

The Empire State Supervisors and Administrators Association (ESSAA) held its monthly Stakeholder Meeting on Tuesday, July 28, 2020, via videoconference with Interim Commissioner of Education, Shannon Tahoe; Deputy Commissioner for P12 Instructional Support, Kim Wilkins; Assistant Commissioner for Special Education, Chris Suriano; Assistant Commissioner for Public Affairs, Emily DeSantis; Assistant Commissioner for the Office of Accountability, Jason Harmon; Associate Commissioner for Bilingual Education and English as a New Language, Elisa Alvarez; Supervisor for Curriculum and Instruction, Erik Sweet; and Laura Glass from the Office of Higher Education.

ESSAA was represented at the meeting by ESSAA President, Carol Conklin-Spillane; ESSAA Executive Director, Michael Starvaggi; ESSAA Executive Vice President, Skip Voorneveld; ESSAA Vice President, John Rickert; ESSAA Vice President, Shireen Fasciglione; ESSAA Vice President, Tony Baxter; ESSAA member Russell Buckley; and Regents/NYSED Liaison, Paul Scampini.

It was recently announced that Interim Commissioner Shannon Tahoe would be leaving her position on August 13. The Interim Commissioner began the meeting by expressing her thanks and appreciation to the ESSAA organization for their support with the many challenges NYSED has faced in recent months. Mrs. Conklin-Spillane in turn commended the Interim Commissioner for the strong leadership she has provided in guiding the Department through these difficult times. Mrs. Conklin Spillane also expressed appreciation to the Interim Commissioner for her open and honest dialogue regarding our questions and concerns during the COVID-19 crisis.

Interim Commissioner Tahoe stated that she anticipates a new Acting Commissioner will be appointed in the coming days and that the search for a permanent Commissioner is ongoing.

During the meeting, Mr. Voorneveld also commended Assistant Commissioner Emily DeSantis for the consistency and clarity of the numerous guidance documents she has been sharing with the field in recent months. Mr. Voorneveld commented that her communications and responsiveness to questions has greatly assisted administrators with staying up to date on the many recent policy changes.

Specific Topics discussed during the meeting included:

## **CARES Act Funding**

Assistant Commissioner Harmon provided an update on the status of the CARES Act funding. The Assistant Commissioner stated that the formal application for the federal funds is now open for districts to complete and submit.

During his review of the basic components of the grant funding, he emphasized:

1. There are two sources of funding within the grant:
  - Governor's Emergency Education Relief (GEER)
  - Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER)
2. Funds will be allocated to districts based on their Title I funding formula from the 2019-20 fiscal year.
3. Districts can apply for funds from both sources within the same application.
4. ESSER funds are allocated to all local education agencies (LEAs) including charter schools. GEER funds are being allocated only to the State's major school districts and does not include charter schools.
5. An equitable services provision, requires districts to share both GEER and ESSER funds with non-public schools located within the geographic boundaries of the district.
6. Districts will have a degree of discretion and flexibility with how funds are spent.
7. In the effort to begin disbursing funds as soon as possible, NYSED has set a due date of August 15 for the submission of applications.

The link below provides detailed guidance on the provisions associated with both the GEER and ESSER funding streams and provides specific information on how funds may be used.

<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/funding/cares-act/attachment-i-cares-act-faq.pdf>

## **Guidance for Reopening Schools**

Mr. Starvaggi shared a summary of the results from a recent survey of ESSAA members regarding major concerns associated with the reopening of schools. A large majority of respondents stressed the need for consistent and clear guidance on specifics associated with social distancing and use of space.

Interim Commissioner Tahoe responded that she shares our concern with this issue but has been advised that this is a domain being handled by the Department of Health. The Interim Commissioner went on to say that she, personally, is still not clear on the mask/six feet requirements and how they should be interpreted. Mr. Starvaggi stressed that clear guidance is crucial for principals to effectively develop and implement the requirements to ensure student and staff safety in their buildings.

Other items discussed relating to reopening schools included:

1. Interim Commissioner Tahoe stated she is currently working with the Governor's Office on whether or not a district is required to offer remote learning if parents opt not to send their child to school. If it is determined that offering remote options is not required, parents will need to begin the process for home schooling. Mrs. Conklin-Spillane stressed that this is a huge issue for principals that needs to be clarified as soon as possible.
2. The importance of principals having clear guidance regarding protocols for dealing with students who become ill during the school day.
3. The need for more clarity on enforcing codes of conduct and behavioral expectations now that instruction has extended into the homes of students.

Based on what was learned from the 2019-20 school year, Interim Commissioner Tahoe offered these recommendations to administrators for the coming school year:

1. Diligent daily attendance monitoring is crucial for both in-person and remote instruction to ensure student engagement.
2. Districts need to continually take inventory of technology access in households to ensure there is adequate connectivity. The Interim

Commissioner recommended that districts work with community agencies to provide additional support.

3. Schools must make efforts to ensure that support services for students with disabilities and Ell/ENL support are adequately provided.

At the conclusion of the discussion on reopening schools, Mrs. Conklin-Spillane expressed the need to ensure that the gains made in recent decades in cooperative, collaborative and engaging instruction not be lost in the wave of social distancing, remote learning, and flexible school schedules. She stressed that we must continually challenge teachers to be creative in developing effective instructional strategies and promote best practices.

Student Teachers

Interim Commissioner Tahoe informed us that a letter will be going out to districts next week encouraging them to accept student teachers and administrative interns this fall. NYSED is currently working with Higher Education partners to minimize barriers and will fully support internship experiences for future teachers and administrators.

### **TEACH System Data Breach**

In recent weeks, several ESSAA members have inquired about a possible breach in the NYSED TEACH database which allegedly involved the fraudulent submission of third-party unemployment claims. When asked to comment on the situation, Laura Glass stated there is currently no evidence that there have been any breaches within the TEACH System. Assistant Commissioner DeSantis shared that she had heard of a possible problem associated with a Regional Information Center in western New York. Interim Commissioner Tahoe said they would look into it and get back to us with more specific information.

*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](mailto:info@essaa.org). New topics will be submitted to our Stakeholder Committee for consideration.*