

Item 9 B: Student Attendance Committee
Appleton Area School District Board of Education
Mon, Sep 11, 2023 6:00PM

Kay Eggert (Board President) 06:59

Okay, we will move to number nine board business Student Attendance Committee. Mr. Hartjes.

Greg Hartjes (Superintendent) 07:08

Yes. So, I am going to have Laura Jackson, our Executive Director of Student Services, join us at the table and Stephanie Marta who is our attendance coordinator join us at the table as well. And so, at a recent board work session in August, Laura and Stephanie presented a summary of data from last year in terms of student attendance. And although it was much improved from the year earlier, the '21-'22 school year, it still can improve. We're looking for improvement.

Greg Hartjes (Superintendent) 07:40

Last year's improvement was due to a lot of hard work, a lot of resources that went into student attendance from Stephanie's part and then our school attendance teams. And so, this past year, Stephanie and Laura had a workgroup of district staff members looking at different ways that we can better support students and their families in terms of consistent attendance, and they came away with several recommendations. And some of them are recommendations that we can take on as a district, but others we are going to need support, partnerships from community members, community organizations, perhaps, and families obviously.

Greg Hartjes (Superintendent) 08:19

So, what we would like to do is we would like to assemble and convene a larger committee that would be district staff members, but then also community members, some at large, and then some from specific organizations, and then parents as well. And we want representation from all of our student groups. So, we're looking for parents from each level. We're looking for community members that will represent all the different students in our district, from a student that may be dealing with homelessness to a student that has transportation challenges or maybe language challenges. So really want to put together this group that will come together over the months of October through February, roughly. And we're looking at meeting twice a month at four o'clock over at Kaleidoscope in the large commons area.

Greg Hartjes (Superintendent) 09:12

Want this to be a very transparent committee. Want to be able to come up with solutions that we think will work in terms of supporting students and families. But we want it to be very open so that the community knows what it is that we're looking to do.

Greg Hartjes (Superintendent) 09:28

So, I will stop talking and see if Laura or Stephanie have anything further to add. They've put together a lot of details around topics for each of the meetings, kind of a four-step process of how we want to go about this. So, are there any questions that you have about this committee?

Kay Eggert (Board President) 09:51

I mean, I have a couple of questions. Just for the purpose tonight, you want to provide some information about the forming of the committee; are you then looking for the vote—excuse me, for the board to actually approve? That—that's one piece.

Laura Jackson (Executive Director Of Student Services) 10:09

Yes, we are requesting that the Board approve the assembling of the committee. So that we can move forward and start collaborating with the community members, parents, and community partners to address the situation.

Kay Eggert (Board President) 10:24

And just for background, one of the important reasons—if the board approves this type of a committee, then this would be considered a body, a committee of the board and so then it's all subject to open records and open meetings laws, everything needs to be posted, but the public can attend any of the meetings, or anyone who's not on the committee can still come to observe. So okay, just for that clarification,

Laura Jackson (Executive Director Of Student Services) 10:53

And with the KA commons, we feel that that space would facilitate the group size we're looking to collaborate with, as well as have an area where people who are coming to observe the process would be able to do so.

Ed Ruffolo (Board Member) 11:09

Just a question to build on what Kay said, I imagine that this is—as we know, from our community linkages, this is an issue that's very important to the members of the community. There's also a lot of debate upon about what's the right way to resolve this. So, I think that's good that there's going to be, but there's going to be differences of opinions and some strong differences. I wonder how you feel about having one or maybe even two board members as part of the committee rather than just as observers? It's a little awkward for me to say that, because I'm not available to do it. But if there are other people on the board that might be, do you think it's a good idea? Bad idea? Just interested in your comments on that.

Laura Jackson (Executive Director Of Student Services) 11:59

It is a committee of the board so it's a subcommittee of the board, but we would be leading the work forward. So, if the committee itself will report back to the board, and I think that in this situation for board members to observe and have that perspective. I don't believe we have anything in our board policies that would say that a board member cannot sit on a committee is that accurate, Mr. Hartjes?

Greg Hartjes (Superintendent) 12:35

I believe that that would be fine for board members to serve on it. But again, we will keep you engaged throughout the time that we meet with reports to the board, and we'll put it as an agenda item. It worked really well, during the referendum for board members to come and listen. They were in back.

Greg Hartjes (Superintendent) 12:56

I don't think this would cause an issue, but sometimes, you know, staff members might be intimidated by board members being as part of the process. And so, it's a little bit easier for them to maybe share their opinion in a small group if there's not a board member at the table, or me for that matter at the table. And so, I'll be facilitating. I won't spend time with small groups, because we'll want them to be comfortable sharing their thoughts. So, it's really about the only thing there is really just that we want every committee member to feel comfortable sharing their opinion on the matters.

Laura Jackson (Executive Director Of Student Services) 13:34

I think it also gives you the chance to really hear from the whole community as you represent the community at large. And really listen deeply.

Nick Ross (Board Member) 13:46

I have a just couple of questions. I think I really liked the way that the potential committee members, you know, you're really doing, taking a holistic approach to the different types of roles that students who may face attendance challenges—you know, those roles might have different important information or perspectives to provide. One question, though, is, you know, we have some—some committees that the district has, are we have them because like state statute tells us we have to. So just to clarify, this is something we are choosing, we would be choosing to do, totally on our own to tackle this issue.

Laura Jackson (Executive Director Of Student Services) 14:40

That's correct. So, the parameters that Kay spoke about—meetings would need to be posted and it would be open to the public, and the minutes and agendas and things like that would be able be—would be open to public record or open records requests. That's correct. It doesn't have the same guidelines for participation as some that are mandated in state statute, the guidelines for participation. It's—but we felt we developed a really balanced group and as you were saying.

Nick Ross (Board Member) 15:19

Yeah, definitely. And also, I just wanted to, like, make it clear to the community that this is something that folks are choosing to do to tackle this really important issue, versus having it be mandated by the state, for example.

Nick Ross (Board Member) 15:38

I guess another question would be, you know, some of the other committees that the district has are specifically called, like, advisory committees, for example, I'm just wondering if, like, maybe we could get some more clarity on like, what is the actual goal? Will the goal be to produce a specific product at the end of a certain amount of time? Yeah, just more information about that, I guess.

Greg Hartjes (Superintendent) 16:11

We definitely are going to be solution focused, but I don't know that we go into this with any clear solution in mind yet. Really want to look at from the perspective of individuals that may be impacted by attendance challenges, what can we do differently to support them?

Greg Hartjes (Superintendent) 16:33

One of the things we'll have to, you know, just be clear about is as a district, we don't have unlimited resources. We have one person in Stephanie that oversees attendance for 15,000 students. And so, what we're looking for is, are there efficiencies out there in other organizations. Obviously, we work with the Boys and Girls Club with the track program. And there's other organizations that are concerned about attendance. There's a state truancy task force that is being formed right now. So, this is not just an Appleton issue.

Greg Hartjes (Superintendent) 17:05

But we don't want to wait until the state maybe has something that they can come out with. We know that last year and year before, all of you heard about it, the challenges that we've had through the community linkages, events. We've looked at our data; we know we're not near where we were in, you know, 2011, '12, '13, '14, those years in terms of student attendance, and we want to get back to that as that—those numbers, because they translate to learning, right? We know kids can't learn if they're not in school. I think we're really maybe most anxious looking at kindergarten, first, and second grade as we're—we've reduced class sizes. We are changing the way we teach reading. None of that matters if a student's not in school. And kindergarten is one of our grades that has the highest absence rate. Is that correct? Stephanie? Do you think of that offhand?

Stephanie Marta (Attendance Coordinator) 17:59

Um, it is, yeah. And across the nation. Same thing.

Greg Hartjes (Superintendent) 18:05

So, you know, that's something we hadn't looked at necessarily before. I think a lot of people think "truancy", they think of high school students. We are going to look at our challenges that high school, but certainly, we want to make sure that kids are building that great foundation in kindergarten, first, second grade, and so that their attendance is important there. So those are just some of the things that we're going to look at, but very solution focused, in terms of, here's what we've done. Here's the outcomes we've had. What more could we be looking to do?

Jason Kolpack (Board Member) 18:43

I was just going to ask, if this were to be approved, how are we going about filling these positions? How are we soliciting interest? Figure out who's going to be involved?

Laura Jackson (Executive Director Of Student Services) 18:53

I'm glad that you asked that. So, if this were to be approved, we have a Google form that we'll ask people to utilize to sign up. If they're not able to access that they can call and share with Kayla that they would like to be involved. We will send that out through our normal communications means. So, when you think about the curriculum review committees that we establish, and we ask people to serve on that for two years, and that's open to—we look for community members as well as parents. We'll follow similar pattern—that pattern to solicit members from parents at large and community at large. But then, as you can see, there are specific organizations or community groups that we want to make sure we send invitations out to. So, we'll target those folks with specific invitations. We've also identified how this project would work. So, you know, ultimately our vision is that we see an increase in the number of students and the percentage of students that are attending 90% of school days or more. And that's our vision for this. Yet we expect to come back with recommendations from this group that—so to the point made by Mr. Hartjes and asked earlier, we will—it's an advisory committee.

Jason Kolpack (Board Member) 20:27

Right. And I guess one point I would make is; it seems to me that the type of person that would self-select to serve in this type of committee might not be the person whose opinion we need the most. So, I would encourage us to maybe try to make sure that we're reaching out to people who are going to be most affected by this type of activity.

Laura Jackson (Executive Director Of Student Services) 20:45

Thank you.

Kris Sauter (Board Member) 20:52

I—originally when I read this committee makeup, I appreciate all the effort that's gone into trying to connect with so many different resources. But I have the same, I guess, question that Ed had was whether it might be beneficial to have a board member sit on the committee. I understand reasons for that, perhaps, not being you know—if that would at all. result in people not feeling comfortable about sharing their opinions or thoughts. I appreciate that. But I also appreciate that any member of the public or any of us would be able to attend these meetings to see how it—you know, just to see what the discussion entails. So, thank you.

Kay Eggert (Board President) 21:46

For board members that have brought up that point about board members serving on the committee, I guess, I'm looking for a little bit of what you think how that would be beneficial for the committee. And I'm also just going to draw back on when—with the attendance truancy task force that had been in place some years ago, there were no board members that were actually a part of that committee, but I think a lot of board members attended all the meetings so they could hear firsthand. Would there be any other—what would what—would there be any other reasons that you—you know I'm just not thinking of why it could be beneficial to have board members on the committee. Certainly, we don't, can't create a quorum of the board. And so...

Kris Sauter (Board Member) 22:35

I was thinking in terms of the fact that this was an area that we heard a lot about when our—in our community discussions and hoping that the public will understand that the board is very much in support of this discussion. And so sometimes it's just beneficial to have a member serve in that role so that people understand that. But I, I anticipate that we can clearly make that a piece of whatever communication is going out so that people understand that board members are, you know—should this pass that board members are certainly a part of this process.

Kay Eggert (Board President) 23:17

And recommendations would come back for action at the board level. So roughly, it looks like it's a group of about 40 individuals who would be on the committee. So concise committee. And so, at this point, you have not reached out to any of these organizations yet. So, this is just ground floor. Go ahead, Greg.

Greg Hartjes (Superintendent) 23:52

We haven't, but we certainly, much like all of you, we've heard from organizations and individuals that want to help. You know, we know the Boys and Girls Club wants to be involved. We know our SROs, you know, want to be involved. I've had numerous organizations, when—Casa Hispana explain they want to be involved. New Hmong Professionals wants to be involved. So, we've heard from a lot of different groups that they want to help find solutions. And so, I think it's going to be very easy for us to find a good cross section of our community to serve on a on the committee.

Jason Kolpack (Board Member) 24:30

That your point about this, the size of the committee made me wonder, is there a plan for facilitation? That's a pretty—could tend to be a pretty unwieldy group. So, I'm just wondering what the plan is to make sure that the discussions are productive and focused.

Greg Hartjes (Superintendent) 24:48

We—you know, we'll probably pattern this after our Future Needs Advisory Committee, which was the precursor to the referendum, and we had 75 people on that committee, and it worked fine. So, there's, you know, an element of presentation, and then tables where there's table discussion, and then some type of report out. So, I think we're comfortable with anywhere from 40 to 50, even 60 will function okay.

Ed Ruffolo (Board Member) 25:18

One thing I note is that oftentimes families with students with disabilities have special challenges when it comes to attendance. If that's through the community at large, or some of the parents, or I don't see any group in here that specifically deals with the disability population, that might be something worth considering, because they may have an insight or a requirement that is quite different from what you might see from other groups. Something to consider.

Kay Eggert (Board President) 25:50

So, Ed are you thinking more than the district special education administrator? You'd like to see—?

Ed Ruffolo (Board Member) 25:57

It would be nice if there was a parent.

Kay Eggert (Board President) 25:59

Parent, okay.

Ed Ruffolo (Board Member) 26:01

Current—especially a current parent.

Kay Eggert (Board President) 26:02

Okay. Any other thoughts on the committee makeup? Because I just want to go back to what we're going to be asked—what we're going to ask the board to do is to approve a committee with this general framework of committee structure?

Laura Jackson (Executive Director Of Student Services) 26:21

Correct. It says, this is our proposal—our recommended—we use "the potential committee members are as follows." So, with this feedback, you know, we can be intentional about also including making sure that we include a parent of a student with disabilities across multiple levels. And we are looking at the approval of to assemble the committee. And this is our target that identifies our target groups.

Nick Ross (Board Member) 26:58

I do have—so to Jason's earlier question about like, the person who is going to self-select first to serve on the committee may not be the person you want to hear from—well we want to hear from everyone, obviously—but may not have the specific information that we're looking for. And to Ed's point about, like, folks from different groups, populations, demographics that have really valuable information based on their experience, you know, there's often a lot of barriers to participation in a committee like this. And I don't know how you could sort of put this into the policy, but or the proposal even but, you know, just an awareness and acknowledgement, that recruitment, specifically for, you know, when we have folks from community groups who are paid to go to committee, like it's part of their job to go to a committee, like that's one thing, but a family member or a student—you know, it's a different ask for an individual like that. So, I would just hope that there would be a continued look at that type of engagement and involvement, because I know it can be very difficult to recruit. But those—the voices of those that would be hardest to recruit are the most important often. So, I just hoped there would be continuous, like, assessment of that. Like, do you have the right voices at the table? Who's missing? You know, who do we need to reach out to? Because you're not going to get, if you have 40 members, all fort—you're not going to get everything that you want, right away. Yeah.

Greg Hartjes (Superintendent) 28:53

We've talked a little bit about—we think we understand the barriers, and the challenges that some families and students have, and we will rely on—Stephanie knows a lot about, you know, where are some parents that maybe have had success with some of the efforts we've put in place in the last year or two. Certainly, Deans of Students at our schools know which parents they work closely with, around getting their children to school. And so, we will—that's obviously the voice we want the most is the voice of those who are struggling. And so, it doesn't do us a lot of good to have a committee that's filled with people whose children are already going to school or community members who don't know the struggles. So definitely, that's what we're going to target

and that's—again, like we do with the referendum, we look for people that have a certain background experiences that really could help us make the decisions. And we'll do the same with this group.

Kris Sauter (Board Member) 29:59

Related to that, did we consider having any student members to this committee?

Laura Jackson (Executive Director Of Student Services) 30:04

We did, had discussed having student members of this committee, and we determined at this time for the committee work itself, we weren't going to ask for their voice for a variety of reasons. And we felt that as a result of the work of the committee, we may need to take it back to student groups at multiple levels and to gain some perspective.

Greg Hartjes (Superintendent) 30:36

Again, I'll bring up the point, when we want to get student input, it's very hard to get student input when they're surrounded by 40 adults. If we can take it back to kids and ask them in their setting where they're more comfortable, I think we'll get a better outcome. Again, we, you know, had some we had three students on the referendum committee, and they struggled with co-curricular commitments to be there, and just—you know, they're intimidated by adults. So, we have to find different ways to get their voice into the discussion.

Kris Sauter (Board Member) 31:12

I appreciate that I just—I am hoping that we will look for the student voice, because I think, as you said that, you know, some—they are the most affected by this. So, I think it would be very beneficial. Thanks.

Ed Ruffolo (Board Member) 31:25

One comment just so it doesn't get the—don't let the agenda item go by without saying it is thank you for this. And this is incredibly positive. This is a challenge for us, and also, I think, demonstrates that we're listening very carefully to the community in taking immediate and positive action to try to solve what is a complicated and difficult problem. So, thank you. And I certainly endorse and support the concept of this committee.

James Bacon (Board Member) 31:56

Yeah, I just had one question somewhat related to what was being asked before, just a slightly different way, maybe. But when I look at trying to represent all the different populations that have been brought up in all these different ways, and I see that you've included in the parents and then the attendance team members on respectively, making sure you get, you know, or ideally are looking for, I guess, at least two elementary, two middle, two high. You know, when I think about kind of the AASD staff of that kind with the attendance team members who work in schools see this every day and then parents in that way, do you think that the six is enough to be representative from the different populations we're talking about there knowing that, you know, when we're talking about like having a representative of one from the city Council or other places, like we're not going to always get all that representation in all those other places, and those are the two main places it seems like we have the option to bring some of that in? And maybe you do. I'm just actually asking: do you think that the six in those two categories is enough?

Laura Jackson (Executive Director Of Student Services) 33:06

We are starting with that. If we felt like when we see and see who responds and who's interested and we've then verify that we've—that we have multiple perspectives on this team, we may need to expand that a little bit. And we're open to that. We don't want to get huge. As Greg said, between 40 and 60 we're comfortable with, and we feel we can be really productive with that. So that gives us that wiggle room if we feel like we really need to broaden the perspectives.

James Bacon (Board Member) 33:43

Yeah, that makes sense, and I appreciate that. And then maybe even to Nick's point earlier, you know, if we're starting here and we ask the question, "Who's not in the room that we think we're missing?" you know, it also makes it easier to then define how do we find that perspective, whether it's adding to the committee, making a new one, or another way? So, I respect that, too. I just wanted to be sure. Thank you.

Kay Eggert (Board President) 34:06

Any other comments or discussion on this? Go ahead, Kris.

Kris Sauter (Board Member) 34:11

One more question regarding the timeline. I think it—I think you said, Laura, October through February, and then two times per month, and then in—after that time period, then is your plan to come back to the Board then with whatever suggestions?

Laura Jackson (Executive Director Of Student Services) 34:30

That's correct. So, we plan then in March to do a presentation before the board of the outcomes of that committee work. We would do some other communication updates in the interim. And just to clarify, we would schedule one meeting in December.

Kay Eggert (Board President) 34:58

There isn't anything else? Do you have anything else you wanted to share on this? No. Then would there be a motion to approve forming a committee to support student attendance?

Ed Ruffolo (Board Member) 35:14

So, move.

Kay Eggert (Board President) 35:17

Motion and a second. Call for any other comments or discussion? Seeing none, Kayla.

[They take a vote and all Board of Education members vote in favor of creating the committee.]

Kay Eggert (Board President) 35:48

Right. Well, they'll certainly will be more to come. Thank you for bringing this forward, and we will look forward to—well, obviously, we'll be able to attend, so we'll get all those meetings on our calendar. So, thank you.