

INTERIM JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

Minutes of the 3rd Meeting of the 2022 Interim

August 16, 2022

Call to Order and Roll Call

The 3rd meeting of the Interim Joint Committee on Education was held on Tuesday, August 16, 2022, at 11:00 a.m., in Room 154 of the Capitol Annex. Representative Regina Huff, Chair, called the meeting to order, and the secretary called the roll.

Present were:

Members: Senator Max Wise, Co-Chair; Representative Regina Huff, Co-Chair; Senators Danny Carroll, David P. Givens, Jimmy Higdon, Stephen Meredith, Gerald A. Neal, Adrienne Southworth, Reginald Thomas, and Stephen West; Representatives Shane Baker, Kim Banta, Tina Bojanowski, Jennifer Decker, Jeffery Donohue, Mark Hart, Scott Lewis, C. Ed Massey, Bobby McCool, Charles Miller, Melinda Gibbons Prunty, Steve Riley, Killian Timoney, James Tipton, Russell Webber, and Lisa Willner.

Guests: Lt. Governor Jacqueline Coleman; Dr. Marty Pollio, Superintendent, Jefferson County Public Schools; and Student Mental Health Initiative Student Advisors: Alexandra Perry, Bentley White, Charleigh Browning, Juleah Edie, Logan Justice, Solyanna Mesfin, and Spandana Pavuluri.

LRC Staff: Jo Carole Ellis, Joshua Collins, Lauren Busch, and Maurya Allen.

Approval of Minutes – July 15, 2022

Following welcome and introductions, Representative Riley made a motion to approve the minutes of the July 15, 2022, meeting. The motion was seconded by Representative Timoney and passed by voice vote.

Team Kentucky Student Mental Health Initiative

Lt. Governor Coleman recognized student advisors Delany Daugherty, Dyllan Tipton, Rohin Dutt, Rox Lockard, Sam Smith, Soleila Elliott Gonzalez, and Ollie Fegenbush who were unable to attend but had contributed to the presentation. Present representing the Student Mental Health Initiative Student Advisors were Alexandra Perry, Bentley White, Charleigh Browning, Juleah Edie, Logan Justice, Solyanna Mesfin, and Spandana Pavuluri. Ms. Mesfin asked members to participate with the program by checking in with their own mental health using a QR code or web address provided in the handouts. She then briefly presented the results of the mental health survey and expressed how important it is for teachers and students to consider their mental health daily.

Lt. Governor Coleman said the CDC reports that nearly 1 in 5 children has a mental disorder, but only about 20 percent are receiving care. In Kentucky, approximately 57 percent of students aged 12-17 have experienced a major depressive episode but did not receive care. Student mental health and access to care were only worsened by the pandemic and students are feeling less motivated, more depressed, and more anxious. All of this was indicative of the need for Student Mental Health Action Summits. The KDE Student Advisory Council created the summits, led surveys and conversations, and analyzed the data from those meetings to create the policy recommendations presented to members.

There were 10 student mental health summit events held throughout the state, both in person and virtually. Many were regional but a statewide virtual event was available to any student who wanted to participate. Approximately 300 students attended and there were 25 breakout sessions where mental health clinicians served as moderators and scribes to capture the discussions and to provide a resource should any student need to discuss a mental health concern. Examples of questions used during break-out sessions included: how does your school/home/life in general affect your mental health, what mental health resources do you wish you had access to at school, what recommendations on mental health do you have for policy makers, and what do students need to be mentally healthy. Flexibility in classroom assignments and deadlines, access to more mental health resources including mental health clinicians, updated suicide prevention training for students and faculty, and mental health days as an excused absence from school were all suggestions that came from those breakout conversations. Follow-up surveys were distributed to participants and helped reduce stigma among students who said they felt heard and less alone in facing their struggles with mental health following the summits.

Lt. Governor Coleman stated that while these conversations were happening among students in Kentucky, there were national groups including the White House and the CDC issuing their own guidance regarding student mental health. The student representatives presented their ten recommendations, which include elevating student voice and more comprehensive suicide prevention training. They emphasized that having student voice is more important than having a token student at the table. Adult leaders need to seek an authentic student voice and solicit input from student led spaces. Comprehensive suicide prevention is also critical and needs to be available throughout the school and included in the curriculum, so that all students are exposed to that information at least twice a year.

The student advocates thanked the members for their passage of House Bill 44 of the 2022 Regular Session, but asked that this piece of legislation be strengthened. It is critical to foster stigma free school environments, require updated evidence-based informed mental health curriculum for K-12 students, and offer opportunities to learn and practice executive coping skills. Additional recommendations include increasing and improving professional development for faculty and staff to include evidence-based mental health skills, covering not only suicide prevention but also eating disorders, anxiety,

depression, etc. It is also necessary for all school staff to participate in that training to foster a stigma free school environment.

Lt. Governor Coleman stated while they do not have all the answers, the wrong answer would be doing nothing. We must continue to address student mental health moving forward. The federal government has indicated their commitment to supporting student health by setting aside nearly \$300 million to expand access to student mental health services and the state is still looking into ways to access and utilize those federal funds.

Chair Huff thanked the presenters and commented on how vital these conversations are for today's students. She said she was proud of the suicide prevention training requirement that was passed as part of legislation she sponsored in House Bill 30 of the 2018 Regular Session.

Representative Bojanowski commented on how important social emotional learning is for students and expressed her gratitude to the committee for highlighting this topic.

In response to a question from Representative Gibbons Prunty, Lt. Governor Coleman said when they suggested putting a safeguard on using mental health days, such as a note from a mental health provider, students pointed out that getting a diagnosis, or even a consultation with a mental health provider, was a privilege not every student has access to. Heather Dearing, Deputy Chief of Staff, Office of the Lieutenant Governor, said the recommendation was also based on legislation in other states and there are expanded recommendations for ways to prevent abuse of the mental health days in the report. Expanding access to mental health professionals in schools would also help prevent abuse of mental health absences.

Responding to a question from Senator Wise, Lt. Governor Coleman said there was some comparison of data from before and after the pandemic, but the surveys on mental health were not structured in the same way as surveys conducted on mental health before the pandemic, because so much had changed. Additionally, the team sought information on what resources are available in order to ensure that updated, evidence-based curriculum and training are provided to schools. She said they found some schools are still using VHS tapes on suicide prevention, so there is clearly room for modernization and more updated information. Ms. Dearing said the data from the summits is also available from KDE and KY Stats is working on ways to use that data to make additional recommendations.

Senator Thomas said Kentucky was recognized as the first southern state to address mental health absences at the Southern Legislative Conference meeting this past summer. In response to his questions regarding student participation on state and local school boards, Ms. Mesfin, the first student to sit on the Kentucky Board of Education, said it was a contentious time when she joined the state school board. It was helpful to have the seat start as a non-voting member during the transition so that the board could appreciate the

role of the student without fearing how they would vote. She hoped that the student board member could transition to a voting position soon and that local boards will see that this is possible. Even having a non-voting student member on local school boards is a valuable opportunity for student voices to be heard. Lt. Governor Coleman said she also supports transitioning the student member on the Kentucky Board of Education to a voting capacity.

Representative Tipton spoke candidly about his own struggles with mental health and how critical it is to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health. In response to questions, the student advisors acknowledged that a few years of normalcy will return some mental health to normal, but the trauma of the past few years will impact students and their mental health for years to come, as any adverse childhood event does. Lt. Governor Coleman said the trauma of the pandemic, compounded by the natural disasters of the West KY tornados and the Eastern KY floods, and the ongoing impact of child abuse and the opioid crisis, led to the necessity of creating a mental health toolkit and other recommendations that can be disseminated to schools.

Responding to a question from Representative Baker, Lt. Governor Coleman said it is critical for all faculty and staff professional development to be reviewed so that it is relevant, evidence-based, and current. Most teachers would love to have the skills necessary to identify students who need help and know how to refer them to the appropriate services. Teachers today are tasked with teaching the whole child and professional development that assists in that is invaluable.

In response to questions from Representative Decker, Lt. Governor Coleman said schools have site-based decision-making councils with parent representatives who are involved in curriculum and other decisions. Additionally, there are parents in the legislature and in the field of teaching who will be involved in creating legislation and implementation of these recommendations in schools.

Jefferson County Public Schools Update

Dr. Marty Pollio, Superintendent, Jefferson County Public Schools, opened his presentation by recognizing the JCPS students on the Student Advisory panel and acknowledging that if 1 in 5 students is experiencing a mental health concern, that implies approximately 15,000 students in JCPS alone need support during this time. It is a tough time to be an educator and a leader, and there are resultant shortages in teachers, staff, and superintendents. There is a lot of improvement that has been done at JCPS, but much still to come.

Right now, the district is comprised of approximately 96,500 students, nearly 7,000 teachers, and 165 schools. Demographically, JCPS faces some challenges in that they have nearly 70 percent of their students receiving free/reduced price lunch, a marker of the amount of poverty faced by the population. While it is critical to address the achievement gaps, academic success is highly negatively correlated with the amount of poverty and

homelessness experienced by students. Additionally, nearly 13 percent of the JCPS student population are English Language Learners and there are 139 languages spoken by students and families. While this enriches the schools, it can pose a barrier to learning.

In 2019, the district surveyed the schools and made an improvement plan. One of the first areas needing to be addressed was the student assignment plan, which was highly inequitable because the burden was placed largely on black families. Magnet schools need to reflect the diversity of the district, and they will be addressed with the new student assignment plan adopted by the district this summer. All students have the choice to attend a school close to their home, unless their parent elects to choose another school or program. There have also not been any new buildings constructed in over 40 years. Increasing taxes is always controversial, but it will be necessary in order to address what has become a critical need, as there are several buildings already at end-of-life. In the eyes of students, school facilities indicate how much they are cared for by their community, and it is time for Jefferson County to put more care into the school facilities. Additionally, modernizing technology is critical for creating a learning environment that meets today's standards and needs. Distribution of Chromebooks with imbedded wireless internet is necessary to meet the needs of students who may not have access to the internet at home. Also, in partnership with Evolve 502, students at JCPS have been given the opportunity to get some postsecondary education through KCTCS, Simmons College, or the University of Louisville.

Increased poverty, workforce shortages, including a dramatic lack of bus drivers, and rebounding from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic are the primary challenges facing the district today. While the scope of challenges faced at JCPS seems enormous, these shortages and impacts are happening at the same rate as in smaller districts, it just is magnified in a district this size. Students in poverty and students of color have been more impacted by the pandemic, as was reflected in the number of students participating in summer learning programs. The district is growing new programs to address these needs, but it will take time.

In response to a question from Senator Meredith, Dr. Pollio said he had been watching during session while many negative comments were made by legislators about JCPS, which he found upsetting. The SEEK funding is the right way to distribute funding to make sure all students get what they need, and his statements at the time were made based on his heated opinion of legislator discussions during the legislative session.

Responding to questions from Representative Bojanowski, Dr. Pollio said there is a critical shortage of special education teachers and those support staff who help identify needs and make recommendations. Due to other staffing shortages, those support staff have been assigned as primary classroom instructors and that takes away from a school's ability to evaluate and recommend services for special needs students.

In response to a question from Senator Thomas, Dr. Pollio said the school facilities are such a severe problem that it will take several years to get to where they need to be. Currently they are assessing the most critical needs and making recommendations for moving forward.

Responding to a question from Representative Miller, Dr. Pollio said enrollment has remained relatively stable at around 95,000 over the last 12 years. There are additionally around 2,500 enrolled in early childhood. Projections are that enrollment will exceed 100,000 in the next ten years.

Responding to a question from Senator Southworth, Dr. Pollio said the JCPS Board is meeting soon to continue the conversation about masking in the district. As a local decision, it is up to the board how they will proceed. This issue has been divisive, especially among those of different races. They continue to follow the CDC guidelines, which recommends universal masking when the community is in red. Currently, JCPS is in the red and when the community goes into yellow or green they can go into optional masking. If the numbers continue to decline, masks will become optional.

Representative Donohue said he is committed to help JCPS move forward and move all the schools of the Commonwealth forward.

In response to a question from Senator Wise, Dr. Pollio said he has spoken often with the State Security Marshal to get into compliance with the new law regarding hiring school resource officers (SROs). The funding is available, but the challenge is finding qualified personnel. LMPD is also experiencing a shortage of eligible candidates. JCPS has 11 school safety officers and four more in training who will be on the force later this week. There are more set to begin training soon which will bring the number to 35 when they complete their training, but Dr. Pollio said it will be difficult to see a full complement of 165 SROs because of the challenges of staffing.

With no further business to come before the committee, the meeting adjourned at 1:00 p.m.