

Minutes
Task Force on Family Engagement in Learning
Thursday, June 10, 2021, at 3:10 PM

The Arkansas State Board of Education (State Board) Task Force on Family Engagement in Learning met on Thursday, June 10, 2021, in the ADE Auditorium at Four Capitol Mall, Little Rock, AR 72201.

Present: Charisse Dean, Chair; Dr. Fitz Hill; Deb Coffman; Chelsey Moore; Dr. Kazandra Wilson; Freddie Scott; Karen Bergh; guests Dr. CJ Huff of Bright Futures USA; Dr. Beth Anne Rankin; Ouida Newton; Susanna Post; Joel Lookadoo

Absent: n/a

Ms. Charisse Dean called the meeting to order at 3:10 p.m.

Consent Agenda

Chelsey Moore moved to approve the minutes of March 11, 2021; Kazandra Wilson seconded. The committee voted to accept the minutes without change or discussion.

Action Agenda

1. Update from Core Team

Chelsey Moore presented the newly formed Engagement Unit has been working on its objectives to promote engagement internally and externally. She shared the team's Vision Statement: "The Engagement Unit moves beyond basic compliance by inspiring districts, agency partners, families and communities to engage in meaningful relationship-building in which all voices are equally valued."

Modules

Ms. Moore shared that the Advisory Group of parent and family engagement district and school personnel meetings that we host monthly were well received this past year. We received feedback at our end-of-year meeting in May that the online meetings and interactive process we used was helpful in guiding our stakeholders through the technical assistance they needed to produce and submit their state-required plans. Members of that group reported that they both valued and enjoyed the exchanges and information, and want us to continue with a similar process again next year.

End of Year feedback

Ms. Moore reported that we encouraged participation by our stakeholders to respond to the agency's request for feedback to the American Rescue Plan and to also complete an end-of-year (EOY) survey that our Unit administered. Ms. Moore reported that parent and family

engagement district and school personnel who responded to our survey noted that they have little time to do the work, many are spread very thin. She explained that at the school level, they are often educators, and are paid a stipend to do the parent and family engagement work in addition to their teaching. Ms. Moore added that the survey results were not surprising, and validate to a degree other anecdotal information we have collected. She said that this recent information underscores the importance of our current practice of engagement and connecting outside partners to provide a “lift” to our stakeholders and their communities where we can.

Ms. Moore reported that our Engagement Unit’s technical assistance this past year has helped our districts refine and improve the plans, and we have undertaken a process to develop model plans to share in next year’s work days and consultative sessions. Chelsey further introduced herself and the Engagement Unit team members present, describing our roles in communications, equity, and community partnerships.

Internal Partners

Ms. Moore reported on the initiatives that the Engagement Unit has worked on in the past quarter, both those that we have developed and those we have co-labored on or promoted collaboratively with other units in ADE whose work impacts families and communities. She stressed some of the important tenets of engagement, developing two-way relationships, trust, and communication. Some of these collaborative relationships include work done with RISE/SOAR (Brandon Waddell); SMACTalk (Ray Girdler); Spring assessment (Rachel Horn) [see [commissioner’s memo](#)]; Coordinated School Health with Lisa Mundy [see [recording](#)], to name a few. She also highlighted the more recent work with the Office of Special Projects and our outreach with the members of [Engage Arkansas](#), and the [Statewide Community Resource Portal](#) to which our team has contributed. Ms. Moore mentioned that the Education Renewal Zones, or ERZs, who are embedded in various state universities throughout Arkansas, will be employing tutors for students within their regions through a statewide training initiative.

Ms. Moore incorporated into her comments the “ornament” concept that has been made popular by the meeting’s guest, Dr. CJ Huff, who was soon thereafter introduced. She explained that the ornaments in a community are the assets that are present or able to be deployed to support students and their families. Ms. Moore highlighted CityServe briefly as an asset for which Task Force member Dr. Fitz Hill is a champion, and offered it as an example of an “ornament” about which those gathered have recently learned. Ms. Moore asked Dr. Huff to then introduce himself and the Bright Futures program, sharing details with attendees.

Dr. Huff spoke about his background in the central and Ozark areas of Missouri, and his roles in education in Springfield both as principal and teacher, and, later, as Joplin superintendent. He was in his superintendent role when the deadly tornado of 2011 left widespread destruction in Joplin, including destroying 10 of the school district's 20 buildings. Dr. Huff described the strength of the community and school district’s work together, which was aided by their prior relationships and helped them overcome the tremendous obstacles and to be able to provide the wraparound supports that were desperately needed in the tornado’s aftermath. He mentioned how similar the challenges related to COVID have been, and even how more

intensely our districts and schools have had to be in “response mode,” due to the frequent or almost constant changes and challenges brought to schools, families, and communities over the course of the pandemic.

Dr. Huff outlined the range of districts that Bright Futures works with across the U.S. and the four states adjacent to Arkansas. Bright Futures currently works with 16 Arkansas districts, with two more, Benton and Forrest City, in the process of coming onboard. He explained that the Bright Futures model is about creating communication structures, bringing resources together, responding to needs within 24 hours by engaging the local community through social media, including the use of private donations of tangible goods, as well as a set-aside monetary “high needs fund.”

Dr. Huff explained that the second piece is about building leadership capacity, getting the right people at the table and having the conversations needed, including the district-level and school-level community representatives. Bright Futures, he explained, though only a small staff of two, provides support for these community leadership groups to do their best work, and to be able to sustain that work on their own over time.

Dr. Huff said that the third piece is about community service, and giving the students the opportunity to grow as service-minded leaders, continuing to give back to the communities that supported them. Ms. Moore added to Dr. Huff’s introduction that her recent sharing of the Bright Futures model to ADE Secretary Johnny Key resulted in the Secretary’s recollection that his own mother had heard of some of the efforts in her local community that support the whole child in a similar way. Ms. Moore thought the similarity of Secretary Key’s mother’s story was not coincidental; that Bright Futures had been, indeed, operating in that community for some time and that its impact and reach—and the very personal help that students receive—went beyond those directly involved in the efforts and informed the entire community about the productive partnerships between school-families-communities that Bright Futures is able to galvanize and that the communities continue.

In answer to Dr. Hill’s question about how Bright Futures selects the communities they work with, Dr. Huff said that the Bright Futures USA organization produces a national conference every year, and invites and attracts others but that the “recruiting” of new communities to the process is organic, adding that “the new communities usually come to us.” The efforts start within the community, not the districts themselves, he added. The community builds the ownership, they work the issues, and Bright Futures simply provides the framework, he emphasized.

Ms. Dean commented on the importance of supporting the whole child. In answer to Ms. Dean’s question about how long Bright Futures had been working in Arkansas communities, CJ Huff noted that Pea Ridge was the first Arkansas community to work with the Bright Futures program in 2013. He added that the strength of Bright Futures-trained communities is in their network, and how they freely share not only in their own hometowns but between one another. The Bright Futures affiliates are able to meet together via the organization’s annual conference

and other methods: “we broker conversations and bring people together around common issues,” Dr. Huff said.

Deb Coffman quipped that Dr. Hill and Dr. Huff need to become “new best friends; together they are unstoppable!” Deb noted that other communities would need to know, first, how to get started, have some quick wins and continue to grow so that the efforts are sustainable. She noted, too, that many of our underserved kids are in the delta region of Arkansas, and there is an opportunity to learn how those people with a giving heart can use the help to get this started. It’s important to start, even on a small scale, she emphasized. She commented that “the 24-hour turnaround is doable, and ‘everyone has Facebook!’” She introduced Dr. Hill and asked him to talk about CityServe.

Dr. Fitz Hill pointed out the community service model of CityServe, similar in organizing good-hearted people to support the students and families in their communities, is founded on the faith community, and there is a “church on every corner.” Dr. Hill said that the CityServe organization and its volunteers have been training churches to become “a social hospital,” so that there is always a sustainable effort in place, since people/leaders leave. There are 214 churches currently involved in Arkansas, he reported, and there is a goal to expand, and most importantly, to partner with their local schools. He gave the example of needing to get a student a bed as soon as possible, so that the child would not be taken out of his family and put into foster care. Each church may even request monthly assets to serve their respective communities. Many churches build their own “pods,” storage and distribution of tangible goods that have been donated. Dr. Hill mentioned the father’s day initiative to deliver thousands of toys to kids whose fathers have been the victims of gun violence.

Ms. Dean noted the importance of reaching out to the smaller churches, and supporting their efforts to support their students and community members. Ms. Coffman underscored the need to help the smaller and more rural communities, in a similar way. Dr. Hill stressed that it is consistency in meeting needs that makes the difference: “the tragic thing is when someone reaches out for help, and we don’t help them or they are not there to respond,” he said.

Dr. Huff responded that churches are the “sleeping giants” in their communities: they have been “microphones” amplifying the needs that come through the Bright Futures channels. He gave the example of how one community recruited about 150 mentors in two weeks in response to the sharing of the need from the pulpit. He shared another story about a family whose dad lost his job, the hot water heater broke and couldn’t be replaced so the student’s clothes could not be washed. This church put out the word and got the hot water heater, the plumber, and so on. Freddie Scott acknowledged the importance of the connections and beginning the relationship between Drs. Hill and Huff.

Ms. Dean stressed the importance of making sure that—regardless of which non-profit or service organization or school is conducting outreach—that there are established relationships in place, so that families can be comfortable asking for help. The work that the team is talking about, Ms. Coffman pointed out, is “prevention work: it helps keep kids in classes and in

schools.” Ms. Dean emphasized that the stigma of “need” must somehow be taken away, and that we have to stress that it’s okay to ask for help. She also noted that DeQueen, in the southwest corner of the state, is a high poverty, high minority community but has high academics: “families and the community are highly engaged, can we learn from them? What are they doing, what are the best practices?”

Ms. Moore noted that the place where everyone can help is to know that we are in the business of “collecting ornaments” and sharing out those resources. The school is often the hub, but the key is to make sure that the community knows about the explicit need: we don’t “tell the kids’ names,” we just “handle the business” (of helping them/solving the problem), CJ Huff added.

1. Discuss Upcoming ADE Family and Community Engagement Work

Ms. Moore mentioned the three (3) Annual Summit sessions that the Engagement Team is working on ([sessions](#))

1. “12 Signs Your Engagement Strategies are Winning Hearts”
2. “4 Profound Strategies for Building Partnerships with Community Assets to Support Student Success”
3. “Engagement Essentials in Action”

Ms. Moore also mentioned the revision of our Engagement Matters website and ongoing branding efforts, as the Engagement Unit continues to promote our work and the resources of the state and the communities we serve; our communications vehicles are growing and expanding.

Ms. Dean thanked the team, and acknowledged that the state has created a whole team to support engagement: “I’m looking forward to Arkansas continuing to be a leader in community engagement.” She thanked Dr. Huff for coming as well and for his work.

2. Outline Next Steps

Action items: none

Next meeting of task force: Sept. 10, 2021

3. Adjournment

Ms. Dean adjourned the meeting at 4:04 p.m.

Minutes recorded by Karen Bergh.