issues and expressed the importance of “wraparound services” for families. Mr. Cook reported that a root cause analysis was done at the high school level as part of their sustainable improvement plan. Dr. Safier suggested that something be posted on the School Committee Facebook page emphasizing that the community and families should take attendance seriously.

In response to a question from Chairman Favazza about the Program Subcommittee’s role going forward, Mr. Bach stated that if we can get a consultant to come in and talk about addressing absenteeism across the community, that consultant could make recommendations on what School Committee members can do. He indicated that he will call Attendance Works to try to arrange for someone to attend the next subcommittee meeting.

Finally, Ms. Wiessen indicated that she will put something out to MASC to see if anyone has worked with Attendance Works and if there are any best practices.

- B. High School Start Time** – Chairman Favazza stated that the committee needs to decide, based on available information, whether it feels changing the school start time is the right move for the district and, if so, to find out how other districts implemented it, what the steps are, how long it takes, and what the community-wide implications are for such a change. He noted that California was mandated by the state government to implement a later start time.

Ms. Wiessen questioned whether a big change such as this should be made for next year, given the current pandemic situation and the emotional state of families. She would also like to get some updated information on the pros and cons of changing the start time. Chairman Favazza stated that it is his understanding that it would take years for the change to be implemented and suggested looking at districts that have done it to see how it impacts athletics and busing. Ms. Watson noted that Beverly High School starts at 8:15 a.m. and ends at 2:30 p.m., the middle school starts at 8:45 a.m. and ends at 3:00, and elementary schools start at 7:55 a.m. and end at 2:00 p.m.

Chairman Favazza would like to explore the tangible benefits to students and staff of a later start time as well as the ramifications of same. Mr. Cook noted that there is significant evidence that kids are not getting enough sleep but stated that there are mixed results about whether a later start time has an effect on student engagement. He expressed the importance of building awareness and understanding of the benefits of the change before deciding whether there is enough drive to figure out the more difficult aspects of it.

Mr. Bach noted that the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends later start times for middle and high schools and he believes their studies showed a reduction in tardiness and attendance issues. He stated, however, that we would need to figure out how it impacts sports and busing and suggested looking into whether there is a will among regional districts to change their start times. He also suggested getting public feedback on the matter. Mr. Cook noted that Beverly is in our athletic conference and they figured out how to make the change.

Chairman Favazza indicated that he will compile data for the next meeting in support of a later start time and asked Ms. Watson and Ms. Wiessen to try to find some data against it.

- C. Screen Time Safety/Health Issues** – Ms. Watson reported that before the school closure, the West Parish site-based council discussed having speakers come in to talk to elementary teachers and parents about screen time usage and safety and suggested having speakers talk to preschool parents. Ms. Wiessen agreed but stated that it is not a good time to push back at parents about screen time since kids are using screens for remote learning. Chairman Favazza noted that kids now have three hours a day of necessary screen time and he believes more kids will be addicted to screens as a result. Ms. Watson suggested posting ideas on ways for parents to connect with their kids without screens. Mr. Cook noted that screen time and social media usage is addressed in the high school health curriculum. This matter will be discussed further at a future meeting.

III. ADJOURNMENT – On a motion by Ms. Wiessen, seconded by Ms. Watson, it was unanimously

VOTED: By Roll Call Vote

Ms. Watson – yes

Ms. Wiessen – yes

Chairman Favazza – yes

To adjourn the Program Subcommittee Meeting of April 10, 2020 at 4:34 p.m.

All reference documents and reports are filed in the Superintendent's office.

*Maria Puglisi
Recording Secretary*