

INTERIM JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

Minutes of the 5th Meeting of the 2020 Interim

October 20, 2020

Call to Order and Roll Call

The 5th meeting of the Interim Joint Committee on Education was held on Tuesday, October 20, 2020, at 10:30 a.m., in Room 171 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 David P. Givens, Jimmy Higdon, Stephen Meredith, Gerald A. Neal, Michael J. Nemes, Robert Stivers II, Reginald Thomas, Johnny Ray Turner, Stephen West, and Mike Wilson; Representatives Kim Banta, Tina Bojanowski, Randy Bridges, Jeffery Donohue, Jim Glenn, Mark Hart, Scott Lewis, Mary Lou Marzian, C. Ed Massey, Reginald Meeks, Kimberly Poore Moser, Melinda Gibbons Prunty, Steve Riley, Attica Scott, John Sims Jr, James Tipton, Russell Webber, Richard White, and Lisa Willner.

Guests:

LRC Staff: Jo Carole Ellis, Yvette Perry, and Maurya Allen.

Approval of Minutes – September 15, 2020

On a motion by Representative Tipton, seconded by Senator Wise, the minutes of the September 15, 2020, meeting were approved by voice vote.

Having School During COVID – What’s Worked, What’s Changed, What’s Tough

Steve Carter, Superintendent, McCracken County Schools, began his presentation with a brief demographic overview of his district to provide background to his remarks. School reopened on August 24 utilizing a virtual model and returned to in-person instruction in September utilizing an alternating schedule. There are two in-person groups, each attending two days a week. Monday is left as a planning and cleaning day for teachers and staff. At the start of the pandemic, there were two main goals: to ensure the employees maintained getting a paycheck and to ensure that students were fed.

There have been many positives and negatives to returning to school in-person. Regarding that return to in-person instruction, a survey of district families showed that 80 percent of families wanted to return in-person, but over time more families and staff have

expressed concerns about safety. Approximately 25-35 percent of students are still attending virtually to meet these desires and provide safety for higher risk students and families. While McCracken County Schools have only been providing in-person instruction for a short time, there has been positive attendance so far. Maintaining a planning day for staff has been very beneficial and supports the mental health of staff and students. However, there have also been challenges to planning for teachers who are striving to meet the needs of both in-person and remote attending students in the same “classroom.” There were multiple return plans developed over the summer which were modified and blended into the actual return that was implemented. Bussing was modified so that only students returning to the same building were bussed together and individual school buildings are still only virtual (no in-person return) because students or families in those buildings were known to have tested positive for COVID-19. Each building is deep cleaned daily, which is a great expense, but it is necessary to keep students and staff as safe as possible.

It is apparent there has been significant instructional “slide” or loss of proficiency since the shutdown, as illustrated from STAR testing. This information is preliminary and partial because school has only just come back in-person, but compared to last fall, less than half of students tested have proficiency in elementary math and reading. Focus has been on RTI and ESS, and is expanding into all student groups to address these declines. When evaluating high school students, using CERT assessments, there has been less of a slide, and even some improvements for reading and science scores. However, he cautioned that this data is very preliminary and only reflects small numbers of students.

To address access, they have provided all students with a Chromebook and have expanded distribution of hotspots throughout the community to ensure better virtual access for students who may not have internet accessibility at home. Other things that have worked well have been weekly leadership team calls and increased communication with members of the school community and the local health departments. Weekly calls with staff and students help to mitigate the loss of interpersonal well-being. Using a virtual platform has been a challenge because it was new and difficult to train users quickly. There is also stress every time a student or staff member tests positive for COVID-19 because of fear for their well-being. While there have been positive cases, there has not been transmission within the school buildings, which is reassuring. There is also stress because of competing opinions about the precautions being taken. To some degree, everyone is right, but as a school, it is important to keep everyone as safe as possible and take any necessary steps.

Responding to questions from Chair Huff, Mr. Carter said there has been some after-school remediation offered, but it has been stressful. The focus in McCracken County has been on the “long game” and coming back safely and cautiously in order to catch students up in the classroom with in-person instruction. Regarding special needs students, their ratio is very similar to that of the general population regarding use of in-person or virtual

instruction. However, these approaches have been specialized to the individual needs of the student in order to get them the best access to the services they need.

Responding to questions from Senator Wilson, Mr. Carter said precise numbers for the cost of increased cleaning are difficult to know because there is still potential for federal reimbursements, which may be used to offset costs. McCracken County is fortunate financially, but he estimates about a 10 percent increase in regular cleaning supplies for staff. The district utilized CARES funds for up-front costs to upgrade facilities. While there were some savings from shutdown of facilities and reduced transportation costs in the spring, it is too early to know if those will offset increased cleaning costs this fall.

In response to questions from Senator Thomas, Mr. Carter said they are not currently requiring COVID-19 testing of staff. Also, the causes for decline in participation with non-traditional instruction (NTI) are varied but tend to be a lack of technical support (such as reliable internet) or a lack of parental support. There is a consistent need to practice empathy toward students who are not attending. There are students having to work to support their families and those whose parents have lost jobs, therefore losing the ability to provide basic needs at this time. Of the approximately 2,000 students in the district, there are approximately 70 students with whom the schools have had no contact. Truancy officers have been trying to find them, and plans are in place to get those students caught up when they are found. No one wants to leave any students behind regardless of the challenges.

Following those questions, Alvin Garrison, Superintendent, Covington Independent Schools, began his presentation with a brief overview of his district demographics. He said there has been a very equal split among families wanting to return in-person, virtual only, or utilizing a hybrid model. They have had excellent communication with local health officials. With their guidance, Covington Independent developed and implemented a five-week hybrid opening. This resulted in an AA group attending in-person Monday/Tuesday and a BB group attending in-person on Thursday/Friday. There is also a virtual academy for online only students. They are four weeks into the five-week plan. There is a hope to get full in-person instruction for those that are not in the virtual academy, especially those that are in the pre-k and elementary age groups, which have experienced similar instructional “slide” as seen earlier for McCracken County. However, with local COVID-19 positivity rates on the rise, that will be a significant challenge.

Positive outcomes have been seen for computer and food distribution in the district. Covington Independent had already reached one-to-one distribution of Chromebooks to students in middle and high schools, but there is still a strong need to increase connectivity for elementary students. The city of Covington has been stepping up to provide free WiFi for the next five years to all residents, but the estimated completion date for that project will not be until after the start of 2021. As a result, the school has worked to issue hotspots so that all students have improved internet connectivity at home. Mr. Garrison wanted to

especially recognize the outstanding work of the custodians, food service personnel, and school nurses who have worked tirelessly to keep kids safe, buildings clean, and ensure students are fed and healthy.

The politics surrounding COVID-19 have been very challenging because they complicate the effectiveness of strategies to get students and staff back safely. There are several students and staff having to quarantine but not necessarily because they tested positive. Temperature checks have been a challenge to implement because of difficulty getting equipment. All of the continued unknowns and growing impatience with the process has been a challenge and a barrier. Everyone wants to return to yesterday, and that is not a possibility right now. Other immediate challenges include the increased training for teachers in how to provide quality asynchronous and synchronous instruction, which will take time. Lastly, communication has been a huge obstacle, because everyone wants information and answers, which are just not available yet.

Mr. Garrison concluded stating some COVID-19 testing of staff has been administered voluntarily, but this is more as a reassurance for staff than a mandatory procedure. Tutoring is also going to be provided 24/7 for all students using a nationally recognized third-party program. This will be launched on Monday for the high school with hopes to expand to all schools soon.

In response to questions from Chair Huff, Mr. Garrison said that all teachers are reporting in-person daily unless they are under quarantine or have a health related exemption. As of the Monday before this meeting, one teacher had returned from out-of-state and had been on campus just prior to testing positive for COVID-19. This resulted in the high school being closed to in-person access for deep cleaning, and school instruction was held virtually using the virtual academy already in place. He also said that there have been no adjustments to pay scale for teachers in quarantine thanks to existing legislative provisions and other measures that allowed the use of emergency sick leave for those teachers.

Responding to a question from Representative Banta, Mr. Garrison said they are using the tutoring company FEV Tutoring, which had references from large school districts across the country, including Baltimore schools. Their model takes into account different modes of learning for students with different learning styles and provides access to professional tutors any time the students need them. The program is being piloted at the high school with hopes to expand to all grades. They found that even with wonderful and engaged parents and students, there was a desire for increased professional support for those learning at home.

In response to a question from Senator Thomas, Mr. Garrison said there had been a combination of factors preventing participation in NTI. Lack of broadband or other internet access is a major problem in Covington, but also the computer cannot replace the

social/emotional interaction of a teacher with a student. Parents are supportive, but for many it has been a while since they were in school. Also, there are parents who are working, either from home or outside the home, and extended relative caregivers are not equipped to teach like trained educators. Kids need the caring adult interaction that they get from in-person school instruction. That passion cannot be communicated on a computer screen. Many students who are not participating fully with NTI are students who are disengaged, especially those who are ELL or special needs.

The third presentation was from John Siler, Superintendent, Whitley County Schools. He said that since the beginning of the pandemic, the district has been seeing relatively high numbers of positive COVID-19 cases. As a result, they have not done any in-person instruction and are utilizing a 100 percent virtual learning method. In his district, very preliminary MAP test data is showing a significant gap in math for elementary school students. Gaps were also evident in kindergarten through 8th grade proficiency in math but less so in reading. All of the data has been gathered from students taking MAP tests, largely at home. Only those students without any internet access were brought into the school, practicing social distancing, in order to take their MAP tests.

All K-12 teachers were provided touch screen Chromebooks, and there is a one-to-one distribution of Chromebooks to students. Through talks with local health officials, they do plan to open an A/B rotation model for students to come back in-person as soon as possible. Teachers have been in-person to provide virtual instruction from their classrooms. All teachers were trained on Chromebooks, and orientation was provided for parents and guardians. They received strong, positive feedback from teachers regarding the virtual teaching platforms Screencastify and Zoom in collaboration with Google Classroom.

A significant challenge has been providing equity in supporting the different levels of access faced by students. This has led to offering three approaches: virtual only learning, in-person learning (when safe), and paper/flashdrive packets for some elementary students. These packets are created at the district level and allow for consistency across the district. Partnerships have also been formed between the district and Berea College to expand availability of hotspots for students. Barriers to that include the need for cell phone signals, which some students do not have even for hotspots to work properly. Meal distribution has also remained critical. All students currently have access to delivery of school lunch and breakfast.

Further challenges include the lack of qualified substitutes. Some of the best substitutes have been retired teachers. Understandably, many of these individuals do not wish to be in the schools due to exposure risk. While Whitley County Schools are not in-person at this time, this will be a problem if there are rises in positive cases and widespread quarantine of staff. Preliminary data shows that approximately 70 percent of families would prefer to come to in-person. There are approximately 307 homes, with approximately 559 students, without reliable internet resulting in approximately 5 to 16 percent of students

accessing virtual learning through paper packets. Extending distribution of hotspots and other wireless technology will be critical to help reach these students. And finally, there is no substitute to being in the classroom and forming the relationship with a teacher who can guide and inspire students.

In response to a question from Senator Thomas, Mr. Siler said Whitley County Schools had not yet set a date for return to in-person instruction but hopes it will be soon. There will be no requirement for teachers or staff to test for COVID-19, but access to virtual clinics and school nurses will be provided. Additionally, use of temperature checks will be standard for all teachers, staff, and students when they return in-person.

Responding to questions from Senator Meredith, Mr. Siler said, with the University of the Cumberlands so close, they have often utilized the ability to recruit substitutes from university students training as teachers. However, if there are not enough substitutes, even with that partnership, entire schools may be placed on virtual instruction.

Senator Wise commented that he recognized the desire to go back to before, but perhaps it is best not to go back. Now might be the time to incorporate the positives and address the negatives of the current education landscape into construction of a new future for education. Waiting on a vaccine is going to take a while, and this pandemic has changed families. It will change education.

Representative Riley also commented that the lack of qualified substitute teachers has been a problem for a while but has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

From the School Bus to the Couch: How Dual Credit & Other Policies Can Help Break the Cycle for Students with Disabilities

Judith Bradley, Director, JackBeNimble, and Jack Bradley, Inclusion Ambassador, JackBeNimble, were present to discuss the need for expanded access to dual credit classes for students with disabilities. Mr. Bradley said over 70 percent of disabilities are invisible, including autism, and often these students get overlooked. He reminded the committee that their potential cannot be assessed by just looking at them. Also, these students simply are not on the educational radar for many school districts. However, as October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month, he appreciated the committee allowing him to speak on behalf of his peers. While dual credit is promoted for all students, it is not explicitly provided for students with disabilities, even as it could provide much greater employment opportunities for them. As a sophomore in college, he is passionate about studying history, because if you don't understand it you are doomed to repeat it. His grandfather was a Holocaust survivor and spoke to governments all over the world. He also took student groups to the Holocaust Museum. When Jack learned of the atrocities committed during that period, he learned he would have been executed, not because he was Jewish, but because he has a disability. Learning has been a long and difficult road for him. Personalized learning should be the norm, not only for the disabled, but for all students. He

supports passage of legislation that helps other students with disabilities get access to learning that best helps them succeed. Students with these invisible disabilities are wired differently, but that does not mean they are not trying their best and are capable of success.

Mr. Bradley said the Kraft Academy initially denied him access unless he ‘gave up’ on his IEP and disability accommodations. He credits his mother for all her support and ‘nagging’ to get him where he is today. Ms. Bradley also thanked the committee for their support of students with disabilities and the recent House Concurrent Resolution calling for expanded opportunities for students with disabilities. The direction of education to provide personalized learning for all students is very welcome, but 30 percent of students with disabilities are disengaged one year out from high school. This will only worsen as a result of the pandemic. This is especially damaging for students with particular disabilities, such as autism. Transition to college is especially helped by participation in dual credit education for students with IEPs. Also helped by the attainment of postsecondary education is the employability and reduction in pay gap for individuals with disabilities. Not only does it improve their quality of life, but it helps them contribute more fully to society through taxes and reduced reliance on welfare programs.

Expectations and academic environment also make a huge difference on the success of students with disabilities. Participation in general education and dual credit education allows them to “hold their own” and often successfully complete the courses. But Ms. Bradley said there is an uneven application of the term dual credit and its definition. This poses a concern when there is also a difference in expectations for students with disabilities compared to their neurotypical peers. Barriers do exist to the success of these students, least of which is the lowered expectations for their success. We need to look at this opportunity to change how we address students with disabilities and get them on the radar of school counselors and policy makers.

Chair Huff thanked the Bradleys for their presentation and said hopefully there would be more time in the future to further address this issue.

Kentucky School Nurse Initiative: Every School Needs a Nurse All Day Every Day

Gannon Tagher, pediatric nurse practitioner, Kentucky Nurses Association School Nurse Task Force, came forward to present the Kentucky School Nurse Initiative to the committee. She began by asking, “If there was something that could keep our kids healthy, would we do it?” School nurses give students the ability to succeed because students do better academically when they are healthy. Healthy children build healthy communities. Schools are second only to homes in their influence on children. And those schools with nurses have better student outcomes physically, academically, and psychosocially. Unfortunately, the state of school health in Kentucky is poor. Kentucky is in the bottom 10 states for children’s health in many categories including physical health, mental health, diabetes, oral health, obesity, and substance abuse. Additionally, from 2016 to 2019 the

rate of uninsured children increased by 29 percent. Also, this is pre-COVID-19 data so it is unclear the long term impact the pandemic will have on these metrics.

There are many schools in the Commonwealth that have school nurses; however, there are great disparities in how these nurses are utilized. Some schools have a full-time nurse, but others have part-time nurses or share a nurse among several schools throughout a district. The National Association of School Nurses has recommended one school nurse for every 750 students. In Kentucky, 43 percent of schools do not meet this ratio. Other organizations, such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, also support increased hiring of school nurses. They opined that when schools have a nurse in them, it improves individual and population health, as well as reducing the use of emergency medicine and increasing keeping students in their medical home for preventative care. School nurses also support the social determinants of health. Students in schools with school nurses have decreased food insecurity, increased access to care, increased reading skills at 4th grade, reduced exposure to violence, and increased positive communications with parents at home.

Adverse childhood events, those that lead to childhood trauma, are also reduced when school nurses are in schools to recognize early warning signs and get students the supports they need. Superintendents are in support of increased numbers of school nurses. And in the current climate of concern around school safety, it is important to not just prevent violence, but also reduce exposure to life-threatening emergencies such as those posed by food allergies and diabetes. With the ongoing pandemic, the need for safety provided by school nurses is only magnified. School nurses serve as a resource to parents, teachers, and students. They perform tests, assist in delivery of food and medications, and assist in answering questions regarding health care plans and IEP plans. Safe return to in-person instruction is greatly benefited by consultation with a school nurse poised to understand the local community and needs of the schools they serve.

Implementation of trauma-informed care is critical to preventing future school shooting tragedies, as was recognized by this committee following the Marshall County school shooting. School nurses are a critical part of the teams to implement that care in schools. All of this combines to result in the current initiative of the Kentucky Nurses Association School Nurse Task Force, which is to encourage that every school have a school nurse, all day, every day. Anecdotally, Ms. Tagher said she has had pediatricians tell her they always know when a patient/student has been referred by a school nurse versus other school staff. Generally, those seen by staff did not need to be out of school, because they were not truly in need of urgent medical care.

Funding for school nurses is clearly a concern, and Ms. Tagher discussed several pathways that school districts may be able to use. One is through the expansion of Medicaid billing for students receiving medically necessary services provided by school nurses. Partnerships with local health departments and hospitals may also be an option, where the

school nurse would be employed by the local health agency but then housed in the school building. This option is used by some schools already. To provide an example of the costs of hiring a school nurse, Ms. Tagher said if one assumes an annual salary and benefits package of \$52,406 for a 43-week school year, it would cost approximately \$65 million, or \$96 per student, to fund a school nurse in every school, all day, every day.

Ms. Tagher concluded her presentation saying the Kentucky Nurses Association School Nurse Task Force was proposing a pilot project requiring a \$3 million allocation in the upcoming state budget to hire 56 school nurses in the highest need districts in all regions of the Commonwealth. They would then gather data on the impacts of adding nurses to these schools. Children are often victims of their circumstances, but those are circumstances children have not chosen. It is up to us to help mitigate these circumstances as much as possible by keeping our children safe and healthy. This will ensure the health of the state as well and allow teachers to do what they need to do to educate students to their full potential.

With no further business to come before the committee, the meeting adjourned at 12:40 p.m. The next meeting of the committee will be November 12, 2020.