

SOUTH CAROLINA EDUCATION OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE

Full Committee Meeting

Minutes of the December 9, 2024 Meeting

Members Present (in-person or remote): April Allen, Rep. Terry Alexander, Melanie Barton, Rep. Neal Collins, Dr. Bob Couch, Rep. Bill Hager, Barbara Hairfield, Jeri McCumbee, Dr. Brian Newsome, Melissa Pender, Dr. Patty Tate, Senator Ross Turner

EOC Staff Present: Amina Asghar, Tenell Felder, Gabrielle Fulton, Hope Johnson-Jones, Dr. Rainey Knight, Dr. Matthew Lavery, Dr. Jenny May, Dana Yow

Guest(s) Present: Representative Michael F. Rivers Sr.

EOC chair April Allen opened the December 9, 2024 full committee meeting and informed members that EOC Vice Chair Brian Newsome, Representative Neal Collins and Jeri McCumbee were attending the meeting online. Allen then acknowledged the students from the College of Charleston's Teacher Leader program as special guests. She stated the students represented a large variety of education programs at the college before asking them to stand as she introduced them. Following these introductions, Allen asked for a motion to approve the minutes from the October 14, 2024 full committee meeting. After the minutes were approved, she called forward former Lakeside Middle School (LMS) principal Casey Calhoun for a special presentation of the 2024 Middle School Data Trailblazer Award. LMS was awarded the EOC's Data Trailblazer Award for exemplary use of data to improve student outcomes, help families and caregivers understand student data, maintain a culture of data informed decision making, and incorporate practices that prioritize data privacy.

Calhoun thanked the committee then introduced LMS 7th grade Assistant Principal Alex Pinto as his co presenter before providing data on LMS's demographics and 2023-24 SC READY scores. Calhoun also spoke on how teachers create a school-based work plan using data to focus priorities for the upcoming school year. Data analyzed included iReady scores, attendance data, discipline records, and a student & staff survey.

Following this, Pinto spoke about the school-wide grapple projects that encourage students to analyze data and to think critically about different problems. Pinto said that grappling assisted students with thinking through math problems.

She then informed committee members about how LMS students “own their data” through creating portfolios that include their iReady score data used to track their ELA and math progress. These portfolios are shared with the students’ parents to showcase the student’s learning and growth.

Next, she spoke on LMS’s teacher data ownership emphasizing that teachers receive a summary of progress each month. She also spoke about how parents at LMS are encouraged to own their student’s data through having access to monitor grades and benchmark assessments throughout the year.

Following the presentation, Calhoun thanked the committee for inviting LMS to present and asked for any questions.

Allen thanked Calhoun for the presentation then asked if parents were able to understand assessment scores or if they needed help with interpreting that data.

Mr. Calhoun answered that any feedback given to students needs to be descriptive to help parents determine how to best assist them to be successful. Pinto also responded that parents receive a parent-friendly version of their student’s assessment scores.

Representative Terry Alexander then commented that he appreciated how LMS was encouraging students to think critically and asked about the racial demographics of the school.

Calhoun responded that at one point, LMS was 95% white but had since diversified with students from different ethnicities and countries.

Dr. Tate commended Calhoun and Pinto for the work they were doing with students. She asked if they could answer who provides professional learning to teachers.

Calhoun responded that LMS had an instructional coach and that the school librarian also provides resources.

Subcommittee member Barbara Hairfield then praised LMS for creating a work plan that provided teachers with a common goal. She also expressed her support for the grapple initiative that the school implemented.

Representative Alexander then asked how parents were receiving the grapple initiative given that the exercise prioritized critical thinking over correct answers.

Calhoun responded that the intention was to communicate to parents that the grapple exercises would encourage student achievement down the line through developing the skills needed to work through productive struggle.

Next Allen asked Calhoun to elaborate on efforts to implement some of the successful practices from LMS on a district-wide scale – especially given his new role as the Executive Director of High Schools and Postsecondary Pathways in Lexington School District 1.

Mr. Calhoun replied that about two years ago, Lexington School District 1 implemented a district wide school work plan similar to the one implemented at LMS and also noted that some of the practices just presented to the committee such as the student-led conferences and presentations were being implemented as well.

Following this there were no further questions.

On behalf of the Governor's office, subcommittee member Melanie Barton commented that SC Governor Henry McMaster is a proponent of data and commended LMS in achieving parent engagement for their student's education. Barton then presented a letter of congratulations from Governor McMaster on the achievement of LMS receiving the Data Trailblazers award.

Following this, Allen asked Dr. Tate to provide an update on the November 18th Academic Standards & Assessments subcommittee meeting.

Dr. Tate shared that subcommittee members heard from EOC staff on two information items, and that no action items were considered. EOC staff presented information related to the 2024 school report card release, and EOC communication manager Tenell Felder presented on the chronic absenteeism focus group results.

She then called forward Ms. Felder to present to the full committee these results.

Felder stated she would be updating the committee on the chronic absenteeism focus group commissioned by EOC staff. She clarified that the EOC was looking into the issue due to a significant increase of chronic absenteeism rates – particularly after the COVID pandemic. Felder cited the U.S. Department of Education stating that chronic absenteeism rates went from about 15% in 2019 to 30% during the 2021-2022 school year – mirroring similar trends in SC public schools. She then reported data showing that only 23% of chronically absent students are on grade level for math, compared to 47% of their peers. Likewise, only 37% of chronically absent students are on grade level for ELA, compared to 57.8% of their peers.

Three focus groups were conducted on October 29th and 30th and consisted of students who self-identified as being absent nine days or less, 10 days or more, or 18 days or more. 26 high school students participated in the focus group – 51% of which were white, 47% black and 2% Hispanic. The students represented 24 public high schools from across the state – 43.5% of which had an overall rating of Average, 21.7% Excellent, 21.7 % Below Average and 13% Good.

Chronic absenteeism is defined as any student in grade K-12 who missed 50% or more of the instructional day for any reason, for 10% or more of the enrollment period and includes excused absences, unexcused absences, and suspensions.

The focus group moderator asked three preliminary questions to participants to gauge students' sense of community, their feelings on attendance, and their familiarity with chronic absenteeism.

In relation to school community, answers indicated that students who had more absences typically felt a lesser sense of community than students with less absences. It was also noted that students across the board indicated they believed that daily school attendance was not necessary. Students who were frequently absent expressed this opinion more strongly, with one even stating that her parent gave her and her sister opportunities to miss school. The final preliminary question on chronic absenteeism revealed that the majority of students were not familiar with the term.

Felder then outlined the following main reasons gathered from the focus group for students missing school; safety concerns/school environment, lack of consequences, mental health struggles, transportation issues, negative experiences with teachers, apathetic feelings towards school, and health issues.

Of these reasons, mental health struggles were the most discussed with students mentioning feeling overwhelmed. Students also discussed how high teacher turnover negatively impacts their perception that attendance is necessary and feeling that there are not significant enough consequences to tardiness/absences.

She also discussed the sentiment of apathy expressed by some students on the necessity of going to school.

After discussing these points, Felder informed the committee that EOC staff was working on a chronic absenteeism public awareness campaign. After the presentation, questions and comments were accepted from subcommittee members. Allen thanked Felder for her presentation then commented that the information presented reminded her of similar conversations about returning to work in person.

Committee member Melissa Pender then commented that the presented data also applied to elementary schools stating that if a parent does not see the importance of their student attending school every day, that the student would likely fall behind academically. She also noted difficulties teachers had in catching up students who have missed a day or days of instruction. She then stated that she was happy to hear about the proposed public awareness campaign and stated that she would like to see EOC staff interview parents of elementary students on chronic absenteeism.

Barton then acknowledged the societal issues that also contribute to chronic absenteeism and noted how those issues are bleeding into higher education and into the workforce. She then mentioned the burden that teachers face having to make up instruction that students missed.

Representative Alexander then asked how the chronic absenteeism issue before COVID was.

Barton replied that she believed that the issue was manageable before COVID, but that since the pandemic it had nearly doubled.

Committee member Barbara Hairfield agreed with Barton and then commented that she believed the e-learning procedures instituted during COVID contributed to the rising rates of chronic absenteeism in the state as students and parents do not realize the importance of in class instruction. She also mentioned the need of schools to have personnel dedicated solely to addressing chronic absenteeism.

EOC Executive Director Dana Yow then stated that chronic absenteeism was an issue across all socio-economic statuses and that is severely impacting student achievement. She noted a school in Texas that made it a point to let students know that they are missed when not present in class.

Representative Alexander then asked Barton about the Governor's office and business community's opinion on the issue.

Barton replied they were under the opinion that the issue needed to be addressed holistically between parents and school staff – and that teachers needed support in dealing with the issue as well. She also referred to it as being an all-hands-on deck approach between the Governor's office, the EOC, the SC Department of Education, and the business community.

Representative Hager then commented on his experience working with young engineers just coming out of college and their need to understand the importance of being physically present at work.

Allen agreed stating that she has observed similar issues in her work as well. She thanked Felder for her presentation then called forward Dr. Bob Couch to provide the update for the EIA Subcommittee.

Dr. Couch thanked Yow and Dr. Knight for their assistance with the EIA budget hearings and reviewed the budget hearing process, noting how the existed programs requested an increase of nearly \$300 million dollars in funding. He then stated that the Board of Economic Advisors recently presented the 2025-26 projections for new monies for EIA for \$44,638,000.

Dr. Couch stated that given the number of requests for additional funding, the EIA subcommittee opted not to consider requests for new EIA program funding for the year. He also stated the decision was made not to consider requests replace federal monies that were provided under the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund. He then called Dr. Knight forward to present the 2025-26 EIA budget recommendations which are summarized as follows:

- An increase of \$30 million for the SC Department of Education to serve additional students in Summer Reading Camps
- An increase of \$5 million for Phase 2 of a Strategic Compensation Pilot, led by the SCDE.
- An increase of \$272,250 for a new Charter School Leadership Program led by the SCDE and an increase of \$4.6 million for a School Leadership Accelerator
- An increase of \$250,000 for Reach Out and Read to expand their program statewide.
- An increase of \$356,500 to Science P.L.U.S. in the upstate to train more teachers in the new science standards.
- A requested increase of \$150,000 to the SC Council on Economic Education.

- An increase of \$1.4 million to the Call Me MISTER program which corresponds to a \$1.4 million decrease in the SC State University (SCSU) BRIDGE program which appropriates that funding to SCSU and Claflin for the purpose of recruiting teachers into the profession.
- The subcommittee also recommends an appropriation of \$6 million for SC to join 10 states that have implemented the Dolly Parton Imagination Library statewide. The program would be implemented by an established agency or program.

The committee recommended the following decreases in recurring funding, citing failure of the mentioned programs to produce intended results:

- A recommended decrease for Teach for America from \$2 million to \$1 million. The committee stated the rationale for the cut was a significant decline in recruitment of teachers in hard-to-staff school districts.
- A recommended decrease for STEM Centers SC from \$2 million to \$1 million. The committee stated the decrease was due to a move away from purpose which is training SC teachers in the teaching of mathematics.

In addition to the above recommendations, the committee also passed revisions to several budget provisos relating to the Teacher Loan Program revolving fund, the EOC's Rural Recruitment Incentive report and a recommendation from the SC K-12 Military Readiness Task Force.

In response to an inquiry from Rep. Alexander, Dr. Knight clarified that since 2020, the SCSU BRIDGE program, produced 8 certified teachers while Claflin University has produced 2 certified teachers – which is why the committee recommended that the monies be transferred to Call Me MISTER, which has produced 140 certified teachers since 2020.

Pender then requested more information about the status of the BabyNet autism therapy. Dr. Knight responded that she spoke with BabyNet which indicated they would be able to serve more children with more funds, but that Medicaid would cover those costs.

Following this, Allen asked Yow to go through the four proviso revision requests which can be viewed in entirety in the full committee December 9 meeting packet. The revisions referred to the following: use of revolving loan funds, the report on the Rural Recruitment Incentive, the

deletion of the Bridge Program, and the adoption of the SC K-12 Military Readiness Task Force suggestion to reinstate social studies assessments in elementary and middle schools.

Concerning BabyNet, Barton then clarified that she believed the funds for the administration of BabyNet would come from the General fund, not from federal Medicaid reimbursements. Yow also clarified that BabyNet was asking for an additional \$1.5 million but that they are already allocated \$4 million; therefore, they were being denied an increase but that the program was not being denied its baseline funding.

Allen then asked for a motion to approve the budget recommendations, which passed.

Allen then asked Dr. Knight to come forward and present on the Rural Recruitment Initiative.

Dr. Knight reviewed the history, purpose, and administration of the program, specifying that \$7.5 million in EIA funds were allocated in the 2023-24 school year.

The following questions were addressed in the report:

- How did school districts utilize RRI funds in 2023-24?
- How do RRI districts perceive the effectiveness of RRI funds?
- Is it possible to determine which incentives yield the most effective outcomes?

The following recommendations were presented:

- Expand the evaluation effectiveness of current incentives
- Facilitate collaborative analysis for strategic refinement
- Implement data-driven decision making on strategy implementation
- Develop a training model for districts
- Empower districts with long-term planning tools

At the conclusion of the report, questions and comments were accepted.

Representative Bill Hager commented that one of his districts had a very high expense for international teacher recruitment travel. He was concerned that those funds could be more effectively used. Dr. Knight agreed and commented there were agencies that specialized in international teacher recruitment that should be utilized.

Allen then asked for the breakdown of funds by use.

Dr. Knight commented that most funds were spent on international teachers at \$9.5 million over the past five years and that recruitment was at \$5.3 million.

She then stated that the EOC and its partners did not have complete data needed to interpret the effectiveness of the incentives and encouraged the need for a follow-up study; a corresponding proviso recommendation was included.

Dr. Tate asked in relation to teacher mentoring if the state or schools districts provided that service.

Dr. Knight clarified that CERRA provides this service for districts to utilize but there were also other options. She stated that she believed the payment to mentors needed to increase from \$250.

Hairfield agreed with this statement and commented that in her district they were having a difficult time trying to get veterans to mentor new teachers. She pointed out that the \$250 roughly comes out to \$20 a month before taxes while requiring that teachers do weekly observations and write reports. She then asked Dr. Knight to clarify if the money discussed was just for rural recruitment to which she replied that it was and that it was over a five-year period.

Following this, the meeting was adjourned.