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EDUCATION

Cautious hope for SFUSD. Dare we dream reform is real this time?

- By Laurance Lem Lee | Special to The Examiner |
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Cautious hope. Those are the words many who watch the San Francisco Unified School District are using to describe Sunday’s special board meeting on governance and outcomes. The seven Board of Education commissioners unanimously approved these two areas of focus, distancing themselves from the positions of former board members Alison Collins and Gabriela López, who were recalled in February.

When the idea to focus on governance and outcomes was first put forth in June, the message from the commissioners was “trust us.” Parents giving public comments were highly skeptical. One big part of the resolution was to suspend smaller focused board committee meetings on, for example, the district budget — leading parents to ask: Why suspend these committees and for how long?

The special Sunday board meeting commenced differently from many others.

AJ [Crabill](#) of Council of the Great City Schools, hired by the district to facilitate the Sunday workshop, had the seven commissioners and the new superintendent, Matt Wayne, sit around a table with pens and notebooks. His first question was stark: “Why do school systems exist?”

Crabill began, “Student outcomes don’t change until adult behavior changes.” Later he said, “The board has ingested some bad habits.” In his “long explainer” distributed prior to the meeting, Crabill [outlined](#) several suboptimal SFUSD current practices, such as “less than 1% of time each month is invested in monitoring progress toward our goals for student learning,” while instead encouraging alternate effective practices,

including, “significantly increased time at board meetings discussing student outcomes.”

What about social justice? Wayne, understanding the session, said, “Improving outcomes helps social justice.” Crabill, assenting, added, “If children leave schools with seeds planted to be great on their own terms ... with choice-filled lives, that is social justice.”

During the seven-hour meeting, the commissioners worked collaboratively and made concessions with one another and agreed on a working vision: “All SFUSD students will graduate as independent thinkers with a sense of agency who have mastered academic and creative skills to lead productive lives and contribute to our community.” They agreed on developing measurable goals related to third-grade literacy, eighth-grade math and college and career readiness. Final versions of the goals and other items from this governance process will follow community feedback.

The new focus on outcomes is long past due. Student data, shared for the first time on July 14, is disturbing. Preliminary spring 2021-22 [data](#) showed only 54.3% of SFUSD students at grade level for English language arts and only 45.5% at grade level for mathematics, compared with 56.4% and 50.6% before the pandemic. Only 28.7% of Hispanic students were at grade level in English language arts in 2022, compared with 31.1% in 2018-19. Only 9% of African American students were at grade level in math in 2022, compared with 13.7% in 2018-19.

Parents were already wary that the district was playing games with the data, avoiding the fuller story. Meredith Dodson [tweeted](#) on July 14, “Not helping to ‘regain trust with community’ when SFUSD’s social media shouts success of 86% high school graduation rate for our Black students, but then you dig one level deeper into the data and find only 24.7% of our Black students are leaving SFUSD ready for college & career.”

Another concern lingering in the back of many minds was prior efforts to address outcomes. A May 2022 [literacy resolution](#) prepared by parents and teachers

was stripped of recommended actions by district staff. Commissioners Matt Alexander and Mark Sanchez shrugged when parent after parent raised such concerns, and carried on.

The commissioners and superintendent were to meet again Tuesday evening with the same facilitator to discuss potential amendments to board policies and other operating procedures. The goal is delivery of a document articulating the district's vision, values, goals and guardrails by Oct. 25, as explained in a recent joint letter from SFUSD Board President Jenny Lam and Wayne.

Lam, speaking to the Chronicle on July 14, said, "This is the beginning of a process to establish the district's North Star goals for student outcomes."

Key to the work is public feedback. Indeed, how the public responds should have a significant effect on the commitment to student outcomes by San Francisco public education leaders.

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