

Official Minutes of the  
Oak Park Board of Education District 97  
260 Madison Street, Oak Park  
May 28, 2024 Special Business Meeting

This meeting was held in-person and virtually using Livestream. Board members met in person along with Administration.

President Kearney called the meeting to order at 6:02 p.m.

Present: Moore, Ross Dribin, Kim, Hurd Johnson, Spurlock, Kearney

Absent: Burns

Also Present: Superintendent Dr. Ushma Shah, Assistant Superintendents Dr. Luis De Leon & Patrick Robinson, Assistant Superintendent of Finance & Operations Dr. Sheila Johnson, Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources & Equity Dr. Natacia Campbell Tominov, Chief Learning & Innovation Officer Dr. Ebony Lofton, Chief Technology Officer Michael Arensdorff, Senior Director of Communications Amanda Siegfried, Senior Director of Data Analytics Anna Colaner, Senior Director Human Resources Dr. Christine Zelaya, Senior Director of Buildings & Grounds John Pahlman and Lonya Boose Director/Board Secretary.

ROLL CALL

**OPEN SESSION**

President Kearney motioned that the Board move into Open Session of the Special Business Meeting at 6:58 p.m. All present members of the Board were in agreement. The Board convened in Open Session at 7:18 p.m.

OPEN  
SESSION

**3. PUBLIC COMMENT**

Pam Gaffney & Sabrina Maggio

Representing collective OPTA members of Brooks: Recognize teachers as humans. Community perception that teachers are immune to trauma, disrespect, etc. does not reflect reality. We have feelings, families, and priorities, and many of us have experienced trauma and disrespect. We need to be supported.

After community concerns about staffing changes, within 24 hours 17 newly posted positions were rescinded. We hope similarly you will listen today to our experiences and our proposed solutions. We want to work in unity with the Superintendent and School Board towards collective efficacy. To aid this united work, we are sharing examples of some problems we face daily in our school buildings:

Chronic tardiness. Some students consistently arrive at each class period in their day 10-15 minutes late, missing critical instruction and sometimes the beginning of an activity and disrupting fellow classmates. Currently we have students with hundreds of recorded tardies for the 2023-2024 school year. To our knowledge, there has been little to no action addressing this issue. Physical altercations; Physical fights are common throughout the day, with some students having multiple fights during the year. To our knowledge, there has been little to no action addressing this issue. Inconsistent administration response to student behavior. Teachers are often not told when students have consequences for behavior. Also, when students are removed from school as a consequence, sometimes it is recorded as “on vacation” or “mental health day”. This inaccurate reporting prevents us from truly understanding the scope of these issues.

PUBLIC  
COMMENT

Class size; These vary significantly; especially for electives and “non-core” classes, they are very large. A class size of 30 is not conducive to learning. Often, classes with co-teaching or push-in services are largest. General education students are added to keep special education students below the 30% limit. Legality does not make it best for students.

Cell phone policy. “Away for the day”, either in a backpack or locker, is not working. Many students push these boundaries during the year, forcing teachers to constantly address use and violations. Taking away their phone and returning it at 3:30 is not discouraging this behavior. Policy states after three violations, a parent is required to come get the device back. This does not happen, but should. Teachers bringing up these challenges or policy questions are labeled “complaining” or “difficult”. Some feel they may face retaliation for voicing concerns. Far more feel this way but are too afraid to speak tonight.

### Kelly Belmont

Speaking as a member of OPTA: We hope these examples help you understand what happens daily in our buildings. We think conditions at Brooks and Julian would improve with the following ideas:

1. Smaller and consistent class sizes.
2. Student accountability - rules and consequences implemented to strengthen the school community.
3. Consistent, comprehensive, sensible cell phone plan.
4. Adding back third assistant principal; returning to grade level APs.
5. Moving administration, including assistant principals and student success coaches, to offices throughout the building.
6. Schedule redesign:
  - a. Daily physical education and movement for middle school students.
  - b. Shorter class periods daily, not every other day.
  - c. No more than 3 consecutive academic hours of core classes before lunch.
  - d. Elimination or redesign of Academic Encore and SOAR, as both leave students with too much idle time.
7. More reading and math Interventionists, maybe one per grade level, to allow more students to receive tiered interventions.
8. District staff with work directly connected to middle schools should move into offices at Brooks and Julian.
9. Daily visibility of school leadership to parents, students, and teachers. As stakeholders we are overlooked and this visibility is crucial.
10. Formal curriculum adoptions for every core class to assist struggling learners in the general education classroom and multilingual students is needed immediately.
11. Student code of conduct and handbook enforcement to accurately reflect behavioral consequences.
12. Return of honor roll and celebrations of academic success, not only celebrations for athletics. This drives student motivation and self-esteem and creates a positive classroom culture.
13. Support janitorial staff and maintenance teams to keep up with our school environment. A clean environment is paramount.

We believe in collective efficacy and will use collective action to ensure we are heard. Thank you for considering our comments.

### Joel Blecha

Hello, I am Joel Blecha, and I am a kindergarten teacher at Irving. Dr. Shah, I heard last week you were willing to collaborate with teachers. This foundation should be based on Dr. Shah coming into the schools

so you can see teachers do the work that we pride ourselves on. I'd be thrilled to show you the great work we're doing in kindergarten. As Julian's school year comes to a close, the multiple holds and lockdowns due to student fights have sadly become a commonplace event.

I'll read to you from a text thread with my son from just this past Thursday. He said, "We're at lunch and we had to go in from recess because there's an ambulance and a fire truck outside." I wrote back, "Are you safe? He said, "Yeah, we're all fine. It's over now, we are used to it."

Another time, my child saw an all-out fight in the school gym, and students recorded it on their phones. He commented "You know how it is at Julian mom, fire alarms, fights, and what the f is happening now. Everyone in this room can agree that our children are becoming desensitized. Currently there are only 3 hallway monitors at Julian that also have to split their attention during lunch and recess. Please reconsider an assistant principal at each grade level, which is how it used to be when my 15-year-old son was a student. This would allow administrators to build relationships with students and ensure that student behavior is addressed in a timely way.

#### Hannah Boudreau

Proud OPTA union member, once again approaching this board and administration with a heavy heart. Simply, our middle schools are not safe. My mother is a retired public-school educator, former superintendent, and principal of over 30 years. My brother is a former public-school teacher and administrator who left the public sector to serve as a school principal in the IL Department of Youth Corrections. Recently my mother expressed concern for my brother's safety serving in the correctional system. His response was that our family should be much more concerned with my well-being. He recalled a time when he worked as a dean in a public school, when he was followed home and threatened by known gang members from his school. The students were allowed back to school with no accountability or consequences, while his family feared for their safety, including his three young children who witnessed the incident.

This reminds me of what I see frequently in our middle schools. Students engage in physical or verbal altercations and then are just sent back to class without consequences or accountability. If a suspension happens to occur, attendance is marked as "vacation" or "mental health day", not ISS or OSS - why? To alter reporting numbers to ISBE? To pretend we don't have an issue? Why are colleagues placed on administrative leave during investigation for attempting to keep students safe for over 200 days? Students can assault each other and staff and return to class, while the adults are disciplined? What message does this send to students? Help this make sense, because it is absurd. We don't feel safe to make a simple decision or hold students accountable for fear of our own jobs.

*Every single* verbal and physical fight I've helped investigate as a social worker can be traced back to cell phone usage. "Away for the day" is great in theory, but it is not working. Students do not have the self-discipline to follow this. Studies show removing cell phones from schools improves academic performance, reduces bullying, and improves students' overall mental health and well-being. Students use their phones for a variety of activities which distract from learning. Recently a teacher had students write down how many notifications they received in one hour. These 20 students collectively tallied 737 notifications. This is not healthy; this is not ok.

One study found it can take students up to 20 minutes to refocus after cell phone distraction. Why have the adults failed to implement a zero-cell phone use policy in our schools? Why can't we join thousands of other districts in using locking pouches (like Yondr) so students can focus on learning and engaging appropriately with each other? It's about a \$60,000 investment to implement at our middle schools, but aren't our kids worth it? Many of our students lack basic social and emotional skills, and cell phones

aren't helping. I urge this board to please step up and act now to create and apply policy. Be agents for positive change and help our students. Relocate admin offices to schools. Get to know our students and build relationships. Help sub. Be present with us. Thank you.

#### Adrienne Court

I am a Nationally Board-Certified Teacher, speaking as a member of OPTA. It's important to start by sharing positive experiences for our students this school year. Every student had the chance to hear from 11 Career Professionals at Career Exploration Days, which Ms. Barlich and myself planned. About 60 students grades 6-8 were exposed to a career and college readiness curriculum, alongside the snap and read tool, through advisory to support decoding of non-fiction text as part of my Administrative Internship. MAP Data from Fall to Winter showed 70% of these students met their Winter Growth Target in the Area of ELA. In my 7th grade electronics course, students used the design process to create custom night lights for 70 Kindergartners across the district. This is only some of the authentic learning opportunities created for Julian students this year. I feel honored to work with my amazing colleagues who provide similar experiences for our students.

Despite enriching curricular experiences, we have seen an uptick in violence. Recordings of fights, social media voting, and digital scheduling of fights amplify the issue. Five weeks ago I witnessed a student assault a colleague who was simply upholding the expectation of class attendance. A voluntary staff meeting was held, but still there is no remedy or recognition of harm. The fight last Thursday delayed the start of career day, had the entire school on hold for almost an hour, and resulted in 4 staff member injuries. Despite requests for direction, no administrator came to speak with the 45 community members present, and we teachers had to continually advocate for a plan. After the hold was lifted, there were countless schoolwide pages for students whose parents had come to pick them up early because they didn't feel safe.

Additionally, the lack of locker usage by students creates added safety concerns. Students dump belongings in locker bays and stairwells, creating tripping hazards. Students prop doors or text friends to let them in, leaving staff concerned about building security. We appreciate the staff listening session last Monday that Gavin and Nancy attended and district administrators present in our building since the last board meeting. However, we have yet to see meaningful changes at Julian this year or new positions created to support next school year.

Our middle schools need:

1. Clear, enforced cell phone policy requiring phones away for the school day. During rotation 1 of career day, student phones were collected to ensure presenters had students' full attention. Of 500 completed exit surveys, only 5 students mentioned allowing their phones as an area of improvement. This shows that given systems and structure, students will rise to the occasion.
2. Attendance report taken following the first 10 minutes of each class period and action to identify unverified students who were previously present in the school day. How can teachers support students' academic growth if there are no policies to ensure attendance? How can we expect students to feel they belong at school if nothing happens with this data to support their emotional wellbeing?
3. Return to 3 Assistant Principals in our middle schools, 1 per grade level. Since pivoting to 1 Assistant Principal overseeing discipline 3 years ago, there has been yearly turnover at Julian. Our most recent person resigned before the end of the school year. Turnover will continue because it is too much work for one person. Returning to 3 APs will allow proper data collection and implementation of restorative practices with fidelity.

4. Instructional Coach to support the vast number of non-tenured teachers. This creates a safe and collaborative space for new teachers to feel supported, encouraging taking risks to grow their practice.
5. Promote from within and respect staff in our buildings. Last year when the middle schools were restructured, 12 staff members were told to reapply for their jobs. Of these, only 3 are still employed at District 97. We started this school year with only 1 of 6 APs returning, partly because the District could not commit to which school each person would be assigned to. Qualified internal candidates applied for the vacant AP roles, yet ELIS shows Julian's now-resigned AP of Culture and Climate was deficient in her administrative endorsement. Please consider retaining institutional knowledge which promoting from within brings our schools.

Our school community is hurting. I ask that we lean into teachers' voices and create systems to allow students to feel safe, engaged, and a sense of belonging. I appreciate the time Mr. Filloposki extended to support our school community before his official start date. I look forward to collaborating at the June 5 planning meeting on meaningful changes for our school.

#### Deborah Berry

Resident of Oak Park since 1992, with 2 daughters that matriculated through school systems in District 97. I'm here to listen, provide insight, and hopefully be part of the solution to change. I was part of the spearheading committee for Project Unity of Apple Organization created in the 90s.

I want everyone in attendance to know that what is happening at Julian is "not normal, not acceptable, and is deplorable". The continued violent fighting, verbal abuse and harassment from students, students calling African American students the "N" word. This is a terrible "culture" that has been in our schools more aggressively since 2012. In 2012, my granddaughter experienced "bullying" at Longfellow.

This culture of bullying, fighting, harassing is commonplace and has to stop. District staff must acknowledge this serious problem and stop "tiptoeing around" this unacceptable cruel behavior. It is not being aggressively and appropriately dealt with, causing mental health challenges for some students and dislike or disengagement for others.

Board members, parents, staff, we cannot go another day allowing out of control fights and verbal abuse to be normal. I am here to offer assistance in whatever capacity to stop this violence that is eating away at the spirit of our students.

This violent behavior is not conducive to learning and takes away from a great school experience. We must act now to change this culture. Children must know that violence and harassment will not be tolerated. Discipline policies must be reviewed because they are not working. Parents and children must be held accountable for these actions. District 97 owes our students a peaceful and healthy learning environment.

#### Clare Brooks

Hi, I am Clare Brooks. I love working for a district where I can put up a trans children poster in my classroom. I like that I can talk about white fragility and other topics that are being banned. The reason why I am up here is to express the concern I have regarding the high turnover rate in D97. Eight of our best teachers, of which five were teachers of color and one was an LGBTQ+ teacher, left this year. None received an exit interview.

In the Julian 2020/2021 school year, 20 teachers, seven AP or support staff, and countless TA's left. 12 of those 20 people were either people of color or members of the LGBTQ community. This past year, nine teachers have left. How is this not a cause for concern? No one has checked in on our school. The data is right in front of us in the five essential survey results for these years. Yet, no one is listening to the data or our voices for concern. Please listen to teachers' voices as we are the experts.

#### Aaron McManus

Hello, I'm Aaron McManus. First and foremost, as the parent of an Oak Park fifth grader who is about to start middle school, this is a really grim situation. We aren't even able to deliver safety to our students. I want to ask you: are you treating this like a transformation? I firmly believe that transformational efforts are necessary for D97. It's not enough to make a few changes when bigger topics need to be addressed. Our engagement on morale scores is horrible. We keep losing staff in more ways than one.

Children cannot learn properly if they don't feel safe at school, and teachers can't teach if they don't feel safe at work. The battle between admin and teachers, and parents and admin, turns our children into the battleground. Communication, collaboration and transformation is needed to create systems that give people the ability to separate facts from weaponized fiction. We need working groups with specialized knowledge expertise, to help solve the district's issues. We need transformation with the seriousness it deserves and a shift away from dictatorial leadership styles and to true collaboration. Let's engage everyone in meaningful ways so that we can make our schools a safe place.

#### Elementary Student

I am a 5th grader at Lincoln. I am just a kid, but I have a voice, and anyone's voice can be very powerful. I learned this because I used my voice as Student Council President. Myself and all Lincoln students used our voices to raise \$3,600.42 to donate to help immigrants, to create a school-wide Earth Day event and day of action, and to celebrate veterans by writing nearly 300 letters that were recently mailed. I'm sure the Student Councils or Student Leadership Teams at other elementary and middle schools did amazing work too.

My parents work in Oak Park schools, so I know there is a lot going on. I ask any district employee or board member to please reach out to students like me so we have a voice in the upcoming decisions which affect my peers and teachers. We care a lot about this and our voices are important. Lastly, thank you to Ms. Thompson and Ms. Tyler for working with the Student Council this year and for being awesome.

#### Megan Jackson

I'm here to talk about the need for more co-taught classrooms to create a true feeling of belonging for neurodivergent students and their families. Also, this would address other current issues facing our district, like the lack of physical safety at middle schools and the need for added support staff at all schools.

My husband and I chose to buy a house in south Oak Park because we believed our family would feel a sense of belonging. I am neurodivergent, and as an interracial couple with biracial children, we hoped Oak Park would challenge the status quo. My neighborhood and local school are littered with "You Matter" and "You Belong" signs. I wanted this place to celebrate divergence as much as it celebrates diversity.

I recently transitioned from public school teaching to special education advocacy, supporting many families navigating our district's special education and MTSS processes. Unfortunately, I have seen too many instances of harm and wrongdoing to stay silent.

Bias against neurodivergent people is pervasive and seems entrenched in our schools and community. Teachers have said they wished students with ADHD would “just be more motivated”; for some, if they can’t see the disability, it doesn’t exist. Non-speaking Autistic students go years without progress because no one thinks they can. Students with anxiety and sensory processing disorders are branded with behavior problems and are isolated away from their class. Students struggle for years with reading and spelling, whose parents are told their children don’t come to class “ready to learn”; for some reason we just can’t say Dyslexia. Parents are constantly called to pick up their children because staff cannot support them. I’ve even heard my neighbors complain about neurodiverse children and realize they’re talking about me, too.

There is a solution: increasing co-taught classrooms district wide is a concrete action aligning with the promise to use universal design for learning. A special education teacher in the room all day ensures the support and expertise needed to make general education classrooms viable options for inclusion. With this wave of potential cuts, I have heard some of the few current co-taught classrooms may be removed. Also, I know of one co-taught special education teacher who is pulling students out of the classroom to ensure students in other classes are receiving their resource minutes. This completely opposes the ethos of the co-taught model and is disingenuous to parents who believe their child has a general and special education teacher all day.

Our incredible special education teachers are doing profound and impactful work daily with our most vulnerable students. These teachers uniquely understand neurodivergent students, and we should be increasing their numbers in each building through co-taught programming. From my experience as a general education teacher, having another credentialed teacher in the room all day alleviates stress and pressure, making the job more fun. If we want to foster a community of belonging for all, we must confront our biases against neurodivergent people and listen when children and families speak of mistreatment in our schools.

My neighbors say “I’ve only had positive experiences in the district.” Shouldn’t every family be entitled to this? Or is it a privilege for those who align with the status quo? What saddens me most is the warnings about retaliation, of potential harm to me or my family because I advocate for all our children to be treated with dignity and respect, and because I encourage families to exercise their educational rights under the law. Neurodiverse families are afraid if they speak out on the ways they are being harmed, their already struggling children will bear the backlash.

I hope Oak Park is not actually a place where the status quo is upheld and those who diverge are punished. I hope we will celebrate neurodivergence, not ignore or malign it. It’s time District 97 lives up to its promises of equity and inclusion. Expanding co-taught programming can be the start. Our children’s futures depend on it.

#### Stacey Belmont

I have 4 children currently in D97. My wife is a teacher at Brooks; however, my words are my own and responsibility for them is solely mine. I am a clinical psychologist and founder and clinical director of Belmont Depression and Anxiety Center in Chicago, which specializes in treating anxiety disorders and depression from adolescence through adulthood. From those perspectives, I’d like to share my thoughts on school safety, the adolescent mental health crisis, and the well-being of our teachers.

Many teachers tonight have discussed school safety and the role of cell phones in the worsening fight culture at Julian and Brooks. Both schools have social media channels dedicated to promoting and encouraging this culture. While it is not uncommon for teenagers with raging hormones to engage in fighting, these platforms magnify and intensify these fights to be out of control and beyond typical

teenage behavior. I have worked in adolescent inpatient settings with very dysregulated children who were often aggressive with other kids as well as adults. From what I have heard about these schools, the environment is worse than anything I ever experienced on those wards. I'm concerned for the well-being of our children trying to learn in these environments, and for our teachers who frequently intervene in almost-daily fights, risking their own physical and emotional safety.

Cell phones intensify the fighting culture, making it unsafe for our kids. Phones also negatively impact our kids' emotional safety. Our kids have never known life without cell phones, yet research on the impact of social media among adolescents is consistent. A recent NIH review discussed a preponderance of evidence linking social media use and depression, anxiety, increased risk for suicide and self-harm, and poor academic performance.

Simultaneously, we are seeing the impacts of COVID shutdown on our struggling children. Anxiety and depression rates among adolescents are substantially higher now than pre-pandemic. Many reviews and meta-analyses on the NIH website and other academic journals support this finding. We are living through a youth mental health crisis.

We have big problems here. While we are not at fault for the global pandemic or our growing technological world, we are not excused from the responsibility of mitigating these harmful effects. Our collective duty is to enact both cell phone and behavioral policies that are consistently enforced and supported by administration. It's important to also have proper staffing to support our kids as they learn to regulate emotions, manage conflict, and learn skills to thrive throughout their lives. This means adding support roles in schools, who interact with students daily, and having enough in-house administrative personnel to handle unsafe and unhealthy behavior, with clear and consistent expectations for behavior and enforced consequences when behavior is harmful.

For parents, it is our job to support a reasonable behavior code at home and to back up school staff who care for our children daily and try to provide them with skills they will need as adults. Our district has some of the most talented and highly educated teachers in the state, and they work in environments that are frankly untenable, frequently risking their own personal safety, even without training in CPI. Our job is to back them up and take them seriously if they ask for help at home with behaviors they witness and try to manage at school. One day our children will one day have consequences for their behaviors. If there aren't consequences at home and school, they will have a rough transition into adulthood.

We have the opportunity to change the trajectory of our middle schools, and ultimately that of the lives of our kids. It is our collective and ethical responsibility. Our children deserve a learning and social environment where they feel safe, are supported in making behavioral changes when they make mistakes, and are held accountable for their actions so they can learn from them, where they also receive quality academic instruction. Our teachers need to feel safe in their work environments so they can be effective in their roles.

I ask you to work on a unified behavioral code for both schools, with clearly laid out expectations and consequences, and to require administrative compliance with enforcement of the code. Work with teachers to create a cell phone policy to promote a healthy learning and social environment for our kids, and require enforcement of that policy. Take teacher requests and reports seriously as you help re-envision the structure and culture of our district.

Kate OKeefe



I am a 6th grade teacher at Julian, this is my 8th year in D97 and my 20th as an educator. I live in the community and both my kids went to Holmes; my son is a 7th grader at Brooks and my daughter finished her freshman year at OPRF.

To start, I want to say I love being a teacher, I love my fellow Julian teachers, I love my 6th graders and I appreciate their families' support.

I agree with those calling for APs for each grade of middle school, that phones need to truly be away for the day, and that our students deserve a clean school and better, greener, safer space to play.

However, tonight I want to talk about instructional time. As an L&L teacher, I teach all the language arts, writing, speaking and listening, reading information and reading literature standards - over 40, not counting sub-standards. I have too much to teach in too little time. I always search for the most efficient way to teach something instead of the most engaging or most creative. It's frustrating year after year to see data that shows too many of our students are not proficient at reading or writing according to the IAR.

At our recent Super Team meeting, we were shown data comparing our district's elementary schools with the middle schools, as well as with "peer districts". Some of the data included:

- Students' sense of belonging drops from 69% in grades 3-5 to 39% in 6-8.
- IAR test scores go down from over 50% meeting/exceeding in 5th grade to below 50% meeting/exceeding in 6th.
- Our test scores are the lowest of "peer districts" in both 6th and 7th grades.

We've been presented with disappointing data for as many years as I've been a teacher at Julian. Two years ago, they made the same comparison to peer districts, but also listed salaries of teachers in peer districts - I suppose to point out that we don't deserve to be paid as well as we are. I think one of the major reasons we don't perform as well as peer districts in reading and writing is because students spend a lot less time at our middle schools learning those subjects. Share data.

I shared this information with Dr. Lawrence several weeks ago, and she told me the schedule is not in her control and I should volunteer to be on the schedule committee, led by Dr. DeLeon. I reached out to Dr. DeLeon and Dr. Shaw, and Dr. Shaw ended up meeting with me. She seemed to agree that we need more time, and suggested scheduling another meeting to discuss the subject. I am bringing this to you tonight because I want all stakeholders to be aware, including board members and parents.

I believe students should have Language Arts class every day for at least 70 minutes to allow more time for reading fluency practice, vocabulary and grammar. These are essential components of literacy instruction that have been neglected for too long. I don't think we can afford to wait another year or two for an improved schedule.

To get any reading support in our district, students need to score below the 25th percentile. Students who consistently score between the 26th and 60th percentiles, not proficient readers or writers, will never have the chance to catch up. Students who arrive in 6th grade already reading and writing well continue to excel. Where could this time come from? Two classes at Julian have no standards or curriculum - Advisory and SOAR both meet for 185 minutes per week. I think this time could be better spent.

I ask you to please encourage our administration to revise the middle school schedule so we have a minimum of 350 minutes of Language Arts per week, 70 minutes per day, and to allocate the resources necessary to staff this change. More time in Language Arts would benefit our students, and reducing the

total number of students each teacher sees would allow them to know students better and give more timely feedback. This is what our students need and deserve.

### Stephanie Suerth

Co-President of OPTA, today speaking as an individual member of OPTA. I'd like to start by sharing amazing work in our middle schools. I'm at Brooks, so I will lean heavily on what I know.

- Every day, OPTA members create and teach curriculum and work with students to meet their needs and assure their successes. They meet before and after school hours to tutor students and provide retakes and quiet spaces. They work with related services, case managers, and admin to ensure the physical and emotional needs of students are met.
- Every day, OPTA members coach students in athletic competitions and bring kids to state level competitions in cross country, track and field, Special Olympics, etc. (Gives specific examples)
- Every day, OPTA members host clubs and extracurricular activities after school hours and promote community through activities across grade levels. (Gives specific examples)
- OPTA members are winning awards and accolades. (Gives specific examples) OPEF recognizes a D97 teacher yearly through the Stazek Award and James Gates Scholarship. There are over 100 National Board-Certified Teachers (many at the middle schools) and equivalents in our related service providers.
- Every day, OPTA members complete non-teaching duties related to our jobs: grading papers, phone calls, replying to emails, buying lunches, providing incentives, etc.

Why do I bring up these positive things? Two reasons: first, we are humans with negativity bias, which evolved potentially as one way the brain tries to keep us safe. Second, D97 supports PBIS, which preaches the ratio of positive praise statements to negative interactions should be 5:1.

As teachers, we are inundated with the negative, which is often loud and proud. Simultaneously there is not much praise for the work we do. If our educators perceive nothing being done to address the negative, we will dwell on it.

Fighting has increased in middle schools. Teachers are on administrative absences for false accusations made while trying to break up fights. At least 3 incidents of educator injury have happened in our schools from breaking up fights or from simply doing our jobs. False accusations have been made during public comment and on social media about our educators without correction made to protect staff. We have a student-family and discipline handbook that is not enforced or practiced.

Our perception is our reality and will continue to be until we either (a) change the reality or (b) provide transparent and comprehensible communication about what is the reality.

The statistics are growing:

- Between 1997 and 2001, 1.3 million acts of violence were committed against teachers.
- In 2011-2012, 9% of educators reported being physically threatened and 5% being physically attacked.
- By 2014, that number skyrocketed to 80% of educators across the country reporting having been victimized at school.
- June of 2021, 33% of teachers surveyed "reported they experienced at least one incident of verbal and/or threatening violence from students (e.g., verbal threats, cyber bullying, intimidation, sexual harassment) and 29% reported at least one incident from a parent of a student. Fourteen percent of teachers said they had been victims of physical violence from students... Eighteen percent of school psychologists and social workers, 15% of school administrators, and 22% of other school staff reported at least one violent incident by a student."

- In 2023, a School Psychology study found “Violence against teachers is a public health crisis that has devastating effects on school personnel well-being, health, and retention, as well as students’ educational outcomes...In the current study, 43.7% of teachers reported experiencing at least one verbal threat, physical assault, and/or property damage, with verbal threats being the most prevalent form of victimization...”
- February 2024, a study in Ohio found that “Of the teachers surveyed, 65% reported at least one verbal threat or property damage incident by a student before the pandemic.”

Did you know there is now a Journal of School Violence? It was established in 2002 and currently has 23 volumes. Of all the experiences our educators share this evening, we want you to seriously consider the solutions we’ve presented:

- A third assistant or associate principal added back to middle school to support student needs, including restorative practices, and educator needs, like evaluations and professional development.
- Add a fourth social worker to each middle school. NASW suggests a ratio of 1:250. Our students need support.
- Require Board Policy be enforced. Specifically, I note Policy 7:190 around Student Behavior and Policy 5:22 which states “The Board of Education believes that a staff member should be able to work in an environment free of threatening speech or actions. Threatening behavior consisting of any words or deeds that intimidate a staff member or cause anxiety concerning his/her physical and/or psychological well-being is strictly forbidden. Any student, parent, visitor, staff member, or agent of this Board who is found to have threatened a member of the staff will be subject to discipline or reported to the authorities.”
- Require the Student Family Handbook be enforced, specifically students’ responsibility to “uphold the rights of and exhibit respect for all school personnel and fellow students” and teachers’ right to “be treated with courtesy, respect, and dignity” and to “work in a safe environment that maximizes staff performance and student learning.”
- Enforce Away for the Day Policy now, so students are prepared in the Fall.
- Require, or at least find ways for, district level administrators to at least sub once a week (or more) and be visible to educators in buildings.
- Recognize work that is happening and give credit where due.
- Visit our schools during the day and experience our joy with us, but recognize challenges too.

I don’t know what the barriers to these solutions are, but we, the OPTA, would like to work with you. OPTA is doing the work every day regardless of the circumstance and of the barriers. Work with us.

#### Jessica Todd

I have 3 kids in district 97, 2 of which are at Julian. On Thursday May 23, 2024, Julian was put on hold. At the end of the day, parents received an email stating there was “a student in need of support” and “no other students were impacted by the situation”. This is not true. My child asked me to speak on her behalf today so you understand the impacts on her. Her story starts over a year ago.

I received this voicemail on February 24, 2023. I have saved it on my phone since. “Good morning Ms. Todd. This is the CNA at Julian. I’m calling you about your child. She is fine however I wanted to inform you that unfortunately there was an altercation with another student and she was hit multiple times on the head, shoulder, face and neck. We noted mild swelling on her right eyebrow and red marks on her left shoulder and neck. We kept her for 30 minutes to ice and observe her. She was alert and oriented and we sent her back to class. Ms Thomas, our assistant principal will also be reaching out to you. She’s our principal for discipline. If you have any questions my number is 708-524-7648. Thank you. Have a good day.”

By the time of this call, my child had been physically assaulted in her classroom in front of her teacher, walked out of the classroom side by side with the student who attacked her, and treated for injuries by the school nurse. I wasn't informed of my child's attack until after the nurse office deemed her fit to be returned into a classroom environment. My child was not safe.

For months prior to my child being attacked, I feared my child would be harmed. On December 15, 2022, I first contacted the Julian administration with concerns about what my child was witnessing in her classroom. I was also concerned about things being said to my child and how she was being treated. For over 2 months, I reached out to Julian. My child was told "I'm going to throw a chair at you.", "My child was told "I'm going to slap you." My child witnessed students locking the classroom door so the teacher and certain students couldn't reenter the room. My child was followed to the bathroom and had her feet kicked while in a stall.

My child was not safe. After leaving the school office the day my child was physically attacked, I called a client to tell them why I had not been responsive, and I learned their child had also been hit by a student. Together we realized our children had been attacked by the same student. My child was not safe. Their child was not safe. Our children were not safe.

Thursday May 23, 2024, was not a good day for anyone at Julian. There are various recordings of the occurrence that day. Unfortunately, my daughter has seen the fight. She has seen a video of the same student that attacked her over a year ago get in yet another physical altercation. I too have seen a video. I now have seen the type of hitting and punching that my child received and did not return, that I have taught her to never do in school and to never do in life, that is repeatedly occurring at her school.

Contrary to the email message sent, my child was impacted last week. She is not alone; all students were and continue to be impacted. The students at Percy Julian Middle School are not safe.

#### Jamie Winchell

I am an OPTA member and the teacher librarian at Julian. My husband Ryan is an OPTA member and 2nd grade teacher at Longfellow. We have 9 and 16 years in District 97 and are both National Board-Certified Teachers. We are Oak Park residents, and both our boys have been D97 students. We are invested in our schools, District 97, and Oak Park.

I want to share my perspectives on passes, cell phones, and safety at Julian. I want the administration to take action and make technical changes so next year is calmer, safer, and more organized:

A school-wide digital pass system: I have been advocating for this for 3 Julian administrations. This would put the onus on students for requesting a pass, and teachers would approve or deny the pass. There could be automatic passes for students to see a social worker, or other support personnel. The system can give real-time data about how often students are requesting passes and for what reasons. Hall monitors and any adult would be able to quickly check if a student has a pass. The system can block frequent flier students who tend to meet up in hallways or bathrooms. We could finally say goodbye to paper passes - 4,430 passes weekly and 315,416 annually, according to a 7th grader report in the March 9, 2023 Jayhawk Journal. This includes the "carbon copy passes" instituted last school year. Please research digital pass systems and implement an effective one for 2024-25.

A school-wide cell phone plan: "Away for the day except at lunch," 10-10 slogans, and daily reminders are not working because there are no consequences for violations. During lockdowns, I've had friends

text me for information because their students are texting each other rumors. Without cell phone distraction, I think social communication and problem solving would improve, as would academic engagement and commitment to community. In a May 1 article in the Washington Post, I learned there are middle schools adopting no phone policies - each student has a pouch, which is magnetically locked and unlocked when they enter and leave the building. A similar policy might be a culture shock, but I believe it will increase unity and trust at Julian. Please research school-wide cell phone plans and implement an effective one for 2024-2025.

Real, enforceable plans to keep students and staff safe: Follow-through and consequences for student fights are mysteries to me. Why was no follow through done when a student left marks on my arm in October? Where is the repair to harm done to my colleagues who have been physically assaulted this year? Where is the concern and follow-up for my multiple documented trauma responses from witnessing so much violence this year? We seem reactionary regarding student aggression, but I want to be preventative and proactive. We need a dean of discipline. We need more student-facing professionals to support us with the social emotional needs of students. Please research student and staff safety plans and implement effective ones for 2024-2025. Digital passes, a cell phone plan, and safety plans are administrator tasks and technical changes. I will be more than willing to help make these changes adaptive to Julian.

#### Dolan Anderson

Our teachers have been doing so much for us. Since I first went to kindergarten at Lincoln, I walked through the doors not knowing what to expect, but all my teachers have been great. Our teachers have not been getting the respect they should. Without teachers we wouldn't be where we are in society. All of us had multiple teachers guide them throughout childhood, and we wouldn't be where we are without them. This is why we're here today, for the teachers that educate us. With the fights, it is not going well in our schools. We need to help teachers with this and we need more attention on this.

#### Katie Hogan

I have a 6th grader at Julian and a 2nd grader. I am also speaking as an educator finishing my 23rd year. I want to talk with the board about questions I want Dr. Shah to answer for you.

How has this happened? How has the management that you hired in this district so drastically not worked? I have sent Dr. Deon email after email about problems since the beginning of the year. As examples: an adult can walk into Julian and walk around the entire building without being stopped. They don't have basic things like, until recently, visitor passes. On parent night which as a teacher is a great night but also dangerous because sometimes you have upset parents.

There are custodial issues, To Dr. Shah: How are you managing the adults who are supposed to manage the leaders of these buildings? Something is really broken here. We hired you as a community member as somebody we trusted to lead this district, but after the last board meeting and the comments there, I heard many red flags. We don't need PowerPoints or consultants. Teachers are asking for basic things like copy paper.

The school is filthy, and the custodial heads and people who work there should be in your office tomorrow to solve this. That's what a strong leader does in a district. When you say something like "I want to hear more student voices," I love it as a Youth Development professional. What I don't get is that you have the data and what our kids are saying right now. The data shows that from fall to spring when kids were asked about their relationship with teachers, it fell by four points. Anything more than two points is statistically significant. Other categories are a sense of belonging and engagement, school climate, and student safety. We were in the bottom 20% compared to the national

average so this is not a problem for all middle schools or a COVID situation. If it was not school-specific, these national numbers would drop as well, but they aren't.

There has been a lot of mismanagement of adults and it needs concrete action. It is ironic to me after all the educators spoke, you pulled up a PowerPoint of a triangle of tiered support. Who needs tier three support? The superintendent's office. It is currently dysfunctional. We should want to work together on this. We need somebody who can do the job, and if there isn't an autopsy done of what went wrong, then that person in the job isn't serious about change.

What I heard about the statistics reminded me of what I've seen teaching in CPS for 17 years. It is called juicing the stats and principals did it all the time to avoid reporting true explosion numbers. I love that you brought in Miss Schaer, a retired assistant principal, to help the middle schools. I spoke to her after the big fight and asked what the heck was going on. She said I haven't been able to even get into the PBIS system. We have just started writing behavior plans. How have we started writing behavior plans on May 20? Dr. Shah, you need to apologize to these teachers and to the community for the mismanagement of adults and so does Dr. Deon. This is what we need to change. Teachers, the community stands with you, we appreciate you, we will not let you down.

#### Karen Fogg

I'm a fifth-grade teacher and resident of Oak Park. When we send our fifth graders to middle school, it's hard to do and hard to say goodbye to them. When we go over to visit them, one of the highlights is seeing these kids really excited. We were greeted by one of the fire alarms that somebody pulled, so we lost about 15-20 minutes of presentation time and the kids didn't get to see everything they normally would. It was a lot of chaos and was kind of scary just walking on the street. During the Q&A section when fifth graders get to ask questions, one asked about the fights they had heard about at Julian. It was kind of shut down and not addressed. I realize it would have been difficult to answer, but the way it was addressed was dismissive.

I also wanted to address outdoor education, which is connected to what everyone has said here, be it collaboration or disconnecting from technology or bringing community together. For over 30 years, outdoor education has been part of the D97 Upper Elementary School experience, first in sixth grade, then after the Middle School's reform, it moved to fifth grade. From school to school, that outdoor education experience has always varied; some for 3 days/2 nights, others for one day experiences. Some went in the fall, others in winter or spring. Some went to Wisconsin or Indiana, others stayed in Illinois. The pandemic changed everything understandably. We are well past the pandemic, and Outdoor Ed as it was has slipped away from us, but many teachers would love to bring it back.

My school has been going to Camp Edward in East Troy, WI for decades. It's an old-fashioned YMCA camp, where students sleep in cabins, do archery and canoe, have campfires, etc. Though the activities are great, location is beautiful, and food is delicious, it is the social emotional learning and connectedness to nature and each other that are most impactful. Forming bonds and building community make it an invaluable experience. We have found going to Camp Edward is the highlight of the year for many fifth graders as well as chaperones.

For the past few years post-pandemic, we have had 3 outdoor education experiences, one in Oak Park and two in Laredo. Though all were fun, they can't compare to a 3-day experience. The one-day format does not allow teachers to see every student engaged in activities, nor does it provide time to form long-lasting connections to others and to nature. Time away from technology and traditional school structure allows students to explore a world many have never before experienced.

One of the arguments against reinstating the overnight experience is that all schools should have similar experiences. Each school has a unique outdoor experience that varies, just as other experiences and activities vary. Each school has a culture and climate unique to its population and immediate community. Not every school has a jazz band, a zero-waste lunch program, etc. Even special ed services vary.

Another argument has been addressing students who reside at Hephzibah Children's Home. Our school has had quite a few students from HCH attend Camp Edwards, and HCH has provided a staff member as chaperone, just like students with a parent as chaperone. Nothing is better than seeing a student struggling academically shine as an archer, or a mother overcome her fear of water to canoe with her daughter. When seniors return to visit, the Camp Edward stories are the ones shared again and again. One senior said "Camp Edward is a core memory." Please consider supporting overnight outdoor education experiences. They enhance the learning of our fifth graders and contribute to and strengthen the district's vision of a portrait of an eighth grader.

#### Molly Greenwood

Hello my name is Molly, and I am a parent to a child in Julian. I would like to say I agree with previous statements said here about having a cell phone policy that works.

The main reason why I am here is to discuss D97 looking to hire outside contract workers for Custodial Staffing. I personally value the dedicated custodial staff, and want them to keep their jobs. But I also have concerns about having subcontractors in the schools. Our kids know the current custodians and trust them, and the custodians know the kids. Schools losing the permanent custodial staff would mean a great deal.

The current custodians know Beye's building inside and out, and work tirelessly to keep it running smoothly. Whenever Beye is holding an event, I know we can count on the custodians to help us track down equipment, find the circuit breaker box when an outlet goes overloaded, and then make suggestions about the best way to keep that from happening again.

The decision to move to a third-party contractor would adversely affect the day-to-day operations at Beye, as well as the sense of community that all Beye staff have worked hard to build. I hope that this plan is reconsidered and that the current custodial staff are retained.

#### John O'Brien

Hi, I'm John O'Brien, science teacher over at Julian, and I am an OPTA member. We have students from a wide array of backgrounds. That diverse culture enriches our lives, but what is not clear, why isn't there an unambiguous policy when it comes to students assaulting our staff members? This topic is alarming and mysterious. There is unequal and ineffectual discipline in the schools. What do I do if a student decides to clobber me for asking him to go to class? Will I be put on leave for 7 months for breaking up a fight and keeping a child from getting his head kicked in?

I have personally heard this question out loud from my coworkers, to themselves and others, because nobody at the district or in the administration will answer them. The policies of D97 are unclear and this makes staff feel unsafe. Why did one kid get suspended for throwing a milk carton and two others get spoken to for violence intimidation and destruction of property? Why does another get mental health days for assaulting a teacher, a teacher who was then slandered in this room by the parents?

This is the standard of equity in Oak Park right now. As a father who has a child going to Brooks, how can I answer their concerns properly if I don't even know the policy that this leadership has on violence in schools? Please give us something to work with.

**6. Superintendent Update**

(Board of Education President Kearney and Superintendent Shah moved the order of tonight’s agenda, the Superintendent Update was presented ahead of celebrations on the agenda.)

6.2 Superintendent Update

Dr. Shah provided an update to the community. This presentation is linked to the board packet, and also the livestream is available on the District 97 YouTube channel.

6.1 Celebrations

- Staff Appreciation Week was May 6-10, 2024. Principals and PTO’s annually come up with creative ways to thank our staff for their contributions. This year each of our schools, and the central office received dedicated funds to creating a positive inclusive team culture.
- “Those Who Excel” Honorees included:
  - Arnetta Thompson, Teacher
  - Dr. Christine Zelaya, Administrator
  - Tyra Banks, Teaching Assistant
  - Jessica Baylian, Teacher
  - Lindsey Kiska, Early Career Educator
- National Board-Certified New and Renewed Certified Staff, complete list is available online
- 2024 District 97 Retirees, Congratulations for your service and dedication to the students and families of Oak Park. Retirees were celebrated during a reception in their honor, Tuesday May 28, 2024.
  - Nancy Hoehne
  - Marion Ivey
  - Beth Lacey
  - John McCauley
  - Elizabeth Patterson
  - Mary Georgina Swanson
  - Debbie Taylor
  - James Zander

ACTION ITEMS

**7. ACTION ITEMS**

7.1 Consent Agenda

Spurlock moved, seconded by Kim that the Board of Education, of Oak Park Elementary School District 97 moves to approve the Consent Agenda as presented.

7.1.1 Personnel

7.1.2 Approval: Irving PTO Donation of 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Gift.

Ayes: Kearney, Kim, Hurd Johnson, Ross Dribin, Moore, Spurlock

Nays: None

Absent: Burns

Motion passed.



## 7.2 Action

### 7.2.1 SY25 OPTA Stipend Teacher Leadership Roles Committee Recommendation (5.14.24)

Kim moved, seconded by Ross Dribin that the Board of Education of Oak Park Elementary School District 97 moves to approve the SY25 OPTA Leadership Roles Committee Recommendation in the amount of \$637,500

Ayes: Kearney, Kim, Hurd Johnson, Ross Dribin, Moore, Spurlock  
Nays: None  
Absent: Burns  
Motion passed.

### 7.2.2 Memorandum of Understanding with Service Employees International Union, SEIU | Time and Attendance

Kim moved, seconded by Ross Dribin that the Board of Education of Oak Park Elementary School District 97 moves to approve the MOA agreement with SEIU for purposes of time and attendance tracking.

Ayes: Kearney, Kim, Hurd Johnson, Ross Dribin, Moore, Spurlock  
Nays: None  
Absent: Burns  
Motion passed.

## **8. DISCUSSION ITEMS**

### **8.1 Community Learning & Entrepreneurialism**

#### 8.1.1 Out of School Time | Update

Dr. Lofton provided an update on outside learning and partnerships. This included:

- Clubs, Activities and Music Learning Programs
- Field Trips
- Early Childhood Collaboration
- Community Partnerships

The complete presentation can be found linked to the board packet, or by viewing the livestream of the meeting on the district YouTube channel.

#### 8.1.2 Township of Oak Park Youth Services IGA Renewal (action 6.11.24)

The Oak Park Township is seeking continued support from Oak Park Elementary School District 97 via an intergovernmental agreement for the Youth Engagement Program. Said agreement will commence on July 1, 2024 and remain in place for two years pending Board approval. This agreement names District 97 as a participating government unit with the River Forest Township, School District 90, School District

200, Park District of Oak Park, River Forest Park District, Oak Park Public Library, and River Forest Public Library.

The Youth Engagement Program (formerly the Youth Interventionist Program) started in 1996 as a collaboration between all eleven taxing bodies in Oak Park and River Forest to address youth gang involvement, substance abuse, and violence in the communities. Currently, nine taxing bodies support the program. District 97's anticipated contribution to the Youth Engagement Program will total \$37,218 and \$38,483 for the 2024-25 school year and the 2025-26 school year respectively.

Approval of this agreement will be placed on the agenda for action at the June 11<sup>th</sup> Board of Education meeting.

### 8.2 Press Plus Issue 113 Policy Update: First Read (action 6.11.24)

Lonya Boose, Director and Board of Education Secretary, along with Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources and Equity presented the Board of Education with Press Plus Issue 113 policy highlights, or proposed changes under review. This process included discussion in open session of the Board, and request for action at a subsequent meeting.

The complete presentation can be found linked to the board packet, or by viewing the livestream of the meeting on the district YouTube channel.

## **9. CORE INSTRUCTION**

### 9.1 School Improvement Logic Models | Hatch, Holmes and Whittier Elementary Schools

\*This presentation will be presented at a later meeting.

### 9.2 Middle School Redesign Update

Dr. DeLeon provided the Board and community with a Middle School Update. This included information on Master Schedule and Culture, Climate and Safety. On June 5, 2024 the Middle Schools will come together to collaborate on planning for SY25. This meeting will create alignment and clarity across both schools. An update will be provided at the next meeting of the board related to this ongoing work and partnership with staff.

The complete presentation can be found linked to the board packet, or by viewing the livestream of the meeting on the district YouTube channel.

### 9.3 E-Learning Recommendation

District Administrators and members of the District 97 Education Council presented details of the e-learning plan for the upcoming school year. This presentation outlined the partnership with OPTA to create a plan for all grade levels, if and when, e-learning days are called in SY25. Grade levels, Pre-K – 2, Grades 3-5 and 6-8 planning details were outlined in this presentation. The team appreciated this level of partnership, to enrich the virtual instructional time.

**11. ADJOURNMENT**

All six present members of the Board were in agreement that the meeting be adjourned. There being no further business to conduct, President Kearney declared the meeting adjourned by voice vote at 12:31 p.m.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Board President

\_\_\_\_\_  
Board Secretary