

Rhode Island Board of Regents for Elementary & Secondary Education
Minutes of March 12, 2009

A Meeting of the Rhode Island Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education was held at the Shepard Building ~ 255 Westminster Street, Providence, RI 02903 & convened at 4:08 p.m.

In Attendance:

R. Flanders, P. Guida, C. Callahan, A. Cano-Morales, K. Forbes, B. Shimberg, A. Beretta, F. Caprio, A. Davis

Public Remarks

Zack Berger, President, RI Education Media Association, addressed the Commissioner and the Regents regarding RIEMA's support of the BEP.

Paul Laverdi, RI Vision Advisory Board, spoke on behalf of the RIVESP Board and their agenda for the future.

Chairman Remarks

Chairman Flanders is pleased to see that President Obama has made education a top item on his agenda and has found funds for education in the federal stimulus package.

Approval of Minutes

Chairman Flanders presented the minutes of the February 5, 2009 meeting.

MOVED AND SECONDED: THAT the Rhode Island Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education Approves the Minutes of February 5, 2009.

VOTE: Approved unanimously.

Approval of RI Vision Education and Services (RIVESP) Advisory Board

Moved to approve the appointment of Mr. William Potter as a member of the RIVESP Advisory Board. Mr. Potter is a student.

MOVED AND SECONDED: THAT, the Rhode Island Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education Approve the Appointment of William Potter to the RI Vision Education and Services (RIVESP) Advisory Board.

VOTE: Approved Unanimously.

Approval of RI Statewide Criteria for Specific Learning Disabilities

Kenneth Swanson, Director of the Office of Diverse Learners presented the statewide criteria for determining specific learning disabilities, for public comment.

Would move districts toward providing specific interventions for students at the first sign of trouble. Responses to Intervention (RTI) are interventions, documented attempts to help a child. If the interventions do not work, the referral for special-education services would be a response to the intervention.

Regent Guida noted that the RTI process has reduced referrals since it has been put in place in Barrington.

Director Swanson assured that this is not a delay tactic; it would get students the help that they need well before they would have had we followed the traditional pathway. The eligibility team would determine if a student is eligible for special education services, the IEP team would decide upon the services.

Regent Beretta asked for an update at a later date on the implementation of the revised Special Education regulations.

MOVED AND SECONDED: THAT, the Rhode Island Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education Approve the Criteria for Specific Learning Disabilities, for public comment.

VOTE: Approved Unanimously.

Approval of Early Childhood Standards, for Public Hearing

Kenneth Swanson, Director of the Office of Diverse Learners, presented; the current standards date from 1968.

Early childhood programs could voluntarily request RIDE approval; they could still operate with DCYF approval, but RIDE approval would provide a gold standard for these programs, though not all would seek this approval. Currently, there are minimal personnel requirements for early-childhood ed.; these proposed standards include challenging personnel requirements, including an equivalent of a B.A. for classroom teachers.

Regent Callahan clarified that these standards are not applicable to kindergartens in K-12 settings.

Regent Shimberg asked whether volunteers will need to undergo a criminal-background check. It was noted that having volunteers sign a statement that they have no criminal record is a “step up” from current requirements. Director Swanson said that the standards would be revised to spell out the nature of volunteers and that the volunteers cannot be alone with children.

Regent Davis asked whether the SASID could be assigned to these preschool pupils. Director Swanson said this could be made a requirement regarding students in RIDE-approved programs, though not necessarily in DCYF-only approved programs. Deputy Abbott said this process may be operative by the end of the year.

Regent Davis expressed concern about the prescribed teacher:student ratios. He was informed that these ratios are similar to national standards. Regent Davis asked if we had guidelines as to length of time students should spend in these programs. Ms. Palermo, of RIDE, said we could add information as to minimum hours and days, matching our current K requirements. Regent Davis encouraged establishing a high standard for RIDE-approved programs. Regent Beretta said that by setting a standard for early childhood that’s higher than the public standard (for days, hours); it would spur public systems to adopt the higher standard. Commissioner McWalters said we need more information about the nature of a minimum standard before shutting down programs. Ms. Palermo explained that programs need a state system that will help them move toward high-quality education standards. These proposed standards would be voluntary except for kindergarten; K programs must meet these standards – if these were higher than public-school standards (e.g. 5 hours required) the nonpublic K programs would have to meet these standards. She suggested moving on public and nonpublic K programs at the same time. Deputy Abbott said Regents may not be authorized to set kindergarten hours, as these are set in statute. Chairman Flanders asked if a minimum number of hours are recommended for a preschool program to work. He was informed that there is no definitive answer. Regent Forbes said K programs cannot meet the standards with half-day programs.

Chairman Flanders asked if there should be a minimum required time period for these programs. Commissioner McWalters said that, though the number of hours is not defined, no program of less than 2.5 hours per day would be approved. Deputy Abbott noted that the standards specify a minimum of 12 hours per week.

Regent Beretta said that the standards should set a high standard if this is to be truly the “gold standard” endorsed by the Regents. Deputy Abbott said that this is an accreditation process and should establish a floor or minimum to meet in order to be called an educational program, rather than a “gold standard.”

Commissioner McWalters said the standards should ensure that there be access to high-quality programs. Director Gaines noted that the emphasis should be on quality of program. Chairman Flanders said that time must be a factor as well.

Director Swanson said that RI Kids Count could provide a research brief regarding recommended hours and days. Chairman Flanders noted that the intent would be to go forward with public hearing and at the same time get research reports on time, hours, and content of programs.

MOVED AND SECONDED: THAT, the Rhode Island Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education Approve the Early Childhood Standards, for public hearing.

VOTE: Approved Unanimously.

Budget Update

Carolyn Dias, Director of Finance and Administration reported to the Regents.

Regent Shimberg noted that Governor's FY budget 09 proposal would alleviate current deficits through use of ARRA funds and through various reductions in aid. Education aid would be reduced by \$31 million and replaced by federal stimulus money. The cut to PD will be offset by the federal funds. In addition, the Governor would increase municipal aid but require that some of that aid go back to school districts, on a tiered scale based on level of past municipal report for schools. This redirected money will go toward technology, deficit reduction, and repairs.

Ms. Dias said that reporting requirements will have to document how many jobs were saved and layoffs averted through use of the stimulus money.

Deputy Abbott said that the range of things districts can spend the federal funds on is quite broad. RIDE will have to report on performance measures and on progress moving these measures.

Ms. Dias said that we will track these expenditures through electronic applications and the UCOA. This is a three-year program; in 2012 there will be a \$34-million drop-off in available funds, as the federal stabilization funds end. Add in the Title I and IDEA funds, and the fall-off could be \$100 million.

Regent Shimberg reported that for FY 10 the Governor has proposed elimination of civics education funds and the addition of 5 RIDE FTEs to administer the federal funds. Ms. Dias noted that money was added for the Urban Ed Task Force, plus \$1.5 million additional for charters.

Commissioner McWalters noted that Regents had little input into development of this budget, but the board must develop a response to this budget as it moves through the legislature. Regents will have to speak to this budget to constituencies and the legislature. He noted the opportunity for Rhode Island to apply for grants from the federal funds to advance and lever change.

Meetings are scheduled with the General Assembly leadership, so Regents must be prepared to discuss the impact of the budget on current programming.

Regent Shimberg suggested a work session of the Finance Committee on the budget.

Commissioner McWalters noted that the Governor did try to preserve the educational agenda, including the sliding scale on the return of municipal aid and the restoration of PD funds.

Chairman Flanders would like thoughts of Regents on the budget. Regent Guida suggested that the funding-formula principles be presented to the leadership at meetings next week.

Legislative Update

Andy Andrade, Special Assistant/Policy & Legislative Relations, gave the Legislative update. Work is going forward on statewide efficiencies, including transportation and health care. A bill has been introduced at the request of AFT to make the Regents an elected board. Regent Cano Morales said such legislation would be a barrier to Regents' serving on the board. Mr. Andrade asked Regents to call him with any questions about bills, in that he can help explain which introduced bills are not truly viable.

BOR Committee Reports

Regent Patrick Guida, Chair of the School Improvement/Programs (SUPER) Committee, reported that the committee's review of BEP will proceed.

Deputy Abbott said a focus group to review the draft BEP will convene Tuesday. Public comment period will have to be extended.

Regent Angus Davis, Chair of the State and Charter Schools Committee, reported that the Committee will have work ahead of it, assuming that the budget is approved, because Regents will have to decide among multiple options regarding approving charter schools.

Commissioner McWalters noted that the Obama administration has endorsed the idea of expanding charters.

Regent Davis expected an update on School for the Deaf at a future committee meeting.

Commissioner's Search - Update

No update regarding the Commissioner's Search was provided.

Executive Session

No Executive Session was held.

Commissioner's Report

Commissioner McWalters reported:

- Letters similar to the letter to Providence will go to the other PS&I districts.
- Most of his recent work has been involved with the federal stimulus money.
- President Obama showed up unannounced at the chief state school officers' meeting last week. The President told the states to leverage change and be ready to be held accountable for change.

Adjournment

With unanimous consent, the meeting adjourned at 6:04 p.m.