

**CITY OF NORWALK
NORWALK PUBLIC SCHOOLS
AD HOC SPECIAL EDUCATION COMMITTEE
OCTOBER 25, 2016**

ATTENDANCE: Dr. Yvel Crevecoeur, Chair, Rev. Artie Kassimis, Ms. Jaquelyn Lamb, Atty. Jeffrey Spahr

STAFF: Dr. Lynn Toper, Chief of Specialized Learning and Student Services

OTHERS: Ms. Joanna Cooper, Atty. Eric Niederer, Ms. Sophie Aponte

CALL TO ORDER.

Dr. Crevecoeur called the meeting to order at 5:32 p.m. A quorum was present.

UPDATES

Dr. Crevecoeur said that Committee would review the Standard Operating Procedures Manual. He said that during the past spring, there had been some fact finding and presentations by Dr. Adamowski and Dr. Cicchetti. Dr. Toper has since taken over as the Chief of Specialized Learning and Student Services. Dr. Crevecoeur said that the administration was very happy to have Dr. Toper on staff. However, there is still a great deal of work to be done.

Dr. Crevecoeur said that the Committee would be meeting once a month on the second Tuesday of every month. This will also allow those members of the public will be able to speak. He discuss the issues until 6:30 p.m. and then the members of the public who were present would be allowed to present their input.

The next meeting will be held on November 22nd.

He then invited Dr. Toper to give a brief overview of the current status of the Special Education Policy Manual. Dr. Toper spoke briefly about the origins of this project. She said that when she arrived in Norwalk, the program was already underway. She said that there had been many changes on the State level and the manual needed to be updated. A number of people had worked collaboratively with Atty. Terry DeFrancis on the policy manual to make sure that the new State legislation was included in the manual.

Dr. Tolbert went on to review the review process for the policy manual. She said that the policy was reviewed several times from the legal perspective and updated with the latest State policy changes. A PowerPoint program was presented to the staff to update them on the basic changes in the policies.

Dr. Crevecoeur then introduced Ms. Lamb to the Committee members and those present and said that she was a Special Educator. He apologized for not doing this earlier and asked that all those present introduce themselves to the group.

Dr. Crevecoeur requested that the members of the public refrain from speaking until 6:30 p.m. and then the members of the public who were present would be allowed to present their input.

COMMITTEE DISCUSSION ON SPECIAL EDUCATION POLICY AND PROCEDURE MANUAL.

Atty. Spahr said that he had some comments about the policy manual. He said that he would have to leave at 6:20 p.m. for another meeting.

He suggested that it would be wise to have a memo to the staff to establish two way communication between the staff and the community. There needs to be some kind of acknowledgement of the requests and periodic updates on the status of that request.

Atty. Spahr pointed out that the State procedural safeguards indicate that information must be prepared within three days rather than the time limit cited in the Policy Manual as indicated on page 19, where it addresses the parents' right to have copies and the right to review the educational records. He cited the CGS statutes and the requirements for procedural safeguards. Atty. Spahr said that he did not believe that the policy should require a staff member to be present when a parent wishes to review a record. He made a suggestion as to how this might be changed.

He pointed out that there were four groups of people that were sacrosanct in our society: health care workers, teachers, the clergy, and finally the law enforcements & first responders. He pointed out that when the community's trust is violated with any of those four groups, trouble starts. It is critical to keep that trust intact. He said that Dr. Toper has been doing a wonderful job, but needed to understand that the parents have lost their trust previously.

There should be a policy regarding the parents right to the records prior to the PPT. He directed everyone's attention to page 48 of the manual. He said that the parents must be afforded the right to have meaningful participation and in order to do this, the information must be available to them prior to the meeting.

Atty. Spahr said that on page 46, the manual states that a parent was not required to notify the staff if the parent will be attending the PPT with the attorney or an outside evaluator. The policy currently says that the Chair of the PPT can make the determination as to whether or not the PPT will go forward under these circumstances. He said that he did not have a problem with the Chair canceling or rescheduling a

meeting because of the presence of an attorney. However, Atty. Spahr said that he did have a problem with the Chair canceling a meeting because the parents indicated that they wanted to record it. The District should assume that the parent is going to record the meeting. Canceling or rescheduling a meeting over a recording is punitive to the parent. The very fact that the school has called for a PPT indicates that there is a problem. He suggested striking the fact that it can be cancelled because of a recording.

Atty. Spahr then spoke about the issue of adding documentation from the parent to the IEP as outlined on page 53. The way the District handles this is telling the parent to write down their comments and it will be appended to the IEP. However, this is different from including it in the IEP, which makes it part of the record. He suggested two possible means of including the document into the IEP. Discussion followed.

Atty. Spahr then asked about requirements on page 67 regarding when a student is referred to a non-State approved facility. He said he would like to know which legal authority has declared the issue must be mediated. Dr. Tooper explained that the District is only allow to place a student in an approved facility, but if the family wished to place the student in a non-approved facility, it can only be done via a settlement. Discussion followed about the details and possible source of the practice.

On page 66, he spoke about the parental involvement and suggested that the words "integral and equal" be included in the description of the parents. Dr. Tooper made a note of this.

Mr. Kassimis said that he had heard from a number of members of his church that when they went to the PPT, they were treated very harshly by the administrators. He said that he was very pleased that this was going forward because it will protect the parents. There are many great things in the new policy manual.

Ms. Lamb said that she had a question regarding the resources mentioned on page VII under "Resources for Chapter 4" and wished to know whether they would be available as part of the manual. The one for Speech and Language was not listed as eligibility documents.

Ms. Lamb said that the manual refers to the SRT (**S**tudent **R**esponse **T**eams) and SRBI (**S**cientific **R**esearch **B**ased **I**ntervention) on page 3. It is important to differentiate that these are separate documents.

Dr. Crevecoeur said that he had some global suggestions. He pointed out that SRBI was in the general based curriculum and student evaluations have moved to the evidence based practices. Dr. Tolbert said that the reference was just being used as an example. He suggested making a distinction between the two practices.

Dr. Crevecoeur pointed out there were references to the IDEA but it was actually IDEIA 2004 (The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act). Dr. Toper said that she believed this was because most of the documents were referring to the old legislation. Dr. Crevecoeur requested this be updated so there would be no confusion about the two documents. Atty. Spahr suggested that an explanatory note be included.

Dr. Crevecoeur said that he appreciated the fact that the manual appeared to be user friendly and coaches the parent through it. Dr. Tolbert said that those changes came from the parents who worked on the manual.

He asked for clarification on page 7 where it addresses student offenses. He said that it would be important to identify the cause of the actions, such as peers, context or any variable that might affect a student's behavior. This would affect the intensity of the offenses and frequency.

On page 9, it addresses differentiation of instruction. He suggested that it would also be important to add that the instruction is being targeted or individualized.

Dr. Crevecoeur asked about a reference to the Custodian of Records on page 15. Dr. Tolbert clarified the reference for him and said that Dr. Connor, the Chief Academic Officer, was in charge of the student records.

On page 20, there are references to "Special Education students" or "student receiving Special Education services" Historically, in the past, the student has been marginalized by this term.

On page 36, there is a reference to "sufficiently comprehensive". Dr. Crevecoeur asked for clarification between "sufficiently comprehensive" and "ideal". Dr. Tolbert explained that this was an area that the review group had a number of discussions about. The group felt this was the best language for the item.

On page 38, the term "standardized testing" is used. Dr. Crevecoeur said that this should be changed to "norm referenced" and again on page 39. The phrase "standardized testing" should be replaced with "norm referenced tests that are used to determine the students aptitude".

Atty. Spahr said that on in the Section titled "Resources for Chapter 2" on page IV, the three day time limit before a PPT should be include a reference to the State policy.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Ms. Cooper said that she wanted to thank everyone from the bottom of her heart for their work and service to the special needs students. She said that she is incredibly optimistic. She said that she was thrilled that. The new administration was taking this issue seriously.

By elevating the position of the Director of Special Education to a level when the Director can actually make changes, the District has made an important move. She repeated that she was very, very grateful. This is such important work for the future and these students will make the district proud. It will be important to fix things and turn the culture around.

Ms. Cooper said that she only received the document earlier in the day, so has not read the entire thing. However, she said that she was thrilled with it and pointed out that most of this was based on current law. Having this all in one place for the staff will be a major benefit. She said that she would like to comment again after reading this thoroughly. She suggested that an introduction be added to acknowledge the past and this manual shows that Norwalk is committed to the students. Ms. Cooper said that the District was incredibly lucky to have Dr. Toper working with them. Discussion followed.

Mr. Niederer said that he had a list of suggestions. He said that there was no reference to when the documents will be distributed in the introduction. There should be some form of formal process to confirm that this manual is contributed. Dr. Crevecoeur suggested that the manual be send along with the communication with the parent. It was suggested that a page be added to the PPT informing the parent that it was available on the Internet and hard copies were available. Dr. Tolbert asked if the idea was to have the parent sign off that they had been informed of this. Ms. Lamb suggested that this be included in the letter when the parent is originally contacted.

Atty. Spahr left the meeting at 6:20 p.m.

Mr. Niederer said that there were breakdowns in communications between team members so that it needs to be considered carefully.

He said that he did not see any appropriate staffing issues in the manual. There has been disconnects between the parents and the school staff about the service providers and their qualifications. Dr. Tolbert said that there were many different titles for the paraprofessionals and she is trying to understand the level of skills involved. She said that this will be defined in the future. Mr. Niederer said that this issue was a pillar of the CREC report.

He then spoke about observations and said that some parents had issues with this. He gave the details and said that it needs to be considered. When he was looking at ESY, it was difficult to transition from the educational component to the social component. There should be some sensitivity to the parents.

Ms. Aponte pointed out that one hour is not enough for observations. Dr. Tolbert said that she did not encourage observations, because she felt that the parent ended up evaluating the teachers and creates an uncomfortable, adversarial atmosphere. However,

she does encourage parents to come in and be part of the classroom because that is more natural. Discussion followed.

Mr. Niederer said that regarding the written prior notification about the lawyer's presence. He said that for the first three years, he did not know about this. this should be explained to people. The parent has five days to register a concern but in the past, concerns that were filed too late were ignored.

Dr. Toper said that she had spoken to Atty. Spahr about having a presentation to the SPED Partners about the basic understanding of the IEP and other critical issues.

Mr. Niederer suggested that there be a one page summary of the parents rights.

Ms. Apointe Said that she feels a major pushback from the staff over communication. Last year was horrible. The prior SPED directors understood the need for the communication between the staff and the parents. Dr. Crevecoeur said that there was a number of cultures, in the Central Office, and individual schools. Changing the culture does not happen overnight. Discussion followed.

ADJOURNMENT.

- ** MR. KASSIMIS MOVED TO ADJOURN**
- ** MS. LAMB SECONDED.**
- ** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The meeting adjourned at 6:45 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

S. L. Soltes
Telesco Secretarial Services