

The League of Women Voters of Manatee County Education Issues Committee observes the **School Board of Manatee County** meetings for items of interest to citizens and to the League, and notes adherence, or lack of adherence, to good governance procedures and the Sunshine Law. The League also provides feedback to school board members.

Following are the major points from the **School Board Meeting on 1/16/2024**.

ITEMS OF INTEREST

The meeting was called to order by Chair Choate at 10:00 a.m. Ms. Spray read the District's Vision followed by the invocation by Reverend Sam Rainer of the West Bradenton Baptist Church. This was followed by the Pledge of Allegiance.

Recognitions

Mr. Barber introduced a Good News Moment featuring the Church Women United (CWU) of Manatee County and their recent annual Migrant Tea. CWU represents more than 30 churches who meet monthly to celebrate diversity of religion, culture, and race. A video clip of the recent event held at Trinity Methodist Church was shared featuring the migrant children who sang and spoke with pictures of the generous outpouring of gifts that included clothing, hand-made quilts and knitted items. Dr. Cheryl Holloway, President of CWU and the district's Coordinator of Migrant Programs, Mario Mendoza both spoke. In addition to the Migrant Tea, CWU provides support to various non-profits who serve the county's youth and provide Soles for Souls – a new shoe distribution program.

Public Comments

MH – quoted the Bible and referenced gatekeepers that are necessary at public meetings. He extrapolated his comments to wonder who are the gatekeepers to protect children from online predators.

Reports and Presentations

2023-2324 FAST Progress Monitoring 2 (PM2) Mathematics Assessment Results:

Mr. Jensen, Deputy Superintendent Instructional Services, explained the results of the recent second mathematics progress monitoring assessment (PM2). Results are for information purposes and should be used to identify areas that may need additional instruction. He explained the differences between the traditional and accelerated pathways for math

instruction in elementary and middle school with many “on and off ramps.” Students in district operated schools are outperforming the state in 3rd grade. Some districts do testing in January and he will provide updates when those numbers are in. In math, 78% of middle school students are in the acceleration pathway. We rank 10th in state with accelerating students. Students who take accelerated math in middle school do very well with 94% out performing state averages. Results are received by district, school, classroom, and student. Teachers can start ‘drilling down’ as they receive individual student PM2 results by standards and strand results. Ms. K. Johnson, new Executive Director of School Improvement, explained how schools will use the data. Teachers will use comparison of PM1 and PM2 data to gauge where their students are in relation to school goals. Teachers can look at each student and what standards they need more support to move forward. Looking at learning gains will help teachers help students at all levels improve.

District staff responded to board members’ questions. Grades of middle school students taking accelerated math follow them to high school. Results will be discussed at the next principals’ meeting and describe the results and interventions needed. District staff will work with individual schools. PM2 reading assessments will occur in January. High school assessments look different because many students are enrolled in advanced placement and dual enrollment courses. Superintendent Wysong indicated that the district is getting “much more granular data than before.” He cautioned board members from comparing last year’s PM data with this year’s because of many variables such as changes in scoring ranges.

Consent Items Twenty-one items passed 5-0.

Public Comments New Business:

HF – spoke on the amended Policy 2520 regarding Selection and Adoption of Instructional Materials to be considered today. She opined the amended policy is a first good step but needs more work and will not undo the damage that has been done. She cited the example of the graphic novel, Drama, that has been removed at several schools and still available at Manatee and Southeast High Schools. She declared it is not pornography, with one scene of a boy actor standing in for a girl part when the girl quickly ran off, and resulted in a closed mouth kiss with another boy. She went on to explain that there is no procedure available for her, as a citizen or parent, to request that this book be returned to the schools’ shelves. The amended policy does not fix the damage done over the last two years. Decisions to pull books from the shelves should be done in the Sunshine.

SS – a retired teacher from Texas and past middle school librarian, indicated her favorite lesson to teach was on banned books. She contends that not all books are banned, first they are challenged and she stated according to the state the decisions must be made by a committee. School librarians rely on professional judgements of others and cannot read all books in their collection. She indicated she cannot find the list of books removed in Manatee

schools and it should be available. She agreed that parents have the right to restrict books their children can read. She requests the district follow the state statutes.

MN – said she was a district teacher for 38 years and her own children attended Manatee district schools receiving an excellent education. She asked the district to follow state policies and give the actual parents decision making power. Leaving it to one person to challenge a book is not proper. It must involve people reading the book in its entirety and removing from that school only. She said there is an atmosphere of fear with threats to certification and criminal charges so there is erring on the side of caution.

Public Hearing: Consideration to Adopt and Amend School Board Policies - No public comment.

New Business: (Non-Consent Items) Superintendent Recommendations

Approval to Adopt New Policy and Amend School Board Polices – for those addressed in the public hearing, approved 5-0 [LWV note: <https://d2kbkoa27fdvtw.cloudfront.net/manateeschools/9d784c5193b88c83e9b5749e889af9e70.pdf>]

Approval to Amend School Board Policy 2520 - Selection of Instructional Materials – approved 4-1 (Foreman dissenting) [LWV Note: https://legistarwebproduction.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/attachment/pdf/2363972/Policy_2520_1-4-24.pdf]

Mr. Choate described that this amended policy was pulled from the grouping of amended policies because of a board member request. He pointed out he would like a means to alert all board members when this happens.

Speaking to the content of the amendments to SB policy 2520, Ms. Foreman cited multiple conversations with people about the issues still needing to be addressed. She cited “shadow banning” or removing books for reasons other than prescribed by the state. There needs to be parental choice in the policy. Currently as stated, they have no rights. By statute, the school board is responsible yet the board is not taking any actions on any of these. The principals should be recommending, not deciding, plus the time it takes for them to read the books. She said they may need to consider adding a person in Curriculum to do this. Board members need to get copy of objections and reports. She stated she had to ask for them. She indicated she’s not recommending the board should vote on every book. If a book is being banned would like it to come to us and curriculum come to us and review. If act as a board, parents can come to the board. All SACS are not created equal. SAC should be informed but not have decision making input. People who are not parents (only 1 parent asked for a book to be banned) comes from community. She wants to find a way for books to remain and put parent restriction on them until process is completed. She recommends parents’ rights and to beef up support of all in the process. It is not getting any better and we are spending time and money. Books need to stop being removed for other than reasons cited in statutes. The entire book must be

read to determine literary value. She agrees for principals to report ONLY if they decide to remove a book.

Other board members responded. Mr. Choate asked the School District Attorney, Ms. D'Agostino, to confirm the amended policy meets state statute and she affirmed it does. The School Board attorney indicated if decision is made by a committee, it must be in the sunshine; if by one person, it does not. Ms. Spray took exception to saying "banning" vs removing books and she hasn't heard of any threats. Ms. Messenger pointed out the political nature of the laws that led to this issue and that the policy will be a work in progress as the legislature meets and she suggested using this policy as a starting point. Mr. Jensen indicated there is a list on the website of books that have been challenged, however it does not say why the book was removed. Others indicated the need to start with this and continue to change it as needed. Ms. Foreman indicated this policy does not provide for a challenge to put a removed book back on the shelf and does not have a role for the school board. There are objections by people who have not read the book and books are being removed. To Ms. Spray's question, Mr. Jensen confirmed if a book is removed at one school it will be removed or restricted at others.

Approval of Budget Amendments for November 2023. Approved 5-0. Rachel Sellers, Deputy Superintendent of Business Services, explained the amended line items.

Approval of the New Job Description and Position of Coordinator, Project EDGE (MTC) – grant funded. Approved 5-0. Dr Wysong explained the job description as a follow up to the grant approved at a previous meeting, It will be paid for from grant funding.

Approval to Use State of Florida Department of Management Services NASPO ValuePoint Cloud Solutions Agreement Alternate Contract Source 43230000-NASPO-1 6 – ACS to Purchase Data Center Infrastructure, Equipment, Installation and Maintenance and Professional/Technical Services for Infrastructure and Cyber Security Solutions, SDMC No. 24-0099-RG, Estimated in the Amount of \$1,500,000.00, Over an Estimated 5 Year Period (Multiple Funding Sources. Approved 5-0. In response to board members' questions, Mr. Hansen clarified this agreement allows for better pricing and will be used for updating hardware.

New Business (No Superintendent Recommendation)

Approval of Citizens' Financial Oversight Committee's 2022 Annual Report. Approved 5-0. Ms. Spray explained it was thought the report had been approved, but had not.

Approval of Resolution 2023-009 and Updated School Board Member Residence Maps. Approved 3-2 (Foreman and Messenger dissenting) Ms. Foreman had asked this be pulled for an opportunity for reconsideration in light of a report from the League of Women Voters

pointing out the differences in the Manatee Board of County Commissioners' (BOCC) process and the one done previously by the School Board and that using the BOCC maps will disenfranchise 26,000 voters if the BOCC's self-serving maps are used. Ms. Messenger pointed out that today's action was the formal mechanism to make the change and the county map is less balanced than the school board's by data shown and the school board's map was done transparently and that cannot be said for county map.

Updates

Instruction – Mr. Jensen described the offerings on the January 8th Professional Development Day that included early literacy and writing across the curriculum. PM2 Reading Assessment begins this week. Next week is “Celebrate Literacy – Believe in Your Shelf” with guest readers and other activities across the schools. Efforts underway for counselors to maximize time with students. FFA students are participating in the County Fair. Parrish Community High School now has a certified Auto Maintenance Program.

Operations – Mr. Ranaldi gave an update on the success of the Operations Job Fairs with more bus drivers coming on. A virtual Instructional Job Fair will be held January 19. He expressed appreciation for the team work between transportation and school leadership to get everyone home safely in response to the extreme wind event on January 9, the first day back to school. The 20 electric chargers for the e-busses have been completed by FPL. Food Service school menus are celebrating Fair Week and free fair tickets to secondary students. A grant is in the works to increase local food to school program at four Title I schools, a middle school, and a high school.

Legal – Mr. Dye, School Board Attorney indicated he is keeping the board up to speed on several litigation issues and that the north river school site will close by the end of the month.

Superintendent Remarks – Dr. Wysong pointed to the twenty-one consent items approve including additional \$1.25 million in grant money for three projects. He echoed appreciation for performance during Tuesday's storm and explained he authorized the principals to make dismissal decisions based on conditions at their schools. He acknowledged the various ways students participated in the Martin Luther King Jr. celebrations over the weekend, by high school bands and ROTC units in parades, as well as oratorical competition at the Palmetto Youth Center. He reminded all of the January 23 board workshop with the final master board training with Florida School Board Association on January 25 as well as the subsequent January 30 workshop.

Board Comments

Mr. Tatem cited leadership as the reason dismissal went well during the storm, making good judgments with quick changes. He encouraged fellow board members to give their time to non-profits like the “migrant tea ladies.” His safety tip related to the drive to Tallahassee the next

day with hopes the district would allow driving the day before when the distance is long to meetings.

Ms. Foreman acknowledged the good, courteous discussions when they don't agree. She expressed discouragement that the votes went the other way on parent choice and disenfranchised voters. She spoke to the student All Access library pass approved by the BOCC.

Ms. Messenger encouraged everyone to go to the Mantee County Fair. She attended the Lakewood Ranch Library Grand Opening. She sat in on the final day of social studies textbook adoption and expressed appreciation for being able to listen to the conversations that helped her understand the process and makes her a better board member. She reminded everyone the new middle school north of the river has not been named yet and the roads to access schools off of Ft. Hamer Road are completed.

Ms. Spray emphasized that the "new" vehicle donated to MTC was damaged by storm water and will never be tagged or insured for use. She will make her second trip to Tallahassee tomorrow. She attended the MLK banquet at the Palmetto Youth Center. She encouraged all to "be kind to those who can't."

Mr. Choate thanked Dr. Wysong for consistently summarizing the consent items approved on the agenda. He emphasized the importance of PM1 and PM2 assessment results to teachers as they work with their students.

Adjourned at 1:27 p.m.

GOVERNANCE AND SUNSHINE

Ms. Messenger continues to provide procedural guidance to make sure meetings are run well. She twice directed the chair that he was skipping a step during action and sought clarity when another board member misspoke.

Mr. Choate raised the issue of the Board not being notified when an item is pulled, which resulted in a very long and unnecessary discussion. As chair, Mr. Choate can simply tell the Board Clerk to notify the Board when an item is pulled.

Board members appear congenial as they express diverse points of view.

The update on math performance on the latest assessment was well done. We urge the district to go even further and start presenting data by demographic groups.

The League of Women Voters of Manatee County is disappointed that the school board did not take advantage of the opportunity to reconsider the districting maps when they chose the

BOCC maps over their own balanced maps drawn with greater transparency. It's regretful that the decision today will disenfranchise thousands of voters.

Ms. Foreman's concerns about Policy 2520 were well reasoned. We commend her for her focus on parents making decisions for their own children. The question is not if the policy follows statute, but if the suggestions made violate statute. The Board should be acting in the best interest of the community. Counsel's response that a sole decider does not have to be in the sunshine suggests that the Board is not seeking transparency in these decisions. Having a committee that reviews challenged books is allowed in statute, is transparent and allows for public discussion. This policy clearly states that only the original objector can challenge a decision. While that too is in compliance with state statute, does statute ban other objectors? Ms. Messenger said this is a work in progress. When will we see more public discussion and additions to Policy 2520?

Ms. Spray stated that if someone objected to a book it had to trigger something in their mind that they objected to. That is an argument for a parent making the decision for their own child and supports Ms. Foreman's idea that the policy should allow for restricting, not removing the book. A single person and one principal should not be making these decisions for everyone.

It would be helpful for board members to fully understand the process by which school media center collections are constituted and maintained. It would also be helpful to have a full understanding of all of the statutes, including a better understanding of the recent statutes, that impact the selection and review of media materials both in the school library and classroom libraries. We encourage you to continue to refine and update Policy 2520 until a fair and equitable process is achieved that gives broader and factual input into decisions about the removal of books from the library shelves.

This report is sent to the members of the School Board of Manatee County, as it has been since LWV observations began, and to League of Women Voters of Manatee County members, and subscribers to our mailing list. This report is published by The Bradenton Times.

School Board of Manatee County meetings are typically held on the second Tuesday at 10 AM, and on the fourth Tuesday at 5 PM. Meetings are live streamed on Manatee Schools TV, and can be viewed on local cable including Spectrum Channel 646 and Frontier Channel 39. Meetings can also be streamed on the School District of Manatee County App, available for Apple TV, Roku, and Amazon Fire TV devices.