

CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT OF THE CITY OF NIAGARA FALLS
DISTRICT PARENT COMMITTEE
Minutes

Wednesday, February 26, 2025, at 5:30 P.M.
First Floor Conference Room – Administration Building

Present: Jacqueline Blaber, Makeesha Booker, Rory Diamond, Tiffany Garcia, Laura Hood, Anna Lavigueur, Stephanie Lee-Martin, Alyssa Neadow, Charlotte Robinson, Raquel Satarian, Cindy Smith, Diane Ostertag, Marlo Stearns, Danielle Zona, Richard Carella, Stan Wojton and Wendy Tedesco.

Schools Represented: Abate, Bloneva Bond, Cataract, GJ Mann, Hyde Park, 79th Street, Gaskill Prep, LaSalle Prep, and NFHS

Schools Missed: Kalfas and Maple

Contact Phone Number: Stan Wojton, Central Office Ph: 286-4189 Email: swojton@nfschools.net

Procedural Matters

1. All concerns should be taken to your building principal or School Quality Council before being brought up at the District Parent Committee meeting.
2. The information discussed at the DPC meeting is to be relayed back to your school parent group.
3. At least one representative from each school should attend each meeting. If one representative cannot attend a certain meeting, they should notify their alternate representative.
4. The meeting agendas and minutes can be found at www.nfschools.net under the “Parent & Guardian” tab, “District Parent Committee” heading.

Welcome & Introductions

Mrs. Hood welcomed everyone to the meeting and then introduced Mr. Carella for the first presentation.

Blue Ribbon Commission on Graduation Measures – Implementation of Recommendations

The final recommendations from the Blue Ribbon Commission on Graduation Measures are out and have been presented to the Board of Regents as a proposal. Mrs. Vilardo will discuss what is in place already at NFHS in alignment with the recommendations.

Mr. Carella provided an overview of expected transformations and timelines, as well as information on how students will be affected and when. The Blue Ribbon Committee was formed in 2019 and consisted of community members, school employees, parents and students. Their task was to look at existing graduation standards across the country and update them to best meet the needs of students. The Committee came up with a slate of recommendations in four categories: multiple pathways to one diploma; flexibility in assessment; meaningful life-ready credentials; and a culturally responsive curriculum. The Committee also created “a portrait of a graduate” which is made up of behaviors, skills and dispositions that the Committee believes all students need to have to be successful beyond high school. The challenge will be how to build the recommendations (if accepted by the Board of Regents) into coursework and how to measure them. To address this, the Committee made 12 recommendations. A few of the recommendations were to replace three diploma types with only one; mandates for coursework (NFHS reflects them well); civic responsibility, financial literacy, well rounded in arts, science and technology; ensure all students have access to CTE experiences before leaving high school; modify credit requirements; and reduce diploma assessment requirements. Students currently have to pass five Regents exams and earn 22 credits. This requirement doesn’t work well for all students and is

sometimes hard to attain. The Committee also recommended creating common rubrics or assessment measures for performance-type assessments to be used across the whole State to ensure all students are on equal footing. Would also like to see further flexibility for students and refugees who are new to the United States. They also suggested an exemption from diploma requirements for students with cognitive abilities or who have had an extenuating traumatic experience. Also, would like people who are going to college to become a teacher to receive training on how to be culturally responsive when they become a teacher. Current teachers are receiving this type of training as professional development. May require revision of current learning standards.

Mr. Carella provided a timeline that shows each phase of these changes. Implementation would be complete for the graduation cohort of 2029. It will not affect current NFHS students who started Grade 9 in 2023. The new recommendations would also contain more flexible provisions for a student to request an exemption due to a major life event. When students currently in Grades 7, 8 and 9 graduate, they will receive only the one type of diploma. The requirement of 22 credits to graduation will remain the same. By fall of 2027, diploma assessment requirements will be changed. There will still be Regents exams available, but they will not be mandated for graduation. Instead, student will have the choice to take an alternative type of performance assessments. Students currently in Grade 5 and 6 will receive the one diploma type, along with seals and endorsements. The Blue Ribbon Committee would like districts to offer many types of seals which show what a student has accomplished. Current Grade 4 students will graduate under a completely revamped system, if all goes according to plan. The State and Federal Government have dedicated some funding for different phases and activities.

Mrs. Vilardo is the principal at NFHS, as well as the parent of a two students in the district, one in Grade 6 and one in Grade 8. Mrs. Vilardo has not mentioned anything to students about the possibility that some Regents exams may be decoupled as a result of the new recommendations, as it is not official yet. Overall, Mrs. Vilardo feels NFHS is in good shape because they have already made changes that will align nicely with the new recommendations. NFHS has a strong foundation to continue adopting any additional changes if the State decides to move forward. NFHS currently offers over 63 college classes. In order to keep parents and families informed about what is available to students, word of mouth is very powerful. In March, will have an event in the evening to provide information on all of these programs. NFHS already offers the seal of civic readiness, as well as the seal of biliteracy. Students can also earn CTE (Career and Technical Education) designations through BOCES. They also offer CDOS, which consists of 216 hours of work-based learning in order to demonstrate career readiness.

Starting in Grade 7, students can take classes for civic responsibility, financial literacy, arts, science and technology. NFHS already offers CFM (.5 credit each semester) for financial management. Seniors get to work with Bank of Buffalo to learn financial awareness. NFHS offers an independent art assessment as an alternative to a Regents exam for students talented in arts. An alternative type of performing arts assessment has been approved by the State. Will do the same for fine arts and music. Students can become part of the PTech program starting in Grade 8. The NFCSD is the only school district in NYS that currently has two PTech grants; one for computer science, and one for technical engineering. NFCSD is one of only 15 districts in NYS that have a partnership with Micron (new company coming to Syracuse that will be hiring lots of new workers). The District received a grant from Micron to help the District prepare students. The company will manufacture items such as computer microchips. As well as CTE courses through BOCES, NFHS has an in-house building trades class where students get hands-on experience and learn from local union workers (welding, concrete work, etc.).

Over the last two years, the District has developed 5 career pathways that students can follow in the areas of humanities, medical, fine arts, etc. As of right now, there are 691 students involved in work-based learning. The District has 40 business partners that offer opportunities for students. So far this year alone, students have completed over 4,000 hours of work time opportunities. In addition, NFHS has a robust media program and an

education program. Buffalo State University offers 3 classes in the area of education in conjunction with District teachers. Currently working on building a relationship with Amazon regarding logistics and building construction, as they are building a new warehouse site just outside of Niagara Falls. The Big Picture program was started as an alternative program, but has evolved to also assist students who have good attendance, but were still failing. The approach is to get general education requirements and testing done early on in high school so students have more time to explore different courses and pathways available to them. Last June, NFHS awarded two post-humous diplomas to families of deceased students. Students who have low cognitive abilities have visited places such as the Hard Rock Café and the Equine Center to learn career skills.

Mr. Carella has not heard word of any opposition to the Blue Ribbon recommendations, so he feels there is a good chance they will be approved in March or April. Regents exams will still be available for students who want to take them, but other types of assessments will also become available as a choice.

Say Yes Buffalo

Ms. Daphne Ross and Ms. Tanya Staples from Say Yes Buffalo introduced themselves and explained what their roles are with the organization. Some of the missions/goals of Say Yes Buffalo are to work to improve racial equity and remove barriers in regard to educational opportunities for all students. Over the past 12 years, Say Yes has launched a variety of support services from cradle to career. Statistics show that the higher the level of education a person has, the more earning potential they have, which is good for the economy. Since Say Yes's launch in 2013, the graduation rate in Buffalo has increased from 49% to 79%. The more students who graduate from high school, the stronger it makes the economy. There is a high work force demand in Western New York. Over 63% of those types of jobs require some sort of credential. Say Yes Buffalo is helping students to obtain those credentials through various different programs. Students who were helped by Say Yes Buffalo have stayed connected to the organization and are giving back to the community. Of the 3,500 students helped by Say Yes Buffalo, 62% pursued a bachelor's degree, 34% pursued an associate's degree, and 4% obtained certificates.

Say Yes Buffalo launched an endowment campaign and currently has over 1,000 investors. Recruited cities around the country. In order to participate, a community must show a sufficient fund raising capacity to create an endowment. Say Yes Buffalo is very close to reaching their endowment goal in Buffalo. NYS has supported the endowment as well. The Say Yes program pays remaining tuition costs for students beyond what TAP, PAL and any scholarships cover. Students can obtain funding through Say Yes to any SUNY or CUNY in NY State, as well as over 100 private colleges and universities across the country (Niagara University included). The National Say Yes office recruited these colleges and universities and now manage that relationship. Some of the private colleges and universities offer assistance with other costs besides tuition.

Say Yes worked with NFCSD staff to identify 5 out of their 12 pillars that will be implemented in Niagara Falls. Ms. Staples explained that Saturday Academy will be held for students and families as a pilot. The pilot sites of the Saturday Academies will be at Gaskill, Abate, Bond and Cataract, though anyone from any school can attend at any of those site. Everything is free, no cost to students or families. Ms. Staples met with the principals of those schools already to develop a relationship. Will also offer evening programs to build leadership skills/community service for high school students. Leadership programs for boys and men of color will be offered so they can learn about policies that impact them in government, and how to use their voice and advocate for change. An apprenticeship program will be put in place for students who are choosing to go into the workforce instead of attending a 4-year college. Under the apprenticeship program, students are hired part-time and receive on-the-job training, as well as instruction on a college campus where applicable. Once their training is complete and they have graduated, these students are then hired full-time at a salary of at least \$45,000 to start. An endowment fund will be created to use for student tuition scholarships. It is estimated that Niagara Falls will need to raise \$20 Million to reach their goal. Active fundraising efforts have already begun.

A person from Niagara Falls will be offered a seat on the Say Yes Buffalo Board of Directors. There is also an Operating Committee that focuses on local accountability and success of work. The Community Leadership Council shares information with the community as a whole as to what is happening with Say Yes.

Mr. Wojton expressed his thanks to Ms. Staples and Ms. Ross for highlighting this wonderful program. The District is looking forward to great things to come.

Elementary Summer School

Mr. Carella will be sending out a short survey to parents containing questions regarding the Elementary Summer Learning Program. He would appreciate everyone taking the time to complete the survey. This free elementary summer program began back in 2016 and is part academic enrichment and part recreational. The program was previously funded through a grant. However, there are no longer grant funds available. The Board of Education will decide whether or not to continue the program and fund it from the District's general budget. Even though the Elementary Summer Program is great for students, the attendance over the years has been consistently lower than the number of families who registered to attend. Only about one-third of the students who registered actually ended up attending, even though bussing is provided. Weighing lower engagement against higher costs. Mr. Carella will share survey feedback with the Board of Education to help them make a decision.

Mr. Carella noted that Camp Wolverine may not be grant funded this year, but it is less expensive to operate, so it will be easier to find alternative funding. Also, Camp Wolverine attendance is usually very good. The summer sports camps for Grades 7 and up, as well as credit recovery and ESY, are slated to take place.

AOBs

NFHS will hold a meat raffle on Saturday, April 5, with proceeds to benefit the NFHS PEG and the Black Excellence Youth Engagement Program. If anyone is interesting in making a donation or attending as a vendor, please contact Makeesha Booker at mbooker@nfschools.net. An information flier is included with these minutes. Hope to see you there!

Next Meeting: Wednesday, March 26, 2025 in First Floor Conference Room