

The Empire State Supervisors and Administrators Association (ESSAA) held its monthly Stakeholder Meeting on Tuesday, March 31, 2020 via videoconference with Interim Commissioner of Education, Shannon Tahoe; Deputy Commissioner for P12 Instructional Support, Kim Wilkins; and Assistant Commissioner of Special Education, Chris Suriano.

ESSAA was represented at the meeting by ESSAA President, Carol Conklin-Spillane; ESSAA Executive Director, Mike Starvaggi; ESSAA Executive Vice President, Skip Voorneveld, ESSAA Vice President, John Rickert; ESSAA Vice President, Shireen Fasiglione; ESSAA Vice President, Greg Avellino; ESSAA Vice President, Rick Kimble; ESSAA Vice President, Andrea Hamilton; ESSAA member Kristin Randare; ESSAA member John Zaplione; and Regents/NYSED Liaison, Paul Scampini.

Interim Commissioner Tahoe began the meeting by commending and expressing deep appreciation for the work being done by educational leaders across the state during recent weeks. She stated that districts have been especially cooperative with the submission of educational continuity plans and the securing of childcare for the children of first responders.

The Interim Commissioner provided an overview of the work currently being done to address issues associated with school building closures due to the COVID-19 virus outbreak. She referenced several guidance documents NYSED has recently posted for certain areas including Special Education and Higher Ed. Mr. Voorneveld specifically thanked her for the flexibility that is being provided for teacher certification candidates whose student teaching experiences were cut short.

Interim Commissioner Tahoe also shared that the Department has a list of issues that will require a decision very soon such as the status of Regents Exams and the status of APPR evaluations. She added that once these areas of immediate concern are resolved, they will begin looking at long-term plans to address the amount of learning time lost and potential adjustments to curriculum and instruction.

Specific Topics discussed during the meeting included:

Supporting Special Education Students

The Interim Commissioner reminded us that guidance for supporting special education students was recently sent out to the field. Assistant

Commissioner Suriano emphasized that there is no flexibility with IDEA regulations during the time that students are receiving remote instruction. He went on to say that every effort must be made by schools to support the educational progress of special education students, stressing that this includes reaching out to parents and ensuring that equitable access is provided. Consistent progress monitoring through evaluation and documentation should be carried out to assess any progress or regression so that additional supports can be put in place when school buildings reopen. There will likely be an uptick in ESY program placement requests.

Status of Regents Exams

Interim Commissioner Tahoe stated that NYSED should be announcing a decision on the status of Regents Exams in the coming days. She emphasized that this is a very complicated decision that involves many components and variables. Mrs. Conklin-Spillane stressed the importance of not only having a decision on whether or not the exams will be administered, but also of the need for very specific guidance on how to plan for seniors who need the exam credit(s) to graduate and for undergraduates to plan future courses. Mr. Rickert brought up the idea of using coursework portfolios as a potential alternative to Regents Exams. For students on track to be eligible to graduate, Mrs. Conklin-Spillane encouraged the Department to build a plan that permitted local control over providing necessary evidence of mastery comparable to that which a Regents or other standardized graduation exam assesses. Deputy Commissioner Wilkins acknowledged the complexity and wide-ranging, long term impact of these decisions for students as young as 7th graders to those aging out at 21 years old, given the multiple pathways for graduation.

APPR Changes

Interim Commissioner Tahoe stated that they are continuing to work on developing a plan to address issues associated with APPR for teachers and principals, acknowledging the inability for APPR plans in place to be executed with fidelity given current circumstances. She reminded us that this will take legislative action and the Governor will ultimately need to approve the proposal.

Mr. Starvaggi emphasized the need for the revised APPR plan to be very specific in how it clarifies the evaluation components for principals. Rather than general language that applies to both teachers and principals, he feels

it is very important that the revisions for principals be clearly articulated. The Interim Commissioner was in total agreement.

Deputy Commissioner Wilkins also mentioned that the Department of Education has significantly relaxed most accountability requirements relating to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) for this year.

Effectiveness of Remote Instruction Practices Being Utilized

Interim Commissioner Tahoe asked for our thoughts on how well districts have been delivering remote instruction and how effectively schools are communicating with hard to reach students. Mrs. Conklin-Spillane responded that schools are all at different place as a result of access to resources and the availability of technology. She has been impressed with the overall efforts of principals to make sure that individual students have a personal connection with a teacher or staff member, and their persistence to identify students who are not participating in instruction and following up with outreach to families. She added that many districts are conducting virtual staff meetings on a regular basis to talk about challenges and share best practices. Mrs. Conklin-Spillane also emphasized the need for the educational leaders to emphatically communicate the message that “while buildings are physically closed, schools are still open and teaching and learning is taking place.”

April Break Status

Governor Cuomo recently issued an executive order which will require districts to continue providing remote instruction even if districts are scheduled to be on spring break during that time. Interim Commissioner Tahoe was asked about the status of the Governor’s decision and its impact on existing collective bargaining agreements. Mr. Starvaggi expressed concern about the potential consequences of this decision and feels that conversations with various stakeholder groups to seek common ground could minimize potential problems.

The Interim Commissioner responded that she is aware of the stakeholder concerns Mr. Starvaggi expressed. She has had several conversations with the Governor’s Office in an effort to gain more clarity on the ruling, but emphasized that the final decision rests in the hands of Governor Cuomo.

ESSAA Members:

If you have any feedback on the foregoing issues or would like to suggest a topic to be addressed with the Commissioner at an upcoming meeting, please e-mail us at info@essaa.org. New topics will be submitted to our Stakeholder Committee for consideration.