

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 1/30/2024**.

ITEMS OF INTEREST

The meeting was called to order by Chair Choate at 5:00 p.m. Ms. Foreman read the District's Vision followed by the invocation by Youth Pastor, Randy Wilkins of the Gulf Coast Church. The Color Guard of Southeast High School presented the flags and Mr. Choate led the Pledge of Allegiance.

Recognitions

Mr. Barber praised Communications Specialist Melissa Parker, noting that other districts are copying the "Good News" feature she produces. Ms. Parker introduced Kendra Wingate. Ms. Wingate described the project she and her children started in 2013 called "Every Child is Worth Something." Starting with four families at Samoset Elementary, the effort to bring Christmas presents to children has grown to include organizations and individual donors providing over 585 gifts so that every student at Palm View Elementary received a toy as well as gifts to many other children at many other schools. Over the years many students have benefited from the Wingates' generosity of spirit.

Student Celebrations

The Florida Department of Education selects premiere STEM students nominated by their high schools as successfully engaged in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) activities and coursework. Principal Carl Ackerman of Braden River High School spoke about Sheena Kurakula and Callum Wilford. Principal Sharon Scarborough of Manatee High School read a letter from Amy Lu. Sheena Kurakula shared the importance of participating in STEM activities. The students will attend an event in Orlando where they will network with future employers and state college system representatives.

Public Comments

AO – described her participation in Turning Points U.S.A. at Bradenton Christian School. She said the student club is non-partisan and a 501c3 organization whose mission is to identify, educate, train, and organize students to promote freedom.

HW – provided board members with a packet and outlined her concerns with the way the mandatory mental health curriculum is being done in the high schools. She described the Monique Burr curriculum required to be used that takes up to six class periods, diminishing the time for her to teach the core subject students are accountable for learning. The curriculum is meant to be preventative but in her experience many students have already had to deal with issues and the material as presented can be triggering. As a classroom teacher she is not trained as a mental health counselor. She wants parents and community to be aware of the topics being covered in the mental health curriculum and the need for a clear opt out process.

CW – brought concerns about a recent district policy change regarding short term vs. long term substitutes. This is a local district policy change, not a state statute. In the past a substitute hired as a long-term sub (more than 20 days) was paid \$110 a day for 20 days, then \$150/day after that. Now long-term subs must work 30 days before the higher pay rate. In addition, now long-term subs must be certified in the field assigned to get the higher rate, while there are many full-time teachers teaching out of field. With this change she is losing \$1500 for her 59-day subbing position. In addition, lack of a long-term sub status places additional burden on the staff since she does not have access to the electronic tools available to use FOCUS, online grade entry, lesson planning, etc. – all the things that long-term substitutes need to have done.

MM – described a graphic novel, Flamer, that describes a boy who is attracted to another boy, and attempts to slit his own wrist. She stressed the importance of students being able to read stories that reflect their own lives. She expressed fear for every Manatee district child who has seen their stories disappear. She asked the school board to operate in the Sunshine, giving all parents their rights, and not relying only on principals for decisions about books leaving the shelves. Books should be read in their entirety before being considered for removal.

SK – from Women Voices of Southwest Florida, indicated her child graduated from Braden River High School and she home schools her younger children. She said, “A good library will have something in it to offend everyone.” Libraries allow us to explore beyond our own beliefs and should not be an echo chamber. She pointed out one school board member reported perusing a graphic novel and claiming it is “not worth the paper it is written on.” She claimed graphic novels can have a lot of literary value. Generalizing a whole genre indicates the issues are not being taken seriously. A book must be read in its entirety to determine literary value. She hopes all board members can do better.

VL – said she is a Manatee High School graduate and she’s concerned about the number of books being removed and the manner by which they are removed. She supports freedom to read and trusts librarians to curate books. They are the experts. She then read a passage from a banned book, Beloved, by Toni Morrison, the first African-American woman to win a Pulitzer Prize.

JT – introduced herself as a 15-year educator and a media specialist. She read quotes from many of her favorite books. She advocated for the freedom of personal choice and that principals are too encumbered to make reasoned decisions about books.

IM – introduced herself as transgender and knew she was before there were any forms of literature that described that and remembers feeling she was “from outer space.” She advocated for LGBTQ literature that helps find yourself and all need to be educated about the world they are going into. If she had had literature that represented all of us, perhaps she would not have tried to kill herself at 10 or turned to drugs at 21. “Keep books available. Don’t punish. I figured out I was trans without any literature.”

AR – said he is a Sarasota High School Student. He agreed that all books are not always age appropriate for all audiences; however, he wanted to share his story. As a sixth grader he read a book with a queer main character and it resonated. Elected officials need to solve more pressing problems.

AD – introduced herself as a Cornell student and Sarasota high school graduate when she tutored at the Anna Gayle Center every summer. She reminded board members of the numbers of Floridians reading at a third-grade level and that one out of five adults in Manatee County can’t read above a 5th grade level. She suggested they attempt to solve the problems they know are there.

TA – is a teacher at Rowlett Middle School Academy for 10 years and a Christian. Literacy is central to our civilization. Reading enables one to receive illumination, to be educated, to be edified. Censorship never works and is divisive. Trying to protect right wing values can be used against your beliefs. He read from the Bible, Judges 19:29-30, and asked, “Is this too graphic?”

Reports and Presentations

Cherry Becker LLP Financial Audit Update. Audit Committee Chair, Jim Daniel, introduced Anthony Walsh. The audit report indicates that the district financials are in good shape with no weaknesses or deficiencies. He thanked his team and the district staff for their cooperation.

Blackburn Elementary School Construction Update.

Mr. Ranaldi introduced the district lead, who brought up the architect and construction manager to describe the remodel and addition project with a guaranteed maximum price of

\$35,316,867. No new student stations will be added. The main goal is security and no disruption to the ongoing educational programs. Principal Vos expressed her enthusiasm for the project. When Mr. Tatem asked about traffic control, staff indicated that with no increased student stations they have added 40% more capacity for parent drop off/pick up on campus. The campus has seen a decline in enrollment due to charter schools opening in the area. Ms. Messenger voiced her enthusiasm for the project by saying she is happy to see the facility upgraded to match the spectacular programs at Blackburn.

North County Middle School Construction Update.

Mr. Goff introduced the architect and construction manager for the project that is a reuse with some modifications for site needs of the Mona Jain/Sugg Middle School plans. This plan will add student stations and a turn lane due to a traffic study. Also there will be space available for expansion in the long term. This too will be an energy efficient building. Construction will start February 2024 and will be completed July 2025. The guaranteed maximum price is \$68,770,540. Mr. Tatem again voiced concern for traffic issues. Ms. Messenger inquired about support for adding on. Ms. Foreman was assured there will be sidewalks that connect to the school.

2023-2024 FAST Progress Monitoring 2 (PM2) Reading Assessment Results.

Derek Jensen, Deputy Superintendent of Instructional Services, presented the results of the second progress monitoring assessment at the half way point. This will help gauge progress and support making adjustments in the second semester. The data shared indicated progress was made between PM1 and PM2. In comparing the FAST data, there is a narrowing of the gap. For students who have been in the district since VPK there is a higher percentage performing at levels 3 and higher on PM2. Mr. Jensen reminded that the results just arrived and will be digging into the data with principals soon. In response to Ms. Spray's priority of moving students in Level 1 to 3's, Dr. Wysong indicated this is the hardest work. Students continually scoring at level 1 are typically ESE, ELL and those chronically absent. Mr. Choate says they are seeing the fruits of the labor of focusing on early literacy efforts. The PM3 assessment will be held May 13-17.

Consent Items Twenty-one items passed 5-0.

Meeting of the Manatee Leasing Corporation. Chair Choate gaveled out of the regular meeting and into the Leasing Corporation meeting. *Approval of First Amendment to Lease Schedule No. 2023A and Partial Release relating to the School Board's Certificates of Participation, Series 2023A (The "Series 2023A Certificates") (Capital Funds).* Dr. Wysong explained this is step 2 of 3 for paying for COPS funding for Blackburn Elementary project. Passed 5-0.

New Business: (Non-Consent Items) Superintendent Recommendations

Approval of Blackburn Elementary School – Classroom Addition and Renovation- Agreement Between Owner and A.D. Morgan – Amendment 2- Guaranteed Maximum Price, in the Amount of \$35,164,840.25 (Capital Funds). Passed 5-0.

Approval of the Annual Comprehensive Financial Report (ACFR) and All Official Parts Thereof for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 2023 (No Financial Impact). Mr. Tatem acknowledged this is a big item and he is confident the school system is in good financial state. Passed 5-0.

Approval of the District's School Internal Accounts Audit Report as of and for the Year Ended June 30, 2023 (No Financial Impact). Dr. Wysong thanked the district staff and school bookkeepers. Passed 5-0.

Approval of the Revision of the Job Description of Assistant Director Construction Services (No Financial Impact). Dr. Wysong indicated this is an update to make it current. It is not budgeted for this school year, but will fill the position using funds for an unfilled planner position for the remainder of the year.

Updates

Instruction – Mr. Jensen reminded everyone that last week was Literacy week and thanked all of the volunteer readers who promoted literacy. He announced the following events: Feb. 3 – STEM Expo at MTC from 1-3; Feb 13 – District Robotics Tournament from 9-4; Feb. 1 – MTC Winter Graduations; Feb. 7 – Bradenton Reads ribbon cutting, 7p.m. at City Hall; Feb.5-9 is National School Counselor Week.

Operations – Mr. Ranaldi said Human Resources filled 12 positions from last week's Operational Job Fair. He announced upcoming job fairs: Transportation, Matske Center, February 14, 9 am – 1pm; Para and Operation, Wakeland, February 22, 2 pm – 5 pm; Teacher and Para, Mar 16 – 9 am –1 pm.

Legal – Mr. Dye asked the chair and superintendent to sign documents after the meeting.

Superintendent Remarks – Dr. Wysong indicated that within the consent items, the board ratified the ASCME bargain that included attendance incentives for bus drivers and mechanics and approved the K-12 Science textbook adoption plan. He gave kudos to Ms. Sellers and her staff for the good job with all of the reporting. In January, schools began using the new Threat Management Model, finishing the training on time. He has notified FLDOE that Manatee County School District is 100% in compliance with class size. He described his many visits to schools. He reminded about the Friday workshop with two updates tied to strategic plan goals. A shade workshop will also be held in February on security, cybersecurity and collective bargaining. He announced the retirement of his assistant Laura Eaton and thanked her for staying during the superintendent transition.

Board Comments

Ms. Foreman reminded board members she will attend a meeting for cybersecurity in Tallahassee Feb. 12-18. She thanked the people who came to speak concerning the library policy and suggested another workshop. Mr. Jensen had suggested doing it after the legislative session. She indicated she is not going away on this. She acknowledged the good Master Board training sessions that have concluded.

Ms. Messenger joined in the literacy celebration last week and read at Palmetto Elementary – “a nice reminder of what we do.”

Mr. Tatem thanked Ms. Eaton. He asked everyone to put safety first, slow down and be safe. He said there’s not a lot of things that keep him up late at night regarding the school board and that is good.

Ms. Spray also acknowledged Literacy Week and that character day at Palm View was quite entertaining with everyone dressed up as different characters. With tennis season starting, she plans to watch practices. She expressed pride in individuals retiring and their great dedication.

Mr. Choate said he was impressed with the students and their concentration when he visited Bayshore Elementary School. He expressed his admiration for elementary teachers and that there is great stuff going on in schools.

Meeting adjourned at 8:35 p.m.

GOVERNANCE AND SUNSHINE

Although the meeting was lengthy, the meeting was well run and progressed smoothly. Board members were congenial.

Once a presentation is ended, we suggest asking that the slide being referenced be shown again. In addition, when splitting the screen with data slides and the speaker, the information on the slide is difficult to see by viewers at home.

The observers have noted difficulty in understanding Ms. Spray’s comments at times. Perhaps the microphone needs adjustment or she needs to speak more directly into the microphone. When she is shuffling papers while she speaks, the paper shuffling is heard over her voice.

Ms. Spray would be more helpful to the board’s discussion with a better understanding and preparation when discussing student assessment data. She would provide a better service to the community if she would study the data and write down succinct comments and/or questions before the board meeting so that her statements are coherent and sound well thought out.

Mr. Tatem continues to ramble and appears not to listen to the answers given to his questions by a well-prepared staff. An example is taking his question about a turn lane at Blackburn Elementary and extrapolating that to every project without considering what had been said about the specific project under discussion. The observers frequently find it difficult to capture the specific point of his comments. We do acknowledge that he himself admits to rambling. These habits are not productive and lead to unnecessarily lengthening the meeting.

Ms. Messenger provided a model of a board member making a positive and enthusiastic statement in support of the district schools when she pointed out that the Blackburn facilities will now match the quality of the program at Blackburn.

We observed and appreciated Mr. Choate's comment that high school students are burned-out with testing and he asked relevant questions. Like him, we are also not sure there is an answer.

Ms. Foreman's comment and compliment of Financial Audit update was specific and not just a general thank you. Pointing out the precise reasons - being on time, without any trouble, and excellent and helpful observations and suggestions - in her acknowledgment increases the likelihood of repeated good performance.

The board is fortunate to have district staff who provides them with full, accurate, and well analyzed information. We encourage board members to take advantage of the expertise within the district to be better informed and prepared. Deputy Superintendents Sellers, Ranaldi, and Jensen consistently come well prepared and have information at their fingertips to respond to board members' questions. An example at this meeting was Mr. Jensen's data presentation that included a breakdown of information about state, district operated, and charter schools, as well as the impact of VPK and absenteeism on student performance. Ms. Messenger expressed her appreciation for the breakdown of information.

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.