AUSTIN PUBLIC SCHOOLS
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DATE: November 2026

TITLE: Community Education Director

TYPE: Information

PRESENTER(S): Jennifer Lawhead, Community Education Director

BACKGROUND:
Community Education uniquely serves Austin community members across the lifespan, from early childhood through older adulthood, in support of the district's mission to prepare all learners to make a difference in the world. The department identifies emerging community needs and develops responsive programs and services to address them. These needs are assessed through both formal and informal data collection, community engagement, and ongoing collaboration with local partners and stakeholders.

Support and Resources to Ensure a Safe and Welcoming Learning Environment

Staff development and well-being: Community Education continues to invest in staff development through communication strategies, strengths-based work, culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) practices, and play-based learning. Director is participating in a six-session Supporting Staff Wellbeing webinar series through COMPASS.

Safety and emergency preparedness: Staff are reviewing emergency processes at Riverland Community College and collaborating with RCC leadership to identify and address gaps in procedures.

Staffing and onboarding: Current hiring and onboarding efforts include two paraprofessionals, two assistants, and a Community Education Coordinator, while also supporting staffing needs created by employee leaves. The department continues to strengthen onboarding practices for new employees.

Wellness: The triennial wellness assessment has been completed and will inform upcoming Wellness Committee priorities. Work continues to strengthen representation across departments and buildings and improve communication from the committee back to individual sites.

Early Childhood communication and access: Communication regarding new students is being centralized through the Community Education Director for both special and general education. Combined with consistent and rolling start dates, this is creating a more coordinated entry process for students and families.

Family and community engagement: A well-attended Transportation Fair connected families with community partners and transportation resources. A Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation-sponsored family night will also provide Early Childhood Special Education families and staff with resources related to music therapy. The project includes weekly music therapy sessions in self-contained classrooms and collaboration with a board-certified music therapist.

Community Education Advisory Council: Work is underway to strengthen the Community Education Advisory Council through development of updated bylaws and a comprehensive CEAC Handbook. The handbook clarifies the council's role in assessing community needs, strengthening community partnerships, promoting lifelong learning, and advising Community Education programming and budgets. It also provides clearer member and officer responsibilities to support consistent onboarding and council operations.

Packer Profile for All Learners

Early Childhood: Packer Profile photo sessions are being established for Early Childhood, extending the district's Packer Profile work to younger learners.

Adult Basic Education: ABE continues to strengthen college and career readiness through career-specific vocabulary embedded into daily instruction and expanded opportunities for students to practice communication skills.

Student voice and leadership: ABE Student Leader Ambassadors are helping welcome and onboard new learners, including connecting students with same-language peers on their first day. A speaking club is also being offered during break time in response to student feedback requesting additional opportunities to practice speaking and listening outside of formal classroom instruction.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support for All Learners

ABE instruction: Professional development is focused on strengthening Tier One instruction, particularly intentional vocabulary instruction. Staff are exploring approaches for teaching Tier One and Tier Two vocabulary and incorporating vocabulary associated with CASAS assessments.

ABE outcomes: 2025-26 ABE data show 44.9% of students achieved a level gain, 84.3% completed a post-test, and the program had a 71.1% retention rate. These data will help guide continued work around instruction, student engagement, and retention.

Early Childhood MTSS: Early Childhood leadership is reviewing the Early Childhood MTSS handbook and developing a plan for implementation in partnership with the School Leadership Team. Screening discussions and data review have also been incorporated into monthly SST meetings and 3-5 evaluation meetings.

Assessment alignment and family communication: Early Childhood is examining how assessment information can be translated more effectively across systems and communicated meaningfully to families. We are seeking to combine Minnesota ECIPs as the common framework for aligning AEPS-3

and Teaching Strategies GOLD, supporting instructional planning, progress monitoring, and family communication.

PLC development: Early Childhood PLCs have shifted structure to increase collaboration, shared commitments, and follow-through. This work is supporting greater consistency around instruction, assessment, and student supports.

Meaningful learning through play: Early Childhood staff are participating in professional learning through MCEA focused on play-based practices. Internal expertise is also being used to connect culturally and linguistically diverse practices with meaningful learning through play.

Excellence in Resource Management

Facilities and learning environment: Early Childhood's new fence has significantly improved the usability and safety of the outdoor learning environment.

Kids Korner: Great Start grant communication and stipend processes are moving forward effectively, supported by collaboration among Community Education, Human Resources, the Business Office, and community partners.