

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 August 6, 2024**.

### ITEMS OF INTEREST

The meeting was called to order by Chair Choate at 10:02 a.m. followed by his reading of the Mission Statement. Before he began the meeting, he said his thoughts and prayers were hoping everyone has been safe these last few days. He thanked Dr. Wysong for making the flexible decisions necessary and Mr. D'Amico, Director of Safety and Security, and his team for all of their work with the shelters that were open.

**Invocation:** Reverend Rob Blackwood, chaplain at St. Anthony's Hospital in St. Petersburg, gave a virtual invocation. Reverend Blackwood said he was a product of Manatee County Schools and a graduate of Manatee High School.

### Recognitions / Student Celebrations

**1. Ernie Withers**, retired General Manager of Mercedes Benz of Sarasota and creator of the Defibrillate Manatee Foundation, was honored by the School Board for the generous donation of 21 Automated External Defibrillators (AED's), 20 AED Training Simulators, 20 CPR Mannequins and 20 First Aid Kits. While attending a Chamber event at Pirates' City in Bradenton on February 21, 2023, Mr. Withers went into cardiac arrest. Pittsburgh Pirates Medical Director Dr. Patrick DeMeo performed CPR and used an AED to revive Mr. Withers. He was rushed to Manatee Memorial where he was treated and one week later, he threw out the first pitch at a Pittsburgh Pirates Spring Training game. He demonstrated the audio directions for the AED and showed the latest version of the CPR mannequin.

**2.**The School Board and Superintendent honored **Mr. Joseph A. Blitzko**, CPA, for his dedicated service to the district's Audit Committee. Mr. Blitzko is a retired partner of Deloitte & Touche, LLP, where he worked for 35 years in Pittsburgh, Los Angeles and Louisville. He is a member of the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants and the Florida Institute of Certified Public Accountants. Since his retirement, he has remained active professionally with various part-time Chief Financial Officer and consulting engagements. Additional community activities have included Junior Achievement, Grant Panelist for the Sarasota County Tourist Development Cultural Arts Program and Member of the Arts and Cultural Alliance of Sarasota County Grants Policy Committee. Ms. Foreman said it was bittersweet to see him leave as he

was an original member of the committee in 2013 when the district was in financial straits and volunteered to be chair when no one else would. Mr. Blitzko thanked the hard-working accounting district staff and the guidance of the Superintendent and the Board in taking the district from an 8 million dollar deficit to a fund balance today of over 100 million dollars. Superintendent Wysong gave Mr. Blitzko a superintendent's coin.

## **Public Comments - none**

## **Reports and Presentations**

**1. Translate Live and ESOL Updates** Dr. Laurie Breslin, Executive Director of Student Support and Family Engagement, and Ms. Debra Estes, Director of ESOL, Migrant and Dual Language Programs, presented Translate Live and ESOL updates.

An English Language Learners (ELL) slide given as an introduction showed there were 7,502 ELL students enrolled (14.1% of the total district enrollment) as of May 2024. Currently, 3,382 ELL students have been enrolled for less than two years. This number is expected to increase in August, with more families registering students. 4,984 students have been exited from the ESOL program in accordance with Rule 6A-6.0903. 12,486 total students are current ELL students or former ELL students. This means that 23.4% of all students in Manatee County were, or are, an English Language Learner.

The priorities are: to focus support on student achievement through language acquisition; compliance with state and federal regulation; assist with assessments; graduation support (last year 30 students met graduation requirements by alternative portfolio assessments); and community and family involvement. ESOL students are making learning gains at the same rate as all students – 52% ELA and 53% Math. There are five bilingual elementary schools in the district and findings so far demonstrate dual language students outscore other students long term. The largest plus of dual language learning is students will have a step up when seeking employment.

Translate Live: Translate Live are hand held tablets that will translate into 124 languages; there are 99 different languages spoken by students and their families in Manatee district schools. The tablets were purchased with Title IV funds and are in all schools and in most district departments. They can be used to support student registration, in conferences, by clinic staff as well as in SAC and PTA meetings. There are some that will also do text-to-speech for hearing impaired. Principals, Assistant Principals and some staff were trained on the tablets this summer and are extremely enthusiastic to use them in their schools.

[LWV Note: Ms. Estes' presentation can be viewed [here](#).]

## **2. 2024-2025 Instructional Priorities and Initiatives**

Mr. Derek Jensen, Deputy Superintendent of Instruction, presented updates on 2023-2024 state accountability, and included instructional priorities and initiatives. Mr. Jensen reviewed many of the slides he presented at the last board meeting. He stated instructional priorities for the 2024-2025 academic goals will be reinforced by: meetings 1:1 with Principals on learning

gains; graduation rate; students performing below expectation; and, weekly data review meetings on student achievement data and program implementation.

There will also be new data monitoring approaches on assessment and accountability data tables, (Multi-Tiered Student Support (MTSS). Early Warning Systems, Additional Formative Assessment tools as well as item banks for teachers.

“Instructional Rounds,” similar to those used by medical professionals, will be initiated.

A one-page district-wide Instructional Priority page will be used by all teachers K-12. It is aligned to the three key areas of What to Teach, How to Teach, and How to Plan.

[ LWV Note: Mr. Jensen’s presentation can be viewed [here](#).]

### **New School Year Updates: Safety, Transportation, Communications**

**Safety:** Paull D’Amico, Chief Officer Safety and Security, overviewed the EVOLV Security Alarm System. This same system is used at professional events and at Disney. A video will be sent to parents prior to the start of school explaining the program. Two systems will be installed at each high school for daily use and at extra-curricular events. The purpose of the system is three-fold: prevent potential weapons being brought into the school; deter the act of bringing weapons into the school; and, reduce the potential for a violent incident.

**Communication:** Mr. Barber, Communications Director, showed the school banners and posters reading “Safety over Secrets” which will be at all schools. Mr. Tatem thanked Ms. Spray for initiating the concept.

Mr. Ranaldi, Deputy Superintendent for Operations, and Mr. Chapman, Executive Director of Administration, described the “Let’s Talk APP” platform which will improve customer service, interactions and metrics. An example was used with transportation. A parent can call the department, give their name, phone number and child’s name and question. A live person will then respond to the question, i.e. why bus # is late. This format will ‘triage’ phone calls and speed up getting to a person who can answer a parent’s question. Once utilization of “Let’s Talk APP” has been refined, it will be expanded throughout the District.

**Transportation:** Mr. D’Amico, Chief Officer Safety and Security, explained the new traffic cameras which are installed at 30 elementary schools. When the light is flashing for school zones, they will record vehicles going ten miles over the speed limit and drivers will be issued a \$100 ticket. Harvey Elementary will not have the cameras until October due to construction on Moccasin-Wallow Rd.

A poster was shared showing when vehicles must stop for buses loading and unloading students. No student is required to cross a four-lane divided highway to board or deboard a bus. On May 8 the district carried out the state mandate to record a one-day illegal passing of busses. There were 270 illegal passes on that one day.

**Consent Items:** Twenty-seven items were approved 5-0.

**New Business: (Non-Consent Items)**

Approval of Revisions of Job Descriptions in the Information Technology Department (No Financial Impact) approved 5-0.

**New Business:**

**1. Approval of the Appointment of Audit Committee Member:** approved 5-0

Mr. John F. Baliga, Jr. was appointed to be a new member of the Audit Committee. Ms. Foreman said he had children in schools in the district, was a CPA with experience, and she met with him. She said he would be a very good addition to the committee.

**2. Approval to Issue a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) for Internal Audit Services:** approved 5-0

There was a discussion of whether the Auditor Selection Committee should make the recommendation to the board. The members amended the motion to reflect this.

**3. Approval to issue a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) for External Audit Committee:** approved 5-0

**4. Discussion and Agreement of Replacement of Board Member Messenger on the Manatee Children’s Services Committee:** approved 5-0

After discussion as to whether the school district member of the committee must be a school board member or a person on district staff approved by the school board, it was decided the Chair Choate would serve the remainder of Ms. Messenger’s term. He would take Mr. Omar Edwards, Associate Director Strategic Planning, and well known in the community, to the meetings and ask the question. It was felt by both the board and the Superintendent that Mr. Edwards would be the ideal person to serve on that board.

**5. Consideration of Naming of Bayshore High School Football Field (No Financial Impact).**

A separate vote was taken for each person in the naming of the field “Plaster/Green Field” due to Mr. Green not meeting the stated criteria of having been retired 5 years; he has been retired 4 years. There was discussion as to whether in naming a facility something should come to light that there was an issue with that person, and she did not think the District should continue that process. Mr. Plaster was approved 4-1 with Ms. Spray dissenting, and Mr. Green was approved 4-1 with Ms. Spray dissenting.

**Updates:**

**Instruction:** Mr. Jensen, Deputy Superintendent Instructional Services, stated his update was his presentation. He wished the teachers, students, and school administrators a wonderful start to the school year.

**Operations:** Mr. Ranaldi, Deputy Superintendent Operations, recapped recruitment to date in Human Resources. Instructional session had 161 attendees with 13 job offers of 7 teachers

and 6 paraprofessionals. Support had 7 hires for transportation drivers. The call center is up and running as of today and dry runs for busses are occurring today. He thanked the Board for approving the 2024-2029 Instructional Technology Plan. Food Service served 214,708 meals this summer, a 39% increase over last summer. He thanked the operational staff who manned three storm shelters over the past several days and the EOC team who were critical elements in keeping Dr. Wysong and himself up to date during the storm.

**Legal:** Mr. Dye said he is working on developing a procedural manual for new, incoming board members. He asked current board members to think back to their first days serving on the board and give him a list of what they would like to have known.

**Superintendent Remarks:** Dr. Wysong said he knew there were long presentations but wanted the board to have all the information for starting this school year. He also thanked them for approving 27 items and highlighted the TSS system piloted by six schools last year and will be in use at all schools this year that will allow teachers to individualize instructional interventions. A second major approval was for locking in the price for constructing an elementary school at Artisan Lakes. Mills and Miller Elementary and Nolan Middle Schools were opened as shelters during the storm. District Administrators did overnight shifts at these schools so principals would not be overburdened and overworked while trying to start a new school year with their respective staff. He invited Board Members to be at the Matzke Complex at 5:30 a.m. on Monday to wave-off the busses as they begin the 2024-2025 school year. He will get on a bus to Parrish High School to celebrate that school getting its first “A” grade ever. Two district staff members will be assigned to each school to check in with them at the beginning and end of the first day of school.

## **Board Comments**

**Ms. Messenger** thanked staff for all that was done to make the shelters function well. She wanted the public to know it is the school district and not the county employees who man the shelters.

**Mr. Tatem** also thanked shelter staff. His safety tip was to budget more travel time when needing to get to a site at a specific time. It will decrease your tension.

**Ms. Foreman** is looking forward to another school year. She reminded everyone of the speed limit in school zones. She is looking forward to the 5:30 a.m. send off of the bus drivers.

**Ms. Spray** thanked retirees. She is not looking forward to the 5:30 a.m. time on Monday but she will be there. She thanked Dr. Wysong for keeping the board in the loop throughout the storm.

**Mr. Choate** received a text from County Commissioner Rahn thanking him for all the District did with shelters throughout the storm. Mr. Choate also thanked Dr. Wysong for keeping them in the loop. He sent thoughts and prayers to all who suffered damages. He also thanked all the teachers for putting up with the changing information on reporting to school for their first day on Monday. He is looking forward to the new school year.

**Adjournment:** 2:06 p.m.

## **GOVERNANCE AND SUNSHINE**

Although it was a long board meeting, we noted board members asking questions for both information and clarification throughout the presentations, i.e. Ms. Foreman asked how late student arrivals would be screened; Mr. Choate asked how parents would know the “Let’s Talk APP” was available, Mr. Tatem asked if teachers were paid for attending summer professional development; Ms. Messenger asked how money for teacher supplies is given to teachers; Ms. Spray asked to have ‘elective courses’ explained to her during ELL presentation.

We appreciate Mr. Choate’s response to the “Translate Live” tablet stating it would be a gamechanger for teachers and others who interact with ELL students and parents. He wished he had it when he was teaching.

We observed Ms. Spray repeatedly asking questions requesting information that had already been provided, as well as repeating questions that had been asked by other Members. This occurs at most Board Meetings.

We appreciate Ms. Messenger’s thanking Mr. Jensen for the one-page, concise guide for teachers in “What to Teach, How to Teach, and How to Plan to Teach.” She stated that is what teachers need to guide them toward meeting the district goals for student achievement.

It would greatly benefit the viewing public to have the names and titles of all District employees and other presenters displayed on screen as they are speaking.