

**GOVERNOR'S ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR EXCEPTIONAL CITIZENS (GACEC)  
GENERAL MEMBERSHIP MEETING  
9:00A.M., October 9, 2021  
HYBRID MEETING**

**MINUTES**

**MEMBERS PRESENT:** Nancy Cordrey, Matt Denn, Bill Doolittle, Ann Fisher, Cory Gilden, Terri Hancharick, Jessica Heesh-Mensack, Molly Merrill, Mary Ann Mieczkowski, Beth Mineo, Trenee Parker, Erika Powell, Jennifer Pulcinella and Brenn  Shepperson.

**OTHERS PRESENT:** Nancy Smith/DDOE, Robert Overmiller/former GACEC member, Erin Weaver/GACEC applicant, Joyce Leatherbury/DDOE; Jalee Pernol/DDOE; Rachel Gibson/Woodbridge School District; Michelle Allman/Laurel School District; Lisa Lawson/Brandywine School District

**STAFF PRESENT:** Pam Weir/ Executive Director, Kathie Cherry/Office Manager and Lacie Spence/Administrative Coordinator.

**MEMBERS ABSENT:** Al Cavalier, Karen Eller, Tika Hartsock, Kristina Horton, Genesis Johnson, Thomas Keeton, Maria Olivere, Jill Scannell, Laura Waterland, Erik Warner and Lindsay Williamson

Chairperson Ann Fisher called the general membership meeting to order at 9:06am. Ann welcomed everyone to the October general membership meeting portion of the Annual Planning Retreat. Ann presented Robert Overmiller with a plaque thanking him for his many years of dedicated service to the GACEC. A **motion was made and approved** to accept the October agenda. Ann then asked for a **motion to approve** the June meeting minutes. The **motion was approved**. A **motion was made and approved** to accept the June, July and August financial reports.

**PUBLIC COMMENT**

There was no public comment for October.

**DIRECTOR'S REPORT**

Executive Director, Pam Weir, described some of the events of her first five months in her new role. Those activities include completing initial Technical Assistance (TA) training through a collaboration with national TAs for the Board and GACEC staff; securing a position on the national State Advisory Panel (SAP)/State Interagency Coordinating Council (SICC) work group; and convening Member Orientation for Council members that included a presentation from the Public Integrity Commission. The Board and GACEC staff have been assisting her to understand and complete several other high-level projects that the GACEC is responsible for. Pam expressed that she continues to onboard and learn more about the Council and the activities of each of the committees. She thanked GACEC staff for being patient and supportive of her

while she learns her role. Pam asked for a motion to convene an Executive Session to meet with the Board to debrief on recent activities, discuss Retreat follow-up and allow the Board to continue to onboard and assist with continuous learning. Bill Doolittle **made a motion** for the Board to convene in Executive Session to train and orient the new Executive Director as deemed necessary by the Chair and requested by the Executive Director. Jennifer Pulcinella **seconded the motion**. **A motion was made and approved**. Pam will reach out to the Board members to schedule times.

## **CHAIR REPORT**

Chairperson Ann Fisher welcomed and thanked our newest members; Jessica Heesh-Mensack, Molly Merrill and Erik Warner. Ann reminded the Council that October is Disability History and Awareness month in Delaware. Ann encouraged everyone to share the Newsletter that was recently distributed by GACEC staff to help spread awareness. Ann reviewed the dates for next year's meetings and asked for a **motion to approve**. **The motion was approved**. The tentative date for next year's Annual Planning Retreat is Saturday, October 8, 2021. **A motion was made** to approve the Department of Education (DOE) speakers for the upcoming year. **The motion was approved**. The Disabilities Law Program (DLP) is inviting comments on the proposed Protection and Advocacy for persons with Developmental Disabilities (PADD), Protection and Advocacy of Individual Rights (PAIR), Protection and Advocacy for Individuals with Mental Illness (PAIMI), Protection and Advocacy for Traumatic Brain Injury (PATBI), and Protection and Advocacy for Assistive Technology (PAAT) Program 2022 priorities. A link will be sent out to members to provide feedback before comments are due to be submitted on November 15<sup>th</sup>.

The 2021-2022 Council Goals were discussed. We will send out a revised copy with the changes that were discussed before the November meeting. Terri Hancharick added that we need to make a concerted effort to add a self-advocate to our group. Matt Denn asked if DOE could send a request out to the Educational Diagnosticians in the high schools making them aware that we are seeking a self-advocate and letting them know what the expectations would be. Mary Ann Mieczkowski will task Dale Matusevich with this request. Erika Powell suggested reaching out to the Partners in Policy Making Program. Pam added that the Membership Committee is currently drafting a membership process which will include additional appointment categories being added to the GACEC. Pam and the Membership Committee will be meeting with Boards and Commissions in the near future to further discuss this.

## **DOE REPORT**

Assisting Mary Ann Mieczkowski were guest speakers, Joyce Leatherbury and Jalee Pernol, from DDOE. They presented on Delaware's 2019 Annual Determination, Indicator 8- Parent Engagement, Regulations Update, Stakeholder Involvement in the State Performance Plan/Annual Performance Report (SPP/APR) and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). Please see the attached PowerPoint for the full DOE report. Matt Denn asked Mary Ann if there is a document that allows us to view the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores of each state. Mary Ann stated she would go on the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) website to check, but she does not recall seeing states ranked in order according to the NAEP scores. Matt added that it would be helpful to know what other, higher scoring states

were doing in order to help our children objectively succeed to the maximum degree. Mary Ann would be happy to invite a NAEP representative to a future GACEC meeting for additional discussion. Pam Weir stated that she could share the link from OSEP's Grads 360 program, which shows the determinations and APR data from each state.

Pam asked Mary Ann if there was a timeline when we can expect to see the one-pagers that DOE and the Parent Information Center (PIC) are working together to create. Mary Ann added that they are currently working on this process and expect them to be done sometime in October. Members also discussed potential strategies to improve parent participation in surveys. Some ideas included sending the survey in a more identifiable envelope, asking more family friendly questions, and distributing a pre-addressed survey at the IEP meeting and explaining the importance for them to return it, so it does not have to be completed immediately after an IEP meeting. Bill Doolittle would like to re-evaluate the pilot study that was done in Delaware when having surveys filled out directly after Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings. It would be helpful to compare Hawaii's pilot, which had a much higher success rate. Matt Denn inquired about if the GACEC can have access to the results of the DOJ/DDOE survey. Mary Ann replied that DOE can present this information at a future meeting once the results are compiled. In addition, Matt and Pam asked if anyone is responsible for the monitoring and enforcing of the State required Parent Councils for each district. There is no official monitoring of these Councils other than the law stating that it is required. Matt added that it is DOE's responsibility to enforce this statute. Mary Ann answered that she would set up a system for DOE to receive the initial Parent Council letter sent out at the beginning of each year and at least one agenda. Pam asked if there was a list-serve for who should receive the Parent Council surveys. Mary Ann replied that the Special Education Directors would have the detailed information about the Parent Councils. Ann thanked the DOE for their reports.

## **DISTRICT PERSONNEL REPORT**

### *Covid-19: Lessons Learned, Barriers and Plans Ahead*

Guest speakers were invited to give updates on how COVID-19 has impacted education including: lessons learned, barriers and plans ahead. Rachel Gibson, from the Woodbridge School District, shared that the learning loss and divide is evident. The district is focusing on priority standards and noted that students with disabilities are more likely to experience regression. Not all students were able to be captured during remote learning. Rachel stated that concern for the mental health and well-being for both students and adults was prevalent. Much was lost including jobs, financial stability, learning and more. This district showed compassion and grace, which was the priority over academics during the last year and a half. Woodbridge School District focused on building relationships and creating a stronger community so families felt more connected. Rachel added that the biggest takeaway was that kids need to be in school as much as possible. Almost 80 percent of special education students are attending in person school for the year. The District offered Extended School Year (ESY) services to all students. All students should now have access to a device and the internet. Rachel discussed some of the barriers that Woodbridge faced during the pandemic. One of the barriers was reaching kids who "fell off the grid." Another challenge was preventing regression for students with disabilities and finding creative ways to accommodate them remotely. It was difficult for children who live in rural areas to have access to internet for remote learning. Challenges to mental health and well-

being was another area of concern within the District because children lost support and access from school-based services and supports. Rachel noted that some of the plans are establishing a very strong MTSS system, increased social and emotional support, focus on learning loss and providing professional development to all staff on teaching diverse learning.

Michelle Allman, Director of Special Education for the Laurel School District, shared that they have learned how resilient children and teachers are. Parents have complained about students needing to wear masks, but there has not been much pushback from the students. Laurel is now a one-to-one district. Every student now has a laptop and the curriculum is housed on the Schoology online platform. Jetpacks have been provided for students who did not have internet access. Laurel School District is hosting family tech nights and parent university nights for parents to better support their children. Michelle added that parent attendance has increased using online meetings. Having this option has allowed parents more flexibility to participate in meetings. Teachers have learned to adjust to teaching in new ways using new platforms. The District has been flexible with learning styles and what options best suit families. Michelle stated that some students have excelled at online learning. More students started getting jobs and working towards being productive citizens in the community and learning outside of the school walls. Medically fragile students have excelled in the comfort of their own home. On the other hand, there were many students who regressed greatly. Michelle also spoke about the barriers that the Laurel School District has faced. Students were isolated for so long and some had a hard time adjusting back to the new normal. There have been multiple fights in school as a result of confrontation that happened online prior to students returning to in person learning. Emotional growth, communication skills and mental stability are areas of concern that have presented. The Opportunity Grants have allowed for behavioral health coordinators to be hired at each school. Teachers are finding it difficult to instruct when students are struggling mentally. The impact of unstructured learning was underestimated. Michelle stated that the District has lost many good teachers and bus drivers with multiple openings left to fill. The school employees have to fill in the gaps when needed while managing all of their other responsibilities. The Laurel School District has been in a day-to-day mode, making real time decisions to improve the programming that is in place and thinking outside the box to accommodate needs. Michelle noted that they are focusing on creating a strong MTSS program to ensure students are getting the appropriate supports that they need. One of Michelle's biggest goals for this year is to recruit, train and retain special education teachers.

Lisa Lawson, Assistant Superintendent from the Brandywine School District, spoke with Council on how her district has handled the pandemic over the last year. Brandywine made the decision not to have a volunteer virtual only option for students. There is a medical exemption for the virtual learning if needed. The District has a temporary homebound option for students, as well. They have a strong belief for in-person learning. There have been some unexpected conversations that have occurred recently, including taking legal action against schools due to the Governor's mask mandate. The onslaught of the board meeting public comments around initiatives with diversity, equity, inclusion, and restorative justice practices was not anticipated. The Critical Race Theory is another unexpected topic that the district had to navigate. Administrators have had to multi-task to support teachers, nurses and families. The impact of the 18-month absence of in person school is being felt. Safety has been the number one priority for bringing students back in. Administrators are struggling to have a work/life balance.

Teachers have seen the behavioral effects of students who missed their kindergarten year. Brandywine launched an initiative for teachers to focus on social and emotional learning for the first two weeks of school. Lisa added that the District has had massive challenges with quarantines and isolations. It is difficult not to be overly cautious with sending students home who may have symptoms of COVID-19. They have found that with the older students it has been difficult to get them off of the technology to be able to engage and communicate in the classroom. Nurses and coordinators seem to be in the most difficult of circumstances. They are maxed out. School nurses are collecting the data for the Department of Public Health (DPH). Special Education coordinators have provided information on Long Covid and how to handle those circumstances. Acceleration versus remediation has been another topic of discussion that is a concern. Parents have been grateful for students to get back to in person learning and have some semblance of “normal.” This has provided a level of relief for parents to not have the dual role. A challenge for parents is that they are having to leave work and pick children up from school and have them tested if they show any signs of COVID-19. Trenee Parker added that she would be glad to connect any of the districts with additional resources to help students. One example is adding links to the virtual learning platforms where additional resources are provided for youth or those who may be concerned about them. Lisa added that the Brandywine School District has Gaggle Alert, which is a mechanism that identifies when students type key words that will send an alert so parents can be notified with any concerns. Jessica Heesh-Mensack added that it would be great if there were platforms where information such as this could be shared among districts across the state to share ideas and support one another. Mary Ann Mieczkowski noted that there are different platforms that are utilized at DOE, including the Special Education Leadership meetings called Communication and Collaboration Network (CCN), which meets monthly.

Ann thanked our presenters for attending and sharing this useful information.

### **COMMITTEE REPORTS**

There were no Committee reports for this month.

Ann thanked all members and guests for attending. **A motion was made and approved** to adjourn the meeting at 3:30pm.