

Wilmington Education Improvement Commission (WEIC) Meeting Minutes
Red Clay Consolidated School District Office
December 9, 2015

Commission Chair Tony Allen called the meeting to order at 5:38 p.m.

Members of the Commission and public introduced themselves and stated their organizational affiliations.

Dr. Allen provided a brief overview of the Commission's recent work and highlighted the ongoing need to develop performance metrics for the effectiveness of the proposed plan. He provided updates on the state of public hearings and noted that the next hearing will be televised and include a presentational overview, diverging from the format of previous hearings. These presentations are planned in response to feedback from parents who requested additional information prior to future hearings.

Dr. Joe Pika, Co-Chair of the Redistricting Committee, agreed with Dr. Allen that funding has been the main topic discussed at public hearings. He noted that upcoming news coverage should help to provide a more detailed explanation of the plan to members of the public.

Vicki Seifred asked how Commission members should address insensitive or inaccurate comments made during public hearings. Dr. Allen responded that the hearings must follow a legally mandated format and spoke to the value of having all testimony included in the public record.

Dr. Dan Rich, policy advisor for the Commission, added that those concerned could respond to comments by also giving testimony to be included in the public record.

Frederika Jenner, President of the Delaware State Education Association, concurred that some of the comments posted on social media indicate a misrepresentation of the plan's intent. She voiced concern that these comments are being heard most and suggested that the Commission proactively respond by working with school principals to disseminate more accurate information to parents.

Dr. Allen replied that the Commission has implored districts to provide more information to parents, and they have done so, but added that they do not have the power to force the districts to do anything in particular.

Karen Eller, teacher with the Christina School District, inquired about the volume of written testimony submitted by members of the public.

Dr. Rich responded that the Commission has received quite a bit of written testimony, which is now posted on the website. He noted that most letters were submitted on behalf of organizations.

Kelly Sherretz, from the University of Delaware staffing team, added that about 20 comments have been submitted through the website and the Commission has received over 50 emails.

Frederika Jenner advocated for a more readable summary to be distributed to parents. Allen responded that summaries and fact sheets have been provided; some still choose not to read the provided literature.

Margie Lopez Waite, head of Las Américas ASPIRA Academy, asked whether the literature was translated into Spanish and requested bilingual copies.

Commission Vice-Chair Elizabeth Lockman responded that some districts had requested and received Spanish literature.

Dr. Allen also shared that the News Journal has agreed to release a series of op-eds from the Commission over the next week.

Dr. Allen reiterated that this meeting is the last opportunity for Commission members to make substantive changes to the plan. He noted that the Commission will vote on the plan as a package at next week's meeting. He explained that worksheets have been provided for members to note corrections to the plan. He emphasized the need for honest discussion and encouraged members to voice any and all issues with the current plan.

Dr. Rich summarized the most recent version of the interim plan. He began with substantive content, noting that the executive summary would be reviewed last. Dr. Rich noted additions to sections one and two, including discussion of cultural competence in schools.

Joseph T. Laws, President of the Colonial School Board, and Lopez Waite recommended that use of Colonial be stricken and replaced with "all districts."

Ralph Ackerman, Vice-President of the Brandywine School Board, asked about reporting data on the number of low-income students. The Commission clarified that if the number is below 15 it cannot be reported.

Aretha Miller, Executive Director of the Community Education Building, emphasized the need to ensure cultural competency training for socioeconomic differences.

Commission members discussed the need to distinguish between low-income students and students living in poverty. Dr. Rich clarified the definition and usage of each term and confirmed that those preparing the draft would check for consistency.

Margie Lopez Waite inquired about district impact from weighted funding. Dr. Rich requested that response to this question be postponed until discussion of the relevant section.

Dr. Rich then moved to discuss sections concerning redistricting implementation. He stated that few changes have been made to this section; citations have been updated, but no substantive edits have been made.

Yvonne Johnson, Parent and Education Advocate for Red Clay Consolidated School District, asked about Colonial's role. Dr. Rich and Dr. Allen confirmed that Colonial and Brandywine's Boards voted to continue serving current Wilmington students. This has been included in the recommendations. Dr. Rich also clarified that students can choose to remain in their current school at the time redistricting is implemented.

Ted Laws asked about school choice. Dr. Rich explained that students enrolled in a specific school at the time of redistricting have the right to complete their education at that school. At all other times, students still have the option of school choice through the established process. He stated that the legislative intent was to provide students with school choice options and ease transition wherever possible.

Commissioners asked for a simple explanation of feeder school patterns in Wilmington. Dr. Rich answered that the Red Clay School District establishes feeder patterns for current and future students. Redistricting will not affect district responsibility for establishing school feeder patterns for students.

Rep. Kim Williams clarified current requirements for school choice.

Dr. Pika shared that WESTT has testified that districts should not be able to opt out, implying that Brandywine and Colonial school districts have not chosen to be part of redistricting solutions recommended by the Commission. This has been a concern of several groups and individuals. Dr. Pika refuted this assertion and clarified that both districts have cooperated and participated in redistricting efforts, and have agreed to submit plans for their role in the city.

Ralph Ackerman agreed with Dr. Pika's statement and spoke to Brandywine's commitment to participating in the Commission's efforts and to Wilmington education.

Ted Laws also agreed with Ralph Ackerman and Dr. Pika, also asserting Colonial's commitment to Wilmington education.

Rep. Charles Potter stated his preference for Colonial School District to stop serving Wilmington students.

Ralph Ackerman asked whether any thought was given to transferring Christina's Wilmington students to Colonial in order to create three contiguous school districts of roughly equal size instead of making Red Clay a much larger district. He acknowledged that this point in the process is too late for such considerations.

Dr. Allen acknowledged that the suggestion had been considered and tabled early on in redistricting conversations.

Ralph Ackerman also drew attention to the impossibility of school choice for many Wilmington students without reliable transportation.

Vicki Seifred agreed that socioeconomic status plays a critical role in school choice.

Dr. Rich then moved to discuss data beginning on p. 76 of the draft report. He explained that this information is based on data sets used in the original WEAC report and stated that the Delaware Department of Education has not provided more current data with which to update the current report. This report will be updated as soon as data becomes available.

Yvonne Johnson expressed her surprise at the small size of the low-income student percentage differences and asked for additional explanation.

Dr. Rich responded that the expectations and projections are not consistent with WEAC data. Dr. Allen noted that pockets of poverty dispersed throughout New Castle County could explain the relatively small projected percentage change.

Eve Buckley asked about data on private, charter, and parochial school enrollment. Dr. Rich explained system effects and potential impact. He explained that this data is provided partially in response to previous criticism for a lack of data.

Margie Lopez Waite noted that the Commission is focused on improvements to the public school system.

Rep. Potter highlighted the impact of socioeconomic status on families' choice to enroll students in charter schools.

Yvonne Johnson clarified that charter schools do not employ a voucher system, but agreed that districts do not do a good job of educating and engaging parents and families, resulting in further disparities by socioeconomic status.

Margie Lopez Waite also expressed the need to address misconceptions about Delaware's and Wilmington's demographic profiles.

Dr. Rich moved on to discuss the next section of the draft report.

Vice-Chair Tizzy Lockman asked about phrasing on page 93 referring to the weighted funding formula. She asked whether there would be a way to reference the work and mandate of the Education Funding Task force and findings.

Rep. Potter clarified that the intent of the Commission's work is to improve Wilmington education.

The Commission passed a motion to suspend the meeting upon Governor Jack Markell's arrival and request to speak to the Commission. Governor Markell was given the floor by Dr. Allen.

Governor Markell thanked Commission members for their work and efforts in developing implementation plans for WEAC recommendations. He stated his understanding of the issue's complexity and acknowledged the necessity of additional state funding to ensure the plan's success and avoid placing undue burden on taxpayers in the Red Clay School District. He shared that a separate group has been set up to analyze and review funding for low income students in Delaware. He noted that Delaware currently has one of the most rigid funding formulas in the nation and emphasized the need for review and development of sustainable recommendations. Governor Markell stated that the Commission's work will inform statewide funding issues for low-income students.

Dr. Allen called the meeting back to order.

Michelle Taylor asked about ensuring that funding follows the student.

Margie Lopez-Waite echoed Michelle Taylor's comments and voiced concerns with the funding outlined in the draft plan. Dr. Rich replied that the plan does not include specific funding requests; those would have to come directly from legislation. He reiterated that this report is solely a planning document for redistricting. Dr. Rich added that the current funding formula provides no weighting for English language learners and low-income students.

Margie Lopez-Waite questioned the assertion that redistricting would accelerate the Red Clay priority schools plan. Dr. Allen responded that consolidation would be facilitated.

Margie Lopez-Waite emphasized the need to clarify that equitable funding intends to mitigate disparities between students and should follow throughout districts.

Ralph Ackerman voiced concern that this pilot funding formula would be unfair to other low-income students both within and outside the City of Wilmington. Dr. Rich responded that the Commission is hoping to use redistricting as a platform to generate political will to make funding for these students a priority in a difficult budgetary year.

Eve Buckley, Parent and Education Advocate for the Christina School District, asked whether this funding formula would ever be provided to non-district schools. Dr. Rich responded that it would ultimately apply to all public schools statewide.

Margie Lopez-Waite implored members to think of this as an experiment to improve student achievement; it might make it difficult to measure whether redistricting or changing the funding formula would account for any improvements. Dr. Rich and Dr. Allen agreed.

Vice-Chair Kenny Rivera stated district demands for funding from year one for Red Clay. He spoke to facilities funding being needed to ensure all Red Clay schools meet certain standards.

Dr. Rich moved to review section six of the report.

Aretha Miller asked for an example of the model described on p. 103 of the report. She also asked for the official definition of extended learning and suggested the addition of recruiting talent to the goals described on p. 106 of the report.

Dr. Pika recounted recent discussions that addressed issues on p. 135 but have not yet been incorporated into the draft.

Dr. Rich highlighted the fact that the Commission report goes beyond legislative mandate to clearly define district boundaries and modifications.

Rep. Potter voiced concern over Colonial School District's plans to expand into the City of Wilmington and asked for justification of the decision to continue serving Wilmington students.

Ted Laws clarified that Colonial School District's plan is to maintain current boundaries.

Dr. Rich discussed the last section of the draft plan. He explained the performance metrics and milestones outlined in this section.

Dr. Rich then reviewed the executive summary and stated that any changes made to the content of the report would be mirrored in the executive summary. He directed members to the last page of the executive summary, which includes the new version of the resolution. He voiced his hope that the State Board will adopt the entire plan, which would necessarily include the resolution. The resolution stipulates the conditions under which implementation of this plan would go forward and allows for districts to call upon the State Board to suspend implementation until necessary funding and transitional supports are provided and includes an expiration date for the proposal if such resources are not provided by the date on which students are supposed to transition.

Dr. Allen added that this provision protects students, districts, and the integrity of the Commission.

Ralph Ackerman stated that the revised resolution is a vast improvement over the original.

Ted Laws stated that he takes exception that Colonial is the only district named on p. 3 and this should be changed to all districts. He requested rewording in the final document.

Dr. Allen responded that this phrasing was chosen to clearly highlight the change in recommendation to allowing Colonial to keep serving Wilmington students, and to address

the concerns highlighted in the community with the decision to allow Colonial to remain in the city.

Dr. Allen then opened the meeting to public comment.

Bill Doolittle, qualified his comments by stating that they are based on not hearing Commission members voice definitive stances on issued discussed on p. 99 of the report. He commended the Commission's work so far, but doesn't think enough has been done to address quality of Wilmington education. He stated his belief that improvements can be made over next few weeks. He first outlined the poverty concentrations in each district and noted that Christina students in poverty would likely be funded by the state by 2020. As a Red Clay parent, he voiced understanding of concerns about not funding all low-income students at the same time, but added that he cannot justify placing some students above others. He advocated for a different phasing plan that would equitably meet the needs of all students. He emphasized that he does not think the current plan can address the needs of all students in poverty within the established timeframe. He added that he has been speaking to Dover legislators and believes that the current plan has no chance of passing the General Assembly. He encouraged passing a phasing plan that has real chance of helping highest need students.

A member of the public shared his perspective that local control is the fundamental concept in education. He said that the main problem in Wilmington is that the education system created after desegregation does not allow for local control. He stated his belief that in America, power is not shared with minority groups, but taken from minority groups. Wilmington exemplifies a system where parents are not in a position to make decisions about their children's education and the people making those decisions have failed to meet their needs. When the Delaware Supreme Court acted to remove Delaware from federal court supervision, local control was given to all communities except Wilmington. He questioned how this plan provides local control for those who have none currently, specifically urban residents in Wilmington. He concluded that this plan does not improve education for urban residents, and the proposed changes will not make a real difference to Wilmington students and families.

Rep. Kim Williams voiced concern that only Red Clay and Christina would receive funding from this plan and stated her belief that Brandywine and Colonial should also receive additional resources.

The Commission passed a motion to approve the minutes.

Dr. Allen concluded the meeting at 8:13 p.m.

Wilmington Education Improvement Commission

December 9, 2015
Meeting Attendance

Commissioners

Ralph Ackerman
Tony Allen
Eve Buckley
Karen Eller
Fredericka Jenner
Yvonne Johnson
Joseph Laws
Tizzy Lockman
Margie Lopez Waite

Johnny Means
Aretha Miller
Harrie Ellen Minnehan
Joe Pika
Representative Charles Potter, Jr.
Kenny Rivera
Vicki Seifred
Michelle Taylor

Institute for Public Administration Staff

Dan Rich
Kelly Sherretz
Elizabeth Burland
Annie Gould
Saran Singh
Neil Kirschling