

**MINUTES
STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION
COUNCIL OF BASIC EDUCATION**

**333 Market Street | 1st Floor
Harrisburg, PA 17126**

September 8, 2021

The meeting was called to order at 1:43 p.m. by Council Chair Dr. Lee Williams.

Attending:

James Agras
Carol Aichele
Nathan Barrett
Jamie Bracey-Green
Reva Gandhi

Pamela Gunter-Smith
Sarah Jordan
Jeffrey Keeling
Maureen Lally-Green
Hon. Mark Longietti
Hon. Scott Martin

Jonathan Peri
Eva Rankin
Hon. Curt Sonney
Karen Famer White
Lee Williams
Hon. Lindsey Williams

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes of the July 14, 2021, meeting of the Council of Basic Education were approved on an **Aichele/Hon. Martin** motion.

COMMITTEE REPORT
COMMITTEE ON ACADEMIC STANDARDS/CHAPTER 4

Dr. Lee Williams, Chair of the Committee on Academic Standards/Chapter 4, reported that the Committee met earlier in the day to discuss next steps on proposed amendments to Chapter 4 that seek to update the current academic standards for Science and Technology and Environment and Ecology to align with current research and best practices in science education. Dr. Williams noted that proposed new standards were published for public comment on June 5, 2021, and said the Board received just over 1,400 comments from educators, environmental organizations, professional associations, members of the General Assembly, the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, concerned citizens, and the Independent Regulatory Review Commission.

Dr. Williams said the Committee heard from Judd Pittman, Special Consultant to the Secretary of Education for STEM, who provided background on the structure of the proposed new standards relative to the current standards. Dr. Williams said the Committee then reviewed public comments that expressed concern with whether certain content related to environment, ecology, and agriculture was either omitted or weakly lined in the new proposed standards. To address these stakeholder concerns, the Committee directed the Department of Education to reengage the Science Standards Content and Steering Committees – advisory bodies of content

experts previously appointed by the State Board of Education – to develop additional recommendations for its consideration.

The Committee adopted a detailed charge to the Content and Steering Committees that identified the specific content-related concerns raised by stakeholders and defined a scope of work for the advisory bodies limited to reviewing those concerns as part of public comment. Dr. Williams said the charge to the Committees grants the advisory bodies latitude to determine how best to address the concerns raised by stakeholders by considering adding a fifth domain to the Integrated Standards for grades 6-12 or through an alternative construct determined by the Committees. To maintain timely progress on the work on Chapter 4, the advisory committees was charged with preparing recommendations to present to the Committee at a special meeting on December 1, 2021.

REPORT OF THE DEPUTY SECRETARY FOR ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

Dr. Sherri Smith, Acting Deputy Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education, reported on the following issues:

2021-2022 School Year

Dr. Smith shared that with schools returning to in-person instruction, the goal remains to keep students in the classroom, which comes with many challenges for parents, students, and school leaders. Beyond the virus, schools are facing learning gaps and concerns about students' social and emotional well-being. Additionally, Dr. Smith said schools have been provided with many varying federal grants which take time to organize and expend appropriately. Dr. Smith said the Department continues to develop guidance templates and resources to support schools in addressing these challenges and to assist in mitigating student learning gaps, such as the Accelerated Learning Toolkit and the ESSA GEERS Extra, which provides frequent communications with reminders, resources, information and guidance on developing, implementing, and monitoring funding provided through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) and the Governor's Emergency Education Relief (GEER) funds.

Annual Reports on Special Education Due Process Hearings and Gifted Education Compliance Monitoring

Dr. Smith presented annual reports on the number of special education due process hearings and gifted education compliance monitoring, as required by Chapter 14 and Chapter 16, respectively. Data on special education due process cases from the 2020-21 school year showed a decrease in the number of cases from the previous school year, with a reduction from 977 to 840 cases. Regarding gifted education compliance monitoring, Dr. Smith shared the 10 school districts were randomly selected for compliance audits in 2020-21. She further noted that the Department resolved four complaints filed regarding gifted education and that one open complaint against a district remains pending. Finally, Dr. Smith provided a snapshot of summary data on gifted education due process requests and outcomes.

Hon. Maureen Lally-Green asked if the Department provided any special guidance on compensatory education in response to the COVID-19 pandemic impacting the provision of specialized services. Dr. Smith shared that the Department asked Intermediate Units to work with schools on ways to provide extra education students may need to address any gaps in learning through summer schools, after school help, or tutoring.

PRESENTATION
HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS AND
EXTENUATING CIRCUMSTANCES

Brian Campbell and Rich Maraschiello, with the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, provided an update on state assessments as required by Chapter 4. They reminded the Council that the administration of state assessments was waived by the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) in 2019-2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and that the testing window for the 2020-2021 school year was extended into the fall. As state assessments are still being administered by some districts, Mr. Campbell said the Department will make a more detailed report on state assessments after the results are made available to the Department in January 2022. Mr. Campbell said disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, including anticipated lower participation in state assessments due to infection rates, closure policies, opt-out and test refusal trends, and shifts in the mode of instructional delivery, likely will affect the comparability of scores to previous years.

Mr. Campbell said these COVID-19 related disruptions to state assessments also will impact the graduation pathways available to students who do not have a numeric score on the Keystone Exams and, as a result, have more limited options to demonstrate satisfaction of state graduation requirements. To address students whose pathways to graduation have been limited, Mr. Campbell presented a recommendation from the Secretary of Education to add the COVID-19 pandemic as an extenuating circumstance for graduation under Act 158 for the graduating classes of 2023, 2024, and 2025. Act 158 grants the Secretary of Education the authority to recommend adding extenuating circumstances beyond those set forth in the Public School Code, and the Secretary's recommendation must be approved by the State Board of Education.

Dr. Jonathan Peri asked whether COVID-19 would already fall under the existing extenuating circumstances set forth in the Public School Code. Mr. Campbell stated that there may be instances where a student did participate in state assessments that were not a result of illness to the student or their family and that other students may have been impacted by school closures or changes in instructional delivery. As such, he did not believe the current extenuating circumstances may cover all situations that students faced as a result of the pandemic.

Senator Martin suggested tabling discussion on extenuating circumstances and suggested that the matter that should be handled through the General Assembly. The Council engaged in further conversation over the appropriate pathway through which to bring the matter to resolution and the need for timeliness in addressing graduation requirements for at least the class of 2023. To address the concerns expressed by Sen. Martin, the Council discussed limiting approval of the Secretary's recommendation to add COVID-19 as an extenuating circumstance to the class of 2023.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Gina Gullo, with the Pennsylvania State Education Association, suggested that COVID-19 may need to be added as an extenuating circumstance beyond the class of 2025 to address affected students who took Algebra in sixth grade.

ACTION ITEM

APPROVAL OF EXTENUATING CIRCUMSTANCES FOR WAIVERS UNDER SECTION 121 OF THE PUBLIC SCHOOL CODE

A motion to approve adding the COVID-19 pandemic as an extenuating circumstance for waivers under Section 121 of the Public School Code for the graduating class of 2023 was made by Dr. Keeling and seconded by Hon. Aichele.

VOTE: All were in favor as indicated by unanimous voice vote.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Eva Rankin and Reva Gandhi, the Council's student members, announced a new student engagement effort they developed called Students for Education in Pennsylvania (SEPA). Ms. Rankin and Ms. Gandhi sought recommendations from Pennsylvania superintendents for high school student representatives to join SEPA. The effort is intended to serve as a forum for students to discuss education policies and issues before the State Board of Education in order to gather collective input from students statewide about their views on these issues. Ms. Rankin and Ms. Gandhi said they convened virtual discussions among 44 students in six geographic regions across Pennsylvania. They provided a summary of the common issues and concerns that were identified by students across the state. Ms. Rankin and Ms. Gandhi said they intend to continue convening students and reporting their thoughts to the Board on a regular basis.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further items of business, the meeting was adjourned at 2:24 p.m. on a **Lally-Green/Aichele** motion.



Stephanie Jones
Administrative Assistant