

Minutes
Fresh Start Academy Advisory Board
Thursday, Nov. 21, 2019, 6:30 p.m.

The Fresh Start Academy Advisory Board met for the first time on Thursday, Nov. 21, 2019, at the Fresh Start Academy in Pomfret.

Board Members Present: Dr. Dianna Abney, chairman; Davida Usual, parent; Kim Johnson, Charles County Commissioners representative; Yolanda Christian, American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), Janice Wilson, Board of Education representative; Linda McLaughlin, Education Association of Charles County (EACC) representative; Christienne Coleman-Warren, Charles County NAACP representative; Dyotha R. Sweat, CCNAACP representative; and C.T. Wilson, Charles County Delegation representative

Absent: Catherine Meyers, Center for Children representative

Staff Members Present: Dr. Kimberly A. Hill, Superintendent of Schools; Amy Hollstein, Deputy Superintendent of Schools; Melissa Bruce, Fresh Start Academy program coordinator; Katie O'Malley-Simpson, Director of Communications/Media Relations

Dr. Abney opened the meeting at 6:32 p.m.

Dr. Abney presented her background and had everyone introduce themselves.

Melissa Bruce, program coordinator, presented information about Fresh Start Academy including an overview of the program, what schools must do before making a referral, program components, the use of Zones of Regulation, inclusion and involvement with the home school, and the transition process.

Ms. Bruce discussed requirements a school must complete before making a referral. She stressed that if the school does not submit a fidelity assessment, meaning it is implemented with quality, consistency, accuracy and integrity, the application will be denied.

Program components include academic, psychological and behavioral. Academics include grade-level curriculum, instructional technology and a low teacher-student ratio. Psychological includes individual and group counseling, crisis intervention and social-emotional learning. Behavioral includes modification and implementation of Behavior Intervention Plans, a behavior management program with points and levels and access to positive reinforcers and ongoing data collection, and analysis to guide decision making.

The Academy staff is using Zones of Regulation, a conceptual framework and curriculum for teaching students strategies for emotional and sensory self-management.

Involvement of the home school provides for inclusion in field trips, schoolwide events like assemblies, field days and classroom visits.

Involvement by staff consists of a minimum of four teacher visits, two counselor visits and two administrator visits. Additionally, staff participates in 20- and 30-day review meetings and

transition meetings, including a review of the child's progress and what comes after transition readiness is determined.

Mrs. Hollstein said the presentation is a high-level overview of Fresh Start Academy. Ms. Bruce said most of the information is provided on the ccboe.com website at <https://www.ccboe.com/index.php/fresh-start-academy>.

A question-and-answer session followed.

In response to a question, Ms. Bruce said the most common behaviors that would make a child eligible for Fresh Start Academy are property destruction and aggression toward teachers and students.

When asked how many students would have qualified for the program last school year, Mrs. Hollstein said the number would be small compared to the total student population, but eligible children have high needs. Since the program was not in operation last school year, it is difficult to estimate a number of eligible children as there is no supporting data. No more than 15 students will attend the program at one time.

Ms. Bruce further explained the transition process, which includes a points and level system and depends on the student. Each student will have a staff member who will support them and provide oversight to make sure students are able to carry over the skills learned at the Academy to their home schools.

In addition to the program coordinator, Fresh Start Academy has a transition specialist, a school psychologist, two teachers and four instructional assistants.

Students will be included in home-school activities like field trips and assemblies, and one of the program's instructional assistants will accompany the child on these visits. Prior to coming to Fresh Start Academy, children will take a tour and have an opportunity to meet and talk with teachers.

Mrs. Hollstein said the children who are exhibiting these behaviors are aware that school is not working for them. During this process, children are meeting with the guidance counselor. However, at age five, a child might not know why they are coming to the program.

Ms. Usual said she understands, and that children at this age are not going to understand that they are being placed here because of their behavior. The child will go where his parents take them. The children have no idea why they are acting this way and that because of their behavior they have to go here. It is not going to register because right now, the children have teachers they consider as safe and their friend. She asked how staff is equipped to handle this.

Mrs. Hollstein said some children are going to be comfortable from the start and some will not. Staff is trained to help children make the transition. Her fear, she said, is that families will not want their children to leave if they are experiencing success. This is not a program where you attend school forever. It is short term.

Ms. Usual asked about the transition period and asked if there is a disconnect from going from a small class and a structured one-on-one environment to the home classroom.

Ms. Bruce said this is why the children have visits to the home school. The transition specialist will help students readjust to their classroom and gradually fade out as the child adjusts. She explained there is no stigma associated with having the transition specialist or instructional assistant accompany the child as they work within the classroom without making it apparent they are there for just one student.

Discussion ensued about possible misuse of the program, chronic behaviors, types of behaviors and pre-referral data.

Mrs. Hollstein said children accepted to the program will be those with chronic behavior issues who have not responded to the interventions at the home school. Teachers will deliver the same academic program and curriculum the students would receive at their home school. Everything available at the home school will be at Fresh Start Academy.

Committee members asked questions about training for home school teachers and parents, what goes in a child's record and an explanation of the points and levels system.

Ms. Hollstein said we have built in professional development for the home school teachers and help for parents at home. One of the biggest challenges is that the school system has a substitute shortage, so it is hard to find substitutes to cover for professional development. She added the only evidence of Fresh Start Academy in a child's record will be daily attendance, which CCPS has to show. She said she does not see this as a stigma attached to the program. We are trying to offer help to these children, and they need our help. Children who are behind educationally, but not ready for an IEP are falling behind right now because they are not able to engage in instruction. The program is not for children with minor behavior problems.

Mrs. Hollstein said staff is getting calls from other counties to see how we are developing a program that best meets the needs of young children. Del. Wilson said he has also received calls from other counties and what we do and how we do it is being monitored. He wants to see it succeed and modeled for the rest of the state.

Del. Wilson and Ms. Johnson said children bring their issues to school with them and cited personal examples. Del. Wilson said we are putting teachers in a tough situation and Ms. Johnson expressed concern about imposing on a student's rights. Both expressed that they believe the stigma of the program is the location.

Dr. Abney agreed the perception of where the program is located has created controversy and that the campus has a stigma attached to it.

Dr. Hill said over the past six years staff has worked hard to change the perception of the Robert D. Stethem Educational Center. Eight to 10 years ago it was solely a place to assign kids to remove them from the general school population. That's not its purpose today. There have been changes in the leadership, instructional methods and the programs at the center. There are opt-in, highly competitive career and technology classes, a Virtual Academy, evening high school and

more. It still serves as an alternative school, but alternative means a lot of different things and Stethem provides valuable resources for students looking for options to the traditional high school.

Mr. Curry Werkheiser, principal at the Stethem center, stopped in to introduce himself.

Ms. Usual asked what is available for children in third to fifth grade.

Mrs. Hollstein responded that the focus of Fresh Start is on kindergarten to Grade 2 and early intervention. It is where we saw the highest need; however, we are working with the Center for Children on other alternatives.

Committee members offered suggestions for additional committee members including an elementary school teacher and additional community representatives. Additionally, Dr. Hill said she is working with George Washington University on a potential partnership to provide additional oversight of the program. Members asked for more information on other programs such as one in Virginia and one in Carroll County that will give the Board a better idea if Charles County is meeting or exceeding expectations.

Del. Wilson said he is grateful that some of the advisory board members, who might not have supported the program, are participating.

Before closing, the group agreed to hold future meetings at the Jesse L. Starkey Administration Building in La Plata, and to make meetings open to the public.

Dr. Abney closed out the meeting saying this is going to be an awesome advisory committee and she is excited to be working with the committee. She said the committee has a lot of work to do to ensure things are going right.

Dr. Abney closed the meeting at 8:12 p.m.