Charleston Co. Schools gather feedback on new structure

By Nick Reagan
Published: Sep. 27, 2022 at 6:19 PM EDT | Updated: 12 hours ago

CHARLESTON, S.C. (WCSC) - The Charleston County School Board is making way for a new governance structure that will change the way district does business.

Board member Lauren Herterich announced on Monday that they plan to hold a special meeting at the end of the week to lay out the key elements that will drive the new organizational structure. This week, the district is wrapping up a series of community engagement sessions to get feedback from parents.

“The information from those meetings is being complied and on September 30th the board will have a working session to draft out goals and guardrails,” Herterich said. “Throughout the month of October, we will be working with [District Superintendent Don] Kennedy and his team to put interim goals and guardrails in place based on the input you all have provided at the community sessions.”

The new governing system is called Student Outcomes Focused Governance. It’s a system pushed out by the Council of Great City Schools that has been training board members on effective leadership for the last several months. Over the weekend, CGCS held training sessions for prospective board members as well.

Student Outcomes Focused Governance allows the elected board to focus on student achievement and less on the finer details of running a massive organization by redefining the priorities of the superintendent and elected board members. The concept is left open-ended and vague, even by the CGCS’s own publication on the idea.

“This concept, which offers a summation of the current literature on board behaviors and their relationship to improving student outcomes, is as simple as it can be confounding,” the document states.

Recently, the idea of redefining roles has been brought up in an attempt to divide the district’s policy manual, widely panned as an effort to give the superintendent more responsibility and power.

Kristen French is one of the board members leading the effort to restructure the governance. She says the policy manual discussion is not part of the current efforts.

“We don’t see that as part of our work right now. That’s something that the new board will have to take on,” French said. “It takes a lot of time to go through your policy manual and determine what the board needs to focus on and what is the superintendent’s responsibility.”

French says the system lays outs a set of goals and how they will be measured and then tasks the superintendent with meeting those goals. The board’s job is then to constantly evaluate the superintendent’s progress. French says that means the majority of future meetings would be dedicated to the goals and less about operational issues.
“Right now, we spend almost no time on student outcomes,” French said. “The ideal is to spend at least 50% of meeting time on student outcomes . . . that’s not going to happen immediately.”

Parents like Pamela Jouan-Goldman are uncomfortable with board members embarking on this effort so close to an election.

“It’s problematic for two reasons. One is, what have they been doing for the last couple of years that they haven’t figured out what they’re in charge of,” Jouan-Goldman said. “Second of all, how can you feel that you can put in place something for a new board to be in charge of? That’s not really your job.”

French says this entire process was supposed to take place last year and argues, despite the awkward timing, the new governance structure will benefit the new board.

“I think that having goals and guardrails based on the community’s input is a very helpful step forward for the new board and I hope that they will embrace these new goals,” French said. “I also think that there are really good consequences in getting this work done.”

Jouan-Goldman, who is also the chairperson for Constituent District 2 also questions the rushed effort to solicit community feedback.

“The big issue is that most people don’t even know about these meetings. As a parent, I received one robocall that said there was going to be a meeting and I received one email with a survey,” Jouan-Goldman said. “It’s very difficult to get to a meeting at six in the afternoon when you have dinner to get on the table and children to pick up from different practices.”

The board will compile all of the feedback they’ve received from the survey and the community meetings and develop guardrails that will be used in the new governance structure.

There are three board meetings scheduled before the Nov. 8 election, including a special called board meeting the day before election day.