

**Official Minutes of the
Oak Park Board of Education District 97
260 Madison Street, Oak Park, Cook County, Illinois
September 8, 2020 Meeting**

This meeting was held virtually using Zoom during the time of the Coronavirus pandemic. Everyone participated via electronic means.

President Broy called the meeting to order at 6:33 p.m.

ROLL CALL

Present: Broy, Kim, Spurlock, Breymaier, Liebl, Moore, and Kearney
Absent: None
Also Present: Superintendent Dr. Carol Kelley, Associate Superintendent of Education Felicia Starks Turner, Director of Communications Amanda Siegfried, Chief Academic and Accountability Officer Ebony Lofton, Senior Director of Equity Carrie Kamm, Senior Director of Technology Michael Arensdorff, Consultant Rob Grossi, and Board Secretary Sheryl Marinier.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

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Moore moved, seconded by Kim that the Board move into executive session for the purpose of Appointment, Employment, Compensation, Discipline, Performance, or Dismissal of Specific Employees or Legal Counsel for the District 5 ILCS 120/2(C)(1), at 6:33 p.m.

Ayes: Moore, Kim, Broy, Spurlock, Breymaier, Liebl, and Kearney
Nays: None
Absent: None
Motion passed

OPEN SESSION

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Kearney moved, seconded by Kim that the Board move into Open Session at 6:55 p.m. All members of the Board were in agreement. The Board reconvened in Open Session at 7:00 p.m.

PUBLIC COMMENT

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Member Spurlock read the public comments that were emailed to the board prior to the start of the board meeting.

Larissa Leibowitz

I am writing to encourage the Board to give families some flexibility regarding when they enroll their children in kindergarten. Without providing flexibility, it will result in significant equity issues and the early childhood education needs of many children will not be met.

I am the mother of two boys, ages five and one. My five year old (whose birthday is in April) is enrolled in kindergarten at Beye Elementary. My one year old's birthday is in August. One of the reasons we chose to move to Oak Park from Chicago three months ago is for its excellent public schools including—importantly—the fact that Oak Park gives parents some flexibility regarding timing of enrollment in kindergarten.

Through friends in Chicago, we have seen the devastating effects of enrolling a child with a summer birthday before they are ready for kindergarten (as CPS has an inflexible policy). In addition, in preparation for our five-year-old entering school, we read about the learning differences between boys and girls and know that it is much more likely for boys not to be ready for kindergarten if they are born

near the enrollment cutoff. We do not yet know when our one-year-old son will be ready for kindergarten, and it is something we intend to discuss with his pediatrician and his teachers when the time comes.

There are a number of ways in which young boys and girls differ: (1) boys' brains secrete lower amounts of serotonin (which is a hormone that promotes self-control and focus), and have higher levels of dopamine, which means that boys generally need more physical activity, (2) the parts of the brain that enable children to process words develops later in boys, which means that girls are usually ready to begin learning to read before boys, and (3) boys' frontal lobes are less active and mature later, which means that boys tend to have less impulse control.

These differences result in significant equity issues for young boys when there is an inflexible enrollment policy. The increased time spent on academics in today's kindergarten has left less time for the physical activity that boys need. Kindergarteners are expected to know how to read by the end of the academic year, which boys especially might not be ready to do, and this can lead to their disengagement with school. Since boys are more likely to be in an environment that creates frustration for them, they are more likely to act out and be perceived as having behavioral problems, which further puts them at a disadvantage. These issues are amplified and become more likely the closer a boy's birthday is to the September 1 grade cutoff.

Putting a child into an academic setting for which they are not ready has harmful effects on their future enjoyment of school, their willingness to engage in school, and their self-esteem. Not only that, but enrolling a child in kindergarten before they are ready is more likely to lead to a misdiagnosis of ADHD. A study funded by the National Institute of Health found that ADHD diagnoses of August birthday children in schools with a September 1 cutoff was 34 percent higher than ADHD diagnoses in September birthday children.

The bottom line is that a strict September 1 cutoff policy will create significant equity issues. Its negative effects will be most felt by families and children (especially boys) who would be better off waiting to enroll a year later in kindergarten but do not have the September 2, 2020 financial means to either move to another school district or to enroll their child in a private school.

Indeed, the Illinois legislature likely acknowledged the critical need for flexibility on this issue when Senate Bill 2075, which would have made kindergarten compulsory in Illinois, was introduced (but failed to pass) last year. A key feature of the bill was to require a child to begin kindergarten if they turn five on or before May 31.

I understand there are other equity concerns that the District is aiming to solve by adopting an inflexible enrollment policy. While there may be no perfect solution, the District should provide guidance and assessments for all children so that the best decision can be made for each child and their family. The District should also inform all parents about low-cost preschool options such as through the Park District or Prekindergarten Partnership. The way to address these important equity issues should not be to enroll even more children in kindergarten before they are ready. I have also heard that the District would provide additional supports (including IEPs) in lieu of having a flexible enrollment policy. This seems to be a poor use of the District's scarce resources if some parents will voluntarily delay their child's entry into kindergarten as an alternative. It also seems to be an inferior way to meet the needs of a child if the child really needs another year before they are ready for the rigors of kindergarten.

For the sake of equity, I respectfully request that District 97 build some flexibility into the policy so that at least parents of children whose birthdays are near the cutoff (who are more likely to be disadvantaged by an inflexible enrollment policy) have the opportunity to enroll their children in the developmentally appropriate grade.

This is very important to my family and I welcome the opportunity to speak with you further on this matter.

Ariane Panter

I am a parent of three children (one of whom is already enrolled in the district with two to follow) and write to implore that you reconsider your intent to change District 97 policy to require that all children age 5 begin kindergarten, absent an IEP to the contrary.

I will start by noting that there is a lack of consensus within the education community around the appropriate Kindergarten entrance age. Some experts recommend that children with summer birthdays wait a year before starting kindergarten. Others do not. Regardless, education analysts have found that kindergarten has recently taken on an increased academic emphasis, almost making it into a modified first grade. One recent study conducted by researchers at Stanford University, which analyzed the Danish National Birth Cohort and used data collected on their kids at age 7 and again at 11, found that starting kindergarten just one year later than the standard, age 5, resulted in significantly better (what they refer to as) “executive function” four years later. In other words, kids that started kindergarten at six had better self-control and were able to stay focused on tasks better than kids who started at 5. The older kids were able to manage their time more effectively and not only recall rules and learned information, but to understand how to apply that information independently.

State law does not force our schools to require 6 year-olds to attend first grade instead of kindergarten. Given the lack of any legal requirement and consensus among education experts, as well as the more academic kindergarten curriculum, I therefore believe parents should have the flexibility to determine what is best for their child, so long as they do so in accordance with state law and in consultation with the school, the child’s doctors and therapists, and the child’s prior educators. While my personal opinion is that all children should start kindergarten at age 6, rather than 5, I understand this may not be realistic and may present challenges for teachers who have to meet the needs of a wide range of ages in a large classroom. Therefore, if broader flexibility is not possible, I still advocate in favor of allowing children with summer birthdays, who will be the very youngest in their class, to choose to wait until age 6.

This does not mean every child with a summer birthday will be held back. In fact, I recommend you review the data from our community as I believe – in years past – it showed that very few parents actually make the decision to hold back their children in this district and the idea that we have an issue with “red-shirting” does not hold up in Oak Park. Moreover, research documents higher diagnoses of ADHD for younger children with summer birthdays. This is likely because children who are developmentally less mature than their older peers are consciously and unconsciously held to standards for behavior that are unfair and unachievable for developmentally younger children. In short, they’re measured against a scale that’s not designed for them.

All school board policies should be child-centered and a policy that designs a cut-off, but leaves some flexibility for those most likely to be adversely impacted, balances the needs of the school and the child well. While I understand that some may argue a “clear cutoff” will enhance “equity,” a rule without flexibility may well have the opposite effect. I understand the reality that children of parents with more financial means are more likely to be held back. That said, if forced to deal with a cut-off they believe is the wrong thing for their child, those parents are just as likely to opt out of public education and choose private school or – if enrolling their child in public – address perceived issues through additional private tutors and therapy. Parents who do not have the ability to make meaningful choices in this regard will be the ones stuck with only one choice available, and a choice they believe is wrong for their child.

If holding children back a year is truly an “advantage,” which I believe the district and board is suggesting it is not, then shouldn’t we be exploring how to allow all children to wait to enroll in school until they reach developmental readiness? To me, the right answer is to address the underlying issue – a lack of affordable, quality pre-K education. We already know the majority of children in Illinois start kindergarten unprepared and that schools have so far shown themselves unable to close these disparities. This is particularly true for low-income students. Therefore, it seems clear that the solution to the inequities we see does not lie in enrolling more children earlier or subjecting them to more academics at earlier and earlier ages, but ensuring that all children get the right foundations in their early years regardless of parental income, race, or other factors that should not impact a child’s opportunity to flourish.

As educators and parents, it is our responsibility to do what is best for our children. When it comes to determining when young children start school, allowing parents some choice within reason allows for the most equitable outcomes and most effectively sets our children up for successful education for years to come.

Dr. Kristina Matarazzo-Moran and Matt Moran

We understand policy 7:50 is now under review by the board. As it is currently written, the policy does not specify a maximum age for children to enroll in kindergarten, allowing for parental choice in enrollment.

We're writing today to urge you to **keep parental choice as part of the policy**, especially for children with summer birthdays who are the youngest to enroll and face the most development-related adverse impacts of the chosen cut-off dates. By giving parents a voice in the enrollment decision, we can give children the best chance for a positive experience with school and instill a lifelong love of learning.

We strongly believe that a policy with flexibility on maximum age for enrollment is in the children’s best interests and is best for equity in education.

Regarding children’s best interests:

First, as a PhD level psychologist and career educator, we know education is a critical developmental experience with lasting, long ranging impacts. We are aware of the research that documents higher diagnoses of ADHD for the youngest kids in a class and are acutely aware of the reason why - because children who are developmentally less mature than their older peers are held to behavior standards that are unfair and unachievable for developmentally younger children.

Second, a child’s first year of school will set the tone for their education for years to come. If they spend their first year struggling academically and socially, the effects of this will carry over for years. It will impact their self-efficacy, confidence, self-esteem, and socio-emotional health. We cannot fathom any **child-centered** rationale for forcing a child, who is not developmentally ready, to handle the rising expectations of kindergarten and first grade at the wrong time. We implore the board to consider these negative impacts before adopting any changes to this policy that would take away parental choice in enrollment.

Regarding equity:

First, if the D97 policy does not allow for parental choice when children need it, it may create a de-facto policy where wealthier families will pull their children out of D97 and enroll in private school to accommodate their child. Thus, the inflexible policy, in practice, will apply to families who cannot afford private school, furthering economic inequity.

Second, if the board were to adopt a policy with a firm cutoff date, the youngest children who need extra help would likely present an increased demand on classroom and intervention resources, diverting those limited resources away from children with needs that are not simply age-related. Plainly speaking, allowing that child to start kindergarten at the right time allows attention and resources to be spent on children with the most critical, ongoing needs.

In closing, we implore the board to review the process for kindergarten enrollment to take these factors into account. When it comes to determining when young children start school, granting parents a choice allows for the most equitable outcomes and most effectively sets our children and community up for a successful educational experience.

Danielle and Peter Falknor

I am writing to comment on the review of Policy 7:50 for school admissions. Although he was due on September 15th, my son was born August 28, 2016 so it is of personal concern the outcome of any policy changes. Our plan until now was to continue observing our son this year as a 4 year-old and in coordination with his educators and pediatrician, make a decision on whether it is appropriate or not for him to start kindergarten in 2021. However it has come to our attention that our ability to make that decision may be taken away if the School Board sets a strict policy on age maximums for school admission.

I strongly believe that establishing a strict, generic policy of what age children start school creates potential to gravely disserve them and their futures, both academically and socially. Parents do not take these decisions lightly, and given the statistics on outcomes of children born near "cut-off dates," there must be a process established for children who are not ready to start school as they turn 5. Studies show children sent too early have higher rates of ADHD diagnosis, poorer self-regulation and less confidence. I have heard discussions that "resources are available" to support children that struggle or fall behind. It seems illogical and inappropriate to take resources away from other children who need the support for a child who could perform much better if they had waited a year to start school at a more developmentally-appropriate time.

Establishing a strict admissions policy would also function to harm efforts by this district to provide equitable education to its children. Parents of financial means will be pushed to sending their children to private schools, while families who cannot afford private tuition will be forced to send their child to school a year earlier, widening the gap further. Personally, this is a very frustrating position to be put in, given that my family moved to Oak Park because of the great public education opportunities it offers.

I understand the need of the district to clarify its policy on age of admissions. But it is short-sighted that the answer is as simple as one blanket policy for all students. Just as there is a process to evaluate children who may benefit from starting school at age 4, there should be a process through which children's readiness is evaluated individually if there are concerns. What's more, there is time for the district to get creative. I am aware of some school districts that offer a "young fives" program alternative to kindergarten, allowing those children exposure to kindergarten but giving them the time they need to be fully ready for a full-K program.

I urge you to thoroughly consider what is best for students who happen to be born on or before September 1st and the repercussions your decision can have on their lives. Thank you for your time.

Stephanie Harris

I am the parent of a son born in June, 2016, and I moved to Oak Park from Chicago in May of this year. Like many parents, the Oak Park school district was one of the primary reasons that we moved

here, and that includes the active involvement of parents in the community to support and help ensure the best schools possible for all of the children in Oak Park. And, that is exactly why I am writing this note.

I recently learned, much to my dismay, that the district is considering implementing a policy of requiring all five year olds of age by Sept. 1 to attend kindergarten and all 6 year olds of age to attend first grade. Such a mandatory, blanket policy is likely to be detrimental to a great many children, and particularly those who have summer birthdays and are otherwise not ready for kindergarten and first grade on this arbitrary time frame. Forcing all children into the education paradigm - and the academic requirements - that are a part of structured non-play-based educational programs when they are not emotionally or socially ready can have lasting damaging effects on those children. It can also be damaging to the other students in the class - those who are ready, and whose teachers may be disrupted or distracted by trying to provide additional support to students who would benefit from another year to grow and mature.

No one knows better what their child is capable of than the parents of that child. And, parents are not likely to take action detrimental to their children. If a parent believes his or her child is not ready for kindergarten or school, the parents' views should be given heavy weight, perhaps even presumptive weight.

I urge the board to adopt a policy that recognizes the uniqueness of every child, and the unique knowledge that every parent has as to their own child - and not an arbitrary blanket policy of forcing young children into an academic program in which they are not yet prepared to thrive.

SPECIAL REPORTS

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STUDENTS TAKING ACTION REGARDING SUCCESS (S.T.A.R.S.) PROGRAM UPDATE

Eboney Lofton introduced Ed Redd and Sidika Balogun from YEMBA who talked about the S.T.A.R.S program. They explained that the program is offered to both Julian and Brooks Middle School students and is open to students who identify as minority or students of color. The program offers a safe space for students and give them an outlet for implementing change in the afterschool space. Students have the opportunity to share personal experiences with the goal of becoming advocates for themselves. They also have the opportunity to develop their social awareness, empowerment, identity exploration, and social activism.

During the 2019-2020 school year, the program served 48 students, and offered 37 sessions.

- 20 at Brooks and 28 at Julian
- 29 were girls and 19 were boys
- 47 A.A/Black and 1 Asian

They shared data from the group's climate and culture survey that indicated a need for a safe space where students of shared identities could have a sense of belonging.

They noted that even during the current pandemic, students have had the opportunity to participate in virtual programming. The program has offered 120 hours of outreach (four times a week via email, phone and text). Through these communications, they noticed that some of the families lacked access to food and computers. YEMBA employed a strategic curbside care package delivery initiative to reconnect and check-in with families, and workshops continued during the stay at home order via Zoom.

S.T.A.R.S. participants have indicated that since they are a part of the program, they are all more aware of personal values. They are all aware of the communities that they belong to, and have learned ways to advocate for themselves. They have a better understanding of what racism and discrimination is, and

understand the meaning of bias. They have learned that they need a safe learning environment where their voices can be heard.

The S.T.A.R.S. virtual program will launch in the fall 2020, with additional lessons surrounding current social issues/events. A new recruitment strategy will be used to encourage more participation.

Balogun shared a video highlighting the program, and student Miya Segawa, a seventh grader at Brooks Middle School talked about her experience with the program. She talked about colorism and the school to prison pipeline. She expressed support for the S.T.A.R.S. program noting that she felt safe talking to everyone and enjoyed her time in the group.

Members of the board expressed appreciation for the report, and YEMBA in general. One board member expressed interest in seeing the program expand to include students who have other reasons for not feeling like they belong.

UPDATE ON FY21 BUDGET

Rob Grossi update the board on the status of the FY21 budget process. He reminded the board that they will hold a public hearing on September 22, 2020 regarding the budget and be asked to adopt the budget during that meeting.

This is the fourth board meeting where the budget has been discussed. On August 11, 2020, the board was presented with a tentative budget that projected a structural surplus in the \$1,000,000 to \$2,000,000 range. As of today, the budgeted surplus is \$1,519,000, but changes will continue up to the time the budget is approved. Grossi noted that this surplus includes the \$1,400,000 within the budget for child-care related expenses, and a full year of PPE supplies. While this budget still may be changed prior to the budget hearing and final adoption on September 22, 2020, Grossi does not expect significant changes from its current form.

Grossi reported that he will be sharing the budget status with the Finance Oversight and Review Committee (FORC), and noted that it has not changed significantly since the committee's last review.

Grossi noted that these uncertain times are making it difficult for any school district to fully predict how the fiscal year will end. The administration continues to focus on maximizing efficiencies without sacrificing preparedness for changes that may occur during the fiscal year due to COVID-19 related issues.

Interest was expressed in hearing more about the child-care funding. Enrollment numbers were shared, noting that only 65 of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Details were asked on the following:

- What does the enrollment look like?
- What are the enrollment projections?
- How much would it cost if we run the child-care program for the full year?
- Did every free or reduced student get into the program that applied?
- Is there any more outreach that the district could be doing to fill the empty spots?
- A forecast of the expense for the full year was requested, noting that some students have not shown up for class yet, which might indicate that there is still a need for the child-care service.

Felicia Starks Turner offered to ask the principals if they could reach out to the families in question and make sure that they are aware of this opportunity.

Interest was expressed in a sliding scale fee for families that do not qualify for free or reduced lunch, and knowing if the abatement funds will be necessary. Grossi explained that the board will begin discussions on the abatement in November, with a decision being made in February, and suggested that the district will have a better idea of the child-care need and the cost of the program by then.

MYD97 FALL KICKOFF

Amanda Siegfried invited the board to take a few minutes to celebrate the beginning of the school year. She reported that the Making My D97 Award will continue this year. She thanked the parents who sent in over 250 back to school photos to share. Siegfried shared a video collage of students on their first day of remote learning for this school year.

Siegfried was recognized by the board for winning the 2020 Illinois Chapter of the National School Public Relations Association's Communications Contest with her MyD97 Weekly Wrap-Up.

ACTION ITEMS

ACTION ITEMS

4.1.1 APPROVAL OF MINUTES FOR THE AUGUST 11, 2020 BOARD MEETING

Kim moved, seconded by Broy, that the Board of Education, District 97, approve the minutes from the August 11, 2020 board meeting as presented.

Ayes: Kim, Broy, Breymaier, Moore, Spurlock, Kearney, and Liebl
Nays: None
Absent: None
Motion passed.

4.1.2 APPROVAL OF MINUTES FOR THE AUGUST 21, 2020 SPECIAL BOARD MEETING

Spurlock moved, seconded by Kim that the Board of Education, District 97, approve the minutes from the August 21, 2020 special board meeting as presented.

Ayes: Spurlock, Kim, Moore, Breymaier, Liebl, Broy, and Kearney
Nays: None
Absent: None
Motion passed.

4.1.3 APPROVAL OF MINUTES FOR THE SEPTEMBER 1, 2020 SPECIAL BOARD MEETING

Kim moved, seconded by Spurlock, that the Board of Education, District 97, approve the minutes from the September 1, 2020 special board meeting as presented.

Ayes: Kim, Spurlock, Breymaier, Moore, Kearney, Liebl, and Broy
Nays: None
Absent: None
Motion passed.

4.2 APPROVAL OF THE CONSENT AGENDA

Spurlock moved, seconded by Kim, that the Board of Education, District 97, to accept the consent agenda as presented

4.2.1 Bill List

4.2.2 Personnel

Ayes: Spurlock, Kim, Breymaier, Moore, Broy, Kearney, and Liebl
Nays: None

Absent: None
Motion passed.

4.3.1 APPROVAL OF PE MODIFICATION

Moore moved, seconded by Breymaier, that the Board of Education, District 97, approve the PE Modification as presented.

Ayes: Moore, Breymaier, Spurlock, Broy, Kearney, Liebl, and Kim
Nays: None
Absent: None
Motion passed.

4.3.2 APPROVAL OF MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING WITH OPTA – APPEAL PROCESS

Spurlock moved, seconded by Kim, that the Board of Education, District 97, approve the Memorandum of Understanding with the Oak Park Teachers Association that permits the PERA Joint Committee to address all aspects of the development and implementation of a local appeals process for a certified educator’s unsatisfactory summative evaluation rating.

Ayes: Spurlock, Kim, Breymaier, Broy, Moore, Kearney, and Liebl
Nays: None
Absent: None
Motion passed.

ADMINISTRATIVE ITEMS

ADMINISTRATIVE
ITEMS

DISPOSAL OF PROPERTY

The board referenced the memo from Jeanne Keane, Senior Director of Buildings and Grounds who requested that the board approve the disposal of some Hatch and Irving library and classroom books that are no longer useful to the district. This item will return to the board for action on September 22, 2020.

DONATION TO BROOKS MIDDLE SCHOOL

The board referenced another memo from Keane asking that they approve a donation of a fully enclosed 3D carving machine to the design department to replace the current machine which is not repairable. The machine is valued at \$2,500, and would be donated from the Inventable, Inc., a digital fabrication vendor. This item will return to the board for action on September 22, 2020.

POLICY REVIEW

It was reported that the policy committee met recently and a summary of that meeting can be found in the board packet. The committee reviewed the PRESS 104 updates which they shared with the board this evening.

BOARD
ASSIGNMENTS

BOARD ASSIGNMENTS

STANDING BOARD COMMITTEE LIAISON REPORT FOLLOW UP (as needed – FAC, FORC, CCE and CLAIM)

Committee for Legislative Action, Intervention and Monitoring (CLAIM)
It was reported that the CLAIM committee has not met yet this school year.

Facilities Advisory Committee (FAC)

It was reported that the FAC committee has not met yet for this school year, but are doing work outside of their meetings. It was reported that a couple committee member terms are up in September. President Broy will follow up with the committee secretary.

Finance Oversight and Review Committee (FORC)

The board was reminded that they were considering a committee of the whole that included the FORC and FAC committees. It was reported that Jeanne Keane is working on updating the plans. President Broy and member Spurlock will touch base regarding this effort.

Committee for Community Engagement (CCE)

It was reported that the CCE committee has not met yet for this school year.

INTERGOVERNMENTAL LIAISON REPORT FOLLOW UP (as needed – IGOV, PTO council, CEC, OPEF, Community Council, Tri-Board on Equity, Policy, and Self-Evaluation)

IGOV

It was reported that IGOV will be meeting sometime in September.

PTOC

It was reported that PTOC has been meeting consistently. They are focusing on the needs of the children.

CONCLUDING ITEMS

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BOARD REMARKS

None

AGENDA MAINTENANCE

The draft agendas for the September 22, 2020 meeting was reviewed and recommendations were made.

Concern was expressed about the new Boardbook Premier, noting that the old version of the board packet was easier to read and navigate.

The board expressed appreciation to everyone who worked hard this summer to ensure that the students are successful. It was noted that the technology team is quick to respond to help desk tickets, and teachers are being flexible when addressing students’ frustration with the amount of Zoom meetings.

ADJOURNMENT

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business to conduct, President Broy declared the meeting adjourned at 8:23 p.m.

Board President

Board Secretary