

## **SOUTH CAROLINA EDUCATION OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE**

### **Full Committee Meeting**

Minutes of the February 10, 2025 Meeting

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

**EOC Staff Present:** Tenell Felder, Hope Johnson-Jones, Dr. Rainey Knight, Dr. Matthew Lavery, Dana Yow

**Guest(s) Present:** Dr. Matthew Ferguson, Dr. Kristin Geshmann, Dr. Lee D'Andrea

EOC Vice Chair Brian Newsome opened the February 10, 2025 full committee meeting, informing members that EOC Chair April Allen would be joining virtually. Newsome then asked for a motion to approve the minutes from the December 9, 2024 full committee meeting. After the minutes were approved Newsome introduced the first agenda item – a special presentation from the 2024 high school Data Trailblazer award winner Spring Hill High School (SHHS) principal Dr. Michael Lofton. Newsome informed committee members that Data Trailblazer awarded schools demonstrated success in assessing, interpreting and communicating data while demonstrating improved student outcomes.

Dr. Lofton thanked the EOC for honoring SHHS with the Data Trailblazer award. Spring Hill High School opened in 2013 with 567 ninth and tenth grade students, and 64 faculty members. Dr. Lofton informed committee members that SHHS now has a population of 1200 students with 119 faculty.

Dr. Lofton also informed committee members that SHHS is an open-enrollment magnet public school with five different focus areas of study: engineering, entrepreneurship, environmental science, entertainment and exercise science. Thirty three percent of SHHS students are pupils in poverty and 29% of students have an IEP. As an open-enrollment magnet public school, Dr. Lofton clarified that SHHS students are not required to meet academic criteria for admittance and are selected for enrollment through a computer-generated lottery. SHHS offers all courses required by the SC Department of Education, and transportation to and from SHHS is provided using a district shuttle system.

After this introduction, Dr. Lofton began discussion on data use at SHHS through the categories of empowering administration, empowering staff, and empowering students and families.

For empowering administration, Dr. Lofton discussed how administrators are assigned students to monitor their progress to graduation.

For empowering staff, Dr. Lofton discussed providing staff with access to standardized testing data, utilizing professional learning communities – and meeting weekly to discuss pacing and instructional strategies to ensure unity. He also noted how staff were supported by administrators who observed and provided feedback on teaching strategies.

When discussing empowering students and parents, Dr. Lofton emphasized students taking ownership of their education and grades. Dr. Lofton discussed the requirement that teachers update gradebooks weekly to help parents and students keep track of progress and subject comprehension. Individual Graduation Plans (IGP) are also discussed with SHHS students in eighth grade before they begin their ninth grade year. Once incoming freshmen confirm their attendance, SHHS school counselors visit the students' middle schools to review test data and start developing their IGP. According to Dr. Lofton, 100% of SHHS students participate in their IGP and 87% of parents participate in their student's IGP. SHHS has a current graduation rate of 97%.

Dr. Lofton then spoke about how chronic absenteeism negatively impacted student achievement at SHHS, leading the school to also monitor attendance data.

As a career pathways school, SHHS places emphasis on preparing its students to be college and career ready – including its intellectually disabled students. Dr. Lofton shared with committee members that by mid-year of last year, 89% of SHHS seniors were college and career ready and that by graduation, 94% were college and career ready. Student data is used to track college and career readiness and to assist students who are falling behind in this metric.

Dr. Lofton shared that SHHS is ranked in the top 4% nationally by US News Report which he believes is a testament to the hard work of SHHS teachers, students and staff. He reiterated that when compared to other magnet schools, SHHS is unique in that it does not exclude students based on grades or other criteria.

In conclusion, Dr. Lofton invited committee members to visit SHHS. After this, questions were accepted.

Dr. Lofton was asked how his school coordinated transportation for students to which he responded that transportation is coordinated through a partnership with the district's Career Center.

He was then asked what he would say legislators need to enforce or mandate for schools.

Dr. Lofton replied that he would want legislators to keep in mind that a "one size fits all" approach does not work well for all students. He encouraged giving students and parents choices on where their child attends school.

Representative Neal Collins then asked if Dr. Lofton would consider leaving Spring Hill High School. Dr. Lofton replied it seems the longevity of high school principals tend to be four years before they go to the district office. He stated that he preferred to work in the school environment.

Next, committee member Melanie Barton commended SHHS counselors for visiting the schools of incoming ninth graders. She then asked Dr. Lofton how SHHS was impacted with attendance after COVID and if he noticed any major changes.

Dr. Lofton replied that he never wanted to experience COVID again and that they are still recovering from how COVID impacted attendance.

Representative Alexander then asked what extra-curricular activities were offered at SHHS.

Dr. Lofton replied that SHHS has various clubs, and that sports were available to students through outside high school league sports.

Representative Alexander asked how they determined what they would offer to students.

Dr. Lofton credited previous Richland two superintendent Dr. Stephen Hefner with creating the vision for Spring Hill High School being a Magnet school. He then explained that not having sports was determined because of "all or nothing" requirements by the high school sports league. He also emphasized that SHHS has to maintain quality programs to attract students since there is no feeder school for SHHS.

Representative Alexander then asked what makes a high school a magnet school.

It was answered that a magnet school is determined by the school board and may have a subject focus such as STEM, could be a "school within a school," or an entirely separate school.

Committee member Jeri McCumbee then commented that Dr. Lofton's leadership was impressive, and that it would be wonderful to create a development program for educators and principals to learn the skills of school leadership.

Dr. Lofton thanked McCumbee and noted the need to celebrate South Carolina's principals. He mentioned his gratitude to SHHS's staff and teachers and noted that SHHS had a low employee turnover rate.

Following this, Barton presented Dr. Lofton with a congratulatory letter from SC Governor Henry McMaster for Spring Hill High School's Data Trail Blazer award.

This concluded Dr. Lofton's presentation.

Vice Chair Newsome moved to the next agenda item of an update of the Academic Standards and Assessments (ASA) subcommittee's January 13<sup>th</sup> meeting from ASA chair Dr. Patty Tate.

Dr. Tate informed committee members that ASA considered two information items: multilingual learners test participation and the Education Scholarship Trust Fund (ESTF) report by EOC Director of Qualitative Research and Stakeholder Engagement Dr. Jenny May. Dr. Tate then called forward EOC Communications Manager Tenell Felder to provide an overview of the 2025 Annual Report.

Felder thanked Dr. Tate then informed the committee that the 2025 Annual Report reviewed the analyzes, updates and program summaries from March 2024 to February 2025. The report was divided into three sections: Reporting Facts, Measuring Change, and Promoting Progress. Reporting Facts summarized data analytic highlights from 2024-25, along with six report summaries. Measuring Change summarized the 2024 School Report Card Release. Promoting Progress summarized the following: EOC's EIA budget recommendations, the Data Trailblazer's award, the EOC's chronic absenteeism initiative, cyclical review of the accountability system, the Military Readiness Task Force, the EOC's strategic plan, and 2024-25 media coverage.

Following her presentation, questions were accepted.

EOC Executive Director Dana Yow asked committee members to inform EOC staff of any changes or feedback to the annual report.

Newsome then called forward EOC Director of Strategic Innovation Dr. Rainey Knight to present as an information item the EOC's Rural Recruitment Initiative Report.

Dr. Knight opened by giving a background of the Rural Recruitment Initiative program which was established by budget proviso in 2015-16 for the purpose of allocating revenues for the use of recruiting and retaining South Carolina teachers in districts that experienced high turn over rates. Dr. Knight noted that a high turnover rate was considered to be 12% but is currently 11%. The top 15 wealthiest districts were excluded from these funds.

Dr. Knight informed the committee that RRI funds were allocated by the Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention and Advancement (CERRA), and were currently at \$7.5 million dollars.

While discussing changes to the RRI over time, Dr. Knight highlighted that Proviso 1A.45 of the 2024-25 Appropriations Act added a revision requiring the EOC to complete an evaluation of RRI funds. She also highlighted that the first RRI program report was issued by CERRA in 2016, and that school district eligibility was revised to include districts experiencing greater than 11% teacher turnover in 2018.

Next, Dr. Knight reviewed CERRA's incentives for Rural Recruitment Incentive funds which were grouped into the following categories: recruiting from within a district, general recruitment and hiring, recruitment, and retention. She discussed recruiting strategies that used alternative certifications such as PACE (Program of Alternative Certification for Educators) to recruit professionals who do not have teaching degrees. Next, she discussed Bridge Programs where districts coordinate with schools to recruit high school students into the teaching profession. Recruiting expenses for were also discussed which included national recruitment, recruitment fairs, housing, and mileage funds.

Dr. Knight highlighted mentoring programs as an important recruitment tool. She suggested the length of mentoring programs be increased from one year to three years.

Surveys were given to teachers by districts to determine ways to improve and better retain teachers.

It was then asked if the incentives come with a requirement for stay in the district to which Dr. Knight replied no, but that districts could opt to include those type of requirements themselves. EOC executive director Dana Yow also clarified that districts indicated they would make that requirement for teachers who received a master's degree that the district paid for.

Next, Dr. Knight reviewed the report's three study questions which were as follows: How did the 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?

For the first question regarding how districts utilized RRI funds, recruitment expenses were identified as the most utilized as 31 districts used RRI funds for this purpose. Dr. Knight pointed out that no districts used funds for housing, Teacher Cadets, or for travel stipends. She also highlighted recruiting costs for international teachers as the most expensive utilization of RRI funds, costing districts approximately \$2 million.

Representative Alexander then asked how recruitment for international teachers was carried out.

Dr. Knight replied that there were designated organizations that searched for teachers abroad on behalf of districts.

Representative Alexander then commented that superintendents suggested international teachers do better for the elementary and high school level.

Dr. Knight commented that she had seen this to be the case with districts that she interviewed with one reporting an increase in math scores. While encouraging, she stated she would prefer to see districts build capacity with their own teachers since international teachers must leave after two years.

Yow then informed Representative Alexander that there were 240 international teachers during the 2024-25 school year. She also stated that districts had indicated a desire to lessen their reliance on international teachers due to the high recruiting costs.

Representative Alexander then asked the percentage of vacancies to which Dr. Knight replied that the numbers of vacancies were decreasing.

Dr. Matthew Ferguson then added that 1209 teachers held an international certificate in South Carolina during 2022-23.

Next, Representative Bill Hagar commented he would like to give a personal example of how international teachers benefited students in his Hampton school district. He noted that math scores in the class of an international teacher increased significantly.

Dr. Knight then moved to the second report question which investigated how districts utilize monies over time. Over the past five years, \$9.4 million had been spent on international teachers and \$5.8 million on critical needs.

She then stated districts expressed wanting to be more strategic in how they spend RRI funds and admit having a high reliance on international teachers. Dr. Knight shared that some districts wanted to expand teaching eligibility to other professions.

Dr. Knight also noted that districts were improperly using funds for general computer maintenance and compliance.

The final question addressed by the report was incentive effectiveness for recruiting teachers to rural districts. Dr. Knight referred to page 13 of the RRI funds initiative report stating that in order to answer this question, improved data was needed to reliably provide data to districts and the state to determine long- and short-term effects of incentives on retention.

Next, Dr. Knight discussed the following recommendations from the report: expand the evaluation effectiveness of current incentives, facilitate collaborative analysis for strategic refinement, develop training model for districts, and empower districts with long-term planning tools.

This concluded the presentation, and questions were accepted.

Barton commented her main concern for the RRI program was that there was no evidence as to if it was working. She pointed out that many of the districts receiving RRI funds still had high turnover rates. She also noted a need to evaluate what is working and what is not. Barton stated she liked the recommendations proposed in the report as she believed they would give more guidance to the program. She also mentioned wanting to see the turnover rates of principals and superintendents.

Dr. Knight noted that many of the rural districts did have high turnover rates.

Yow then clarified that the data for teacher turnover rates are based on that particular school and may not account for teacher movement within the district. This was one of the reasons for requesting additional time to collect more complete data.

Representative Neal Collins stated he was in favor of cutting CERRA and that he was very concerned that international teacher recruiting took up one third of RRI funds. He then asked Dr. Knight if districts would be upset if international teacher recruitment funds were discontinued.

Dr. Knight responded that to her knowledge, there were districts who used all of their RRI funds for international teacher recruitment. She also noted that many districts were simply trying to fill holes of teacher vacancies by using international teachers.

Representative Collins responded that funds can be taken from the international teachers fund and a stipend of \$150 given to each teacher.

Dr. Knight stated she understood his viewpoint and that she also understood the importance to parents of having a qualified teacher in the classroom, even if that teacher was an international teacher.

Dr. Ferguson then commented that the department has no jurisdiction over the Rural Recruitment Initiative but that he agreed there were ways to improve fund distribution.

Yow commented that they heard from districts who were not able to recruit any teachers using RRI funds and that considering this, having an international teacher was a better alternative to not having a teacher in the classroom.

Representative Alexander then expressed his agreeance with Representative Colins regarding international teacher recruitment.

Committee member Barbara Hairfield commented that she has observed during her recruitment experience that though abuses can occur in any setting, RRI was established for a good reason. She expressed her disagreement with committee members suggesting the program needed to be cut. Hairfield suggested a better solution would be to create a small committee to set criteria for the distribution of funds. She also acknowledged that perhaps money needed to be reduced but that a committee could provide parameters for doing so.

Representative Alexander agreed stating that people needed to be held accountable for tax payer dollars.

Newsome then commented that it was important to help schools investigate the numerous ways they could recruit teachers within the United States.

Representative Alexander then asked what international teachers were being paid.

Dr. Knight replied that for international teachers, benefits are not paid. She then thanked the committee for their feedback and let them know that the SC Department of Education, CERRA, EOC and SC Teacher would be getting together to discuss what could be done to improve the issues discussed.

Following this, Dr. Ferguson recognized Clemson University College of Education Dean Dr. Kristin Geshmann and thanked her for attending on behalf of the committee.

Newsome then called forward Yow to give the executive report.



Yow begin her report with an update on the accountability system's cyclical review. She stated that letters had been sent out and that they are looking for people to serve on the state accountability advisory committee. The purpose of the committee would be to make recommendations to the EOC and then to the General Assembly.

Next, Yow reviewed the timeline of the report which is as follows:

- **Feb. 2025:** establish State Accountability Advisory Committee; Finalize partnerships for focused convenings
- **March 2025:** Center for Assessment to conduct Statewide surveying of public to focus on expectations and the impact of current accountability system indicators. Report shared with State Accountability Advisory Committee.
- **March-April 2025:** Conduct Regional Listening Sessions; report shared with State Accountability Advisory Committee by April 30, 2025.
- **March-June 2025:** Focused Convenings to occur; recommendations to State Accountability Advisory Committee by July 1, 2025
- **March-October 2025:** State Accountability Advisory Committee to meet (three in-person meetings in Columbia, one remote; led by Center for Assessment)
- **Dec. 2025:** Capstone Report prepared by Center for Assessment and Recommendations to EOC

Next, Yow discussed the release of the 2024 NAEP Mathematics and Reading assessment. SC 4th graders had an average scale score one point higher than the national average, while the average score for SC 8<sup>th</sup> graders was four points below the average.

The average scale score for SC students in 4th grade reading was 1 point higher than the nation, while the average scale score for SC students in 8th grade reading was 3 points behind the nation.

The NAEP report also revealed that student absenteeism declined in 2024 compared to 2022, but still remained higher than pre pandemic numbers.

Next, Yow informed committee members of that on January 15, the EOC made a presentation to the Public Education and Special Schools Subcommittee of the House of Ways and Means

Committee on the 2025-26 EIA budget recommendations and would present to the Senate Finance K-12 Education Budget Subcommittee on March 7.

Yow then reminded committee members that their statement of Economic Interest was due on March 30, 2025.

Following this, the meeting was adjourned.