

The **Empire State Supervisors and Administrators Association (ESSAA), CAS' Statewide affiliate**, held its monthly Stakeholder Meeting on Monday, February 22, 2021, via videoconference with Commissioner of Education, Betty Rosa; Deputy Commissioner for P12 Instructional Support, Kim Wilkins; Assistant Commissioner for Public Affairs, Emily DeSantis; Deputy Commissioner, John D'Agati; Executive Director of the Office of Educator Quality and Professional Development, Alex Trikalinos; Deputy Commissioner for Higher Education, William Murphy; Chief Financial Officer, Phyllis Morse; Assistant Commissioner for the Office of Student Support Services, Kathleen DeCataldo; Counsel and Deputy Commissioner for Legal Affairs, Daniel Morton-Bentley; and Director of the Office of Governmental Relations, Jennifer Trowbridge.

ESSAA was represented at the meeting by ESSAA President, Carol Conklin-Spillane; ESSAA Executive Director, Mike Starvaggi; ESSAA Executive Vice President, Skip Voorneveld; ESSAA Director of Information Resources, Celia Strino; ESSAA Vice President, John Rickert; ESSAA Vice President, Tony Baxter; ESSAA Vice President, Greg Avellino; ESSAA member, Mike Moran; and Regents/NYSED Liaison, Paul Scampini.

Specific Topics discussed during the meeting included:

Status of USDE Assessment and Accountability Waiver Requests

Deputy Commissioner Wilkins began the meeting with an update on the status of the assessment and accountability waiver requests that were recently submitted to the US Department of Education. One waiver request seeks to allow the cancellation of all required 3-8 assessments and Regents Exams associated with Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) for 2020-21. The second waiver would exempt districts from assigning a Level 1-4 accountability score to subgroups based on certain indicators.

The Deputy Commissioner stated that, at this point, NYSED is not sure when they will hear whether one or both of the waivers have been approved. She went on to say that NYSED will continue to move forward with plans to administer the assessments until formal notification from USDE is received. Deputy Commissioner Wilkins added that NYSED has developed several alternative plans to address scenarios where both waiver requests are rejected or if only one is approved.

Later in the day, after our meeting ended, NYSED was informed by the Department of Education (USDE) that it will not grant a blanket waiver for administration and accountability of state assessments. In a statement released from NYSED on Tuesday afternoon, we learned that USDE did agree to uncouple state assessments from accountability measures so the test results will be used solely as a measure of student learning. Additionally, USDE affirmed that no student should be made to come to school to take a state assessment.

As a result, NYSED will be proposing a series of regulatory amendments at the upcoming March Board of Regents meeting so that passing of Regents Exams would not be required to meet graduation requirements. Additionally, an amendment will be proposed to cancel Regents Exams that are not mandated as part of the Every Student Succeeds Act.

In-Person Instruction, Athletics, and COVID Testing Guidance

Commissioner Rosa provided clarification regarding a recent field memo that was sent out from Assistant Commissioner for the Office of Student Support Services, Kathleen DeCataldo. The Commissioner shared that they have received reports that schools, predominantly in New York City, are requiring parental consent for their child to have a COVID-19 test as a condition for being able to participate in both in-person instruction and extra-curricular activities. The Commissioner emphasized that the only grounds for excluding students are whether they are ill or symptomatic, or if a local health department has ordered students to quarantine based on actual or potential exposure to COVID-19. It was further emphasized that schools cannot impose remote instruction on students whose parents/guardians do not consent to a surveillance test for COVID-19.

With regards to safety guidelines for in-person instruction, some states, including Connecticut which borders several New York districts, have recently shifted from the 6 feet socially distancing protocol to a 3 feet minimum distance. Mr. Baxter shared that administrators in his area have been fielding many questions from parents as to why New York has not also relaxed the 6-foot requirement.

Commissioner Rosa stressed that the current CDC recommended 6 feet social distancing requirement remains in place for New York State. The Commissioner went on to say that, while there is political pressure pushing schools to move toward more and more in-person instruction, there are many policy barriers and inconsistencies that need to be addressed before schools can re-open safely.

Mrs. Conklin-Spillane also expressed a potential concern for the future with regards to how principals address school safety in situations where parents opt not to have their children vaccinated.

With regards to extracurricular activities, Mr. Rickert shared that high school parents have been raising concerns about potential inequities with the fact that interscholastic sports teams are being allowed to practice and play games, while other activities such as music groups and robotics clubs are still not able to meet. Commissioner Rosa shared that they are receiving similar feedback from across the state regarding this perceived inequity and are having discussions about how to best address the situation.

Digital Equity Survey

Deputy Commissioner Wilkins asked for our thoughts and feedback on the recently released results from the Digital Access Survey that was sent out this past Fall. Mr. Scampini responded that the data presented at the most recent Board of Regents meeting did a very effective job of highlighting key areas of concern, especially with regards to the number of devices being used by students that are provided by districts (69%), and the level of insufficient internet access being experienced in high need districts and rural areas.

The Deputy Commissioner went to say that NYSED is using the data to plan the next steps for improving areas that need to be addressed. NYSED is encouraging districts to implement or expand formalized IT Departments to guide the improvement of digital access at the local level. Deputy Commissioner Wilkins also stated that they are working on statewide strategies to improve broadband access across the board and exploring options to improve the quality of devices students and teachers are using.

From a long-term economic development perspective, Commissioner Rosa feels it is very important to promote sustainable improvements. Mr. Conklin-Spillane agreed, stating that expanding implementation of technology and improving broadband access should be a component of every school district's annual budgeting process.

State Budget Update

Chief Financial Officer Phyllis Morris provided an update of the current status of the proposed Executive Budget which was outlined during a presentation at the February Board of Regents meeting. It was emphasized that while the budget presents the appearance of an increase in funding, the proposed allocations for schools present a significant decrease in financial support. She specifically mentioned the reduction of the STAR exemption and the consolidation of eleven current state aid categories into a Services Aid category as being particularly impactful to districts. Mrs. Conklin-Spillane expressed concern that districts across the state have yet to recover from the last block consolidation of aid categories that reduced funding in several areas.

APPR Update

Alex Trikalinos provided an update on the status of APPR and tenure requirements. He stressed that the 2019 amendments to APPR that allow evaluations to be completed without linking them to assessment results remain in place. He went on to say that NYSED is advocating for another Executive Order, similar to the one that was enacted last year, which would again suspend APPR requirements for teacher and principal evaluations for the current school year. He is, however, unsure of when a decision would be announced.

Mr. Trikalinos also mentioned that the suspension of test scores as a component of administrator evaluations provides an opportunity for districts to move toward a more multi-dimensional approach for carrying out principal evaluations.

Mr. Starvaggi expressed that, while ESSAA is very much in favor of suspending the APPR requirements again, he has concerns that a delay in

enacting the change makes it very difficult for principals to effectively plan for the timely completion of evaluations. Commissioner Rosa responded that the APPR process is currently a very common concern among stakeholder groups and is intertwined with many other issues. She went on to say she is hopeful it will be resolved in the same manner as last year.

Also, with regards to school accountability, Mrs. Conklin-Spillane expressed the need for ongoing discussions on how to best evaluate schools that have been designated to be in need of Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) or Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI) if assessments are not administered.

Principal Talent Management System

At the December 2020 Board of Regents meeting, Board members viewed a demonstration of the newly developed Principal Talent Management System. Scheduled to launch this Spring, the computer system is designed to use information contained in NYSED databases to assist superintendents with canvassing qualified candidates for administrative vacancies.

Mr. Scampini asked Deputy Commissioner for Higher Education, William Murphy about the timeline for the rollout of the system. Mr. Murphy replied that the system is tentatively scheduled to go live this Spring and that a field memo with specific information on the software will be released in the near future. He added that he is willing to provide us with a demonstration of the software prior to its release.

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.