

NEWS & RECORD

Board meetings have got to change, consultants tell Guilford school board

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HIGH POINT — Poor leadership by the Guilford County Board of Education risks undercutting school system progress, advisers told board members Saturday.

Board members also had a dim view of how well they've been doing together.

Michael Casserly, executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools, told board members about the practices and characteristics he said are associated with faster improvement in urban school districts.

Then he showed them the results of a survey they filled out. On three of the five indicators for being an effective school board, Casserly said, their answers would put them 51st out of 52 big district school boards surveyed.

"This doesn't sound to me like a board, by your own admission and in these indicators, that is functional, that looks anything like a board in an urban school district that significantly improves achievement on behalf of its kids," he said. "That's the bottom line. I'm sorry to say it flat out like that. Is it a failure? I'd look at it as more of an opportunity for you."

Board members seemed interested in getting and trying out advice on how to improve.

"I was really proud of them today," said Winston McGregor, executive director of the Guilford Education Alliance and the sole community spectator for the board's annual fall retreat. "I thought this was really good work."

All nine of the board members attended the day-long communication and governance training retreat held from about 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. in a meeting space at High Point University. One member had to leave early for a funeral, but otherwise everyone stayed for the whole presentation.

Superintendent Sharon Contreras also participated with the board members.

In recent months there have been tense moments and bitter communication among some board members, as well as tension between some board members and the superintendent.

The meeting facilitators were less interested in rehashing what could have been done better during a recent controversy over the district's graduation schedule than were board members.

Their most emphatic recommendation was board members need to shift how they spend most of their time in meetings.

The board needs to set three to five measurable goals for what students should be learning or achieving in Guilford County Schools and then spend about half of their meeting time monitoring progress toward those goals, the consultants said.

According to the averaged survey results, board members think they are spending about 13 percent of their meeting time on student achievement and student outcomes.

The consultants cautioned against simply holding longer meetings to pack in this new priority. So if board members go with this recommendation, they will face possibly tough choices about what they want to spend less time on.

It also presents a potential challenge to figure out how to do things differently for the superintendent and her staff who pull together the agendas for meetings.

Board members did not go into closed session at the retreat, even though one was listed on the agenda.

The board and superintendent spent the last part of the meeting working on narrowing possibilities for goals for the district and made plans to discuss choices at the next regular board meeting. They also agreed to take the facilitators up on their offer to meet with the board again.

Asked after the meeting whether the training was worthwhile, board members' responses ranged from "I'm here, aren't I," to high praise.

Board member Anita Sharpe leaned toward wait-and-see.

"We'll see how much we take back," she said. "I hope so."