

TEXAS SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED
BOARD MEETING MINUTES
September 21, 2023

Call to Order

Lee Sonnenberg, Board President called the meeting of the Texas School for the Blind Board and Visually Impaired Board of Trustees - Strategic Planning Session to order at 10:02 a.m. on September 21, 2023.

Introduction of Board Members and Audience

Board members present were Lee Sonnenberg, Beth Jones, Elaine Robertson, Julie Prause, Ernest Worthington, and Brenda Lee.

Board members present via Zoom were Maghan Gautney and Dan Brown.

Audience members present were: Emily Coleman, Superintendent; Jenny Wells, General Counsel; Angela Wolf, Curriculum Director; Sara Merritt, Short Term Programs Principal; Cheryl Williams, Human Resources Director; Matt Schultz, Residential Director; Theresa Rappaport, Superintendent, Goodwill Excel Center; Scott Brackett, IR Director; Eric Grimmett, CSR Director; Kate Borg, Outreach Director; Ann Du, CFO; Miles Fain, Comprehensive Programs Principal; Susan Houghtling, Planning and Evaluation Coordinator; and Veronica Keating, Executive Assistant.

Strategic Planning Session

Emily Coleman welcomed Ms. Rappaport who was going through the same Region 13 Superintendent Program she completed. Ms. Coleman reported that the School was going to conduct a fire/evacuation drill during the meeting at 10:40 a.m. Susan Houghtling provided instructions for the drill.

Ms. Coleman explained how she gathered information for the Strategic Planning Session. She stated that she would report out by topic the information she obtained from internal and external stakeholder feedback. Board members were welcome to ask questions as she shared information. She welcomed administrators' input as well. After pre-determined topics were shared, department heads would have an opportunity to bring up other topics for consideration and which they considered priorities. After lunch, the Board would have an opportunity to reflect, comment, and elaborate on the topics discussed.

In March 2023, she facilitated a feedback session with practitioners at the TAER Conference in Denton. She facilitated an internal stakeholder group in the Spring called the "Student Programs Cabinet" and shared feedback received with relevant department heads. In August, she scheduled multiple focus groups and invited all of the Education Service Center (ESC) leads and met with leadership from Texas family organizations. In September, she held a focus group with NFB (National Federation of

the Blind) and ACB (Austin Council of the Blind) and received information from TSBVI's Student Council.

Ms. Coleman thanked everyone who participated. Then she asked the attendees of the Board meeting to write down big and little things TSBVI should start doing. She stated if it wasn't addressed during her presentation then they could share out their idea. She stated she was interested to see how many topics they wrote down that were addressed during the session.

She reported on the Statewide Census totals. There were: 10,911 total students, 22 percent are students on section 504 plans (2,423), 846 students who are Deafblind, and 458 students listed as braille readers. Out of the 8,488 students on an IEP only, 24.7 percent indicated vision loss only. The remaining 75 percent of the student totals had at least one additional disability.

Regarding the Comprehensive Programs Census from January 2023), there were 124 total students (one percent of students with VI ages 6-22 on IEPs), 23 students who are Deafblind, 73 percent have at least one disability in addition to visual impairment, 42 percent were braille readers, and about 36 percent who are Hispanic/ Latino.

Ms. Coleman shared what the Student Council thought the School should start, stop and continue: High school students wanted to be able to obtain college credits through Austin Community College (ACC). Ms. Coleman stated the School does provide a partnership with ACC and students. She also pointed out that there are new members to the Student Council. One particular student was running for several positions. She said they would definitely need challenging course work and the Student Council would like a more diverse course selection and block schedules (A & B days). Ms. Coleman mentioned the School tried block scheduling during COVID and it was not popular. They would like sweet tea to be offered to adult students in the cafeteria and healthier food options. They wanted more challenging classes, to have teachers teach college courses, more funds for the Fine Arts department, and to push the start time of school back with a later dismissal.

High school students said they would like to stop being treated like younger peers. They said classes were not hard enough, they wished there was more freedom in residential and they would like a later curfew and to stop having to wake up early.

Students said they wanted to continue everything and to keep the later bedtimes. Ms. Coleman noted students do have later bedtimes. They would like to continue to learn new things, keep all the activities offered; have small classes, outings and holiday parties. They said that teachers are amazing. Students wanted to keep the activities like White Cane Day, Family Day and SCASB events.

Ms. Coleman reported on TSBVI's high area of needs. She stated the School still needed residential instructors, drivers, experienced teachers, American Sign Language interpreters and interveners, and mental health staff. She noted that there are not as

many since the last strategic planning session two years ago. The School had since addressed the needs brought forth in the previous session and had progressed well.

The Statewide/ External Stakeholder group's highest areas of need including the shortage of Teachers of Students with Visual Impairments (TSVI) and Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialist (COMS) statewide. The School had many of their instructional staff on emergency certification and the number of retirements would increase in the future. The Outreach Program was too small to support Texas's need for resources for the blind and visually impaired. There was also a need for teachers of students who were Deafblind. Ms. Coleman stated that there was a lot of discussion around O&M instruction with a lot of districts hiring instructors from out of state. Therefore, students were only receiving their orientation and mobility training virtually. They also reported that caseloads are too big and instructors were being asked to do multiple jobs. She added that this was a part of the statewide crisis for the need of instructors.

The Internal Stakeholder group's recommendations were to continue to request increased pay as an exceptional item, increase advertising and recruitment, continue to hold job fairs in the spring and summer, streamline and simplify the job application process and bring back regular merit increases.

The External Stakeholder group's recommendations were to have a universal stipend for staff certified as Teacher of Students with Visual Impairments (TSVI), Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialist (COMS) or Teacher of Students who are Deafblind (TDB). They would like to see an increase of funding to University training programs, increased training for administrators in their work, continued flexibility and a culture conducive to itinerant work. Braille transcribers were not easily attainable. There was some concern about Comprehensive Program referrals being in a holding pattern. Ms. Coleman stated that, due to staffing issues, the School could not serve as many students. She also stated that districts will refer them and don't follow through on the referral process. Ms. Coleman asked Principal Miles Fain how many students are enrolled in Comprehensive Programs and he answered there were 130 students.

The university preparation programs the School works with are provided by Texas Tech University and Stephen F. Austin State University. Ms. Coleman stated that some of the information she would share is out of the School's hands but is shared for informational purposes. They recommend auditing and revision of TVI programs and assistive technology to ensure they're relevant to today's teaching needs. These are mandated by other entities; however, she shared the information as it was relevant to the topics presented.

Elaine Robertson asked what was Comprehensive Program's potential capacity in residential and Matt Schultz answered they could house 150 students if the School was fully staffed and funded.

Ms. Coleman stated that she reached out to Stephen F. Austin State University and did not hear back from them.

The data collected for Texas Tech University stated that there were the following numbers of Texas candidates enrolled in the Fall of 2023: TSVI - 62, O&M - 26 and Deafblind – 13 for a total of 101 candidates.

The External Stakeholder recommendations for the Outreach Program were to establish training for Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialists and Teachers of the Visually Impaired. Region One ESC recommended holding mini braille boot camps at other education service centers or to have online options. Other recommendations were to hold braille refresher courses and training for teachers. They wanted to include general education and special education in trainings. Ms. Coleman added those components were tied to the School's training. She added that they would like more active learning, including Optic Nerve Hypoplasia (ONH) and Cortical Visual Impairment (CVI) training. They suggested Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) region wide events to help teachers with resources and networking. They also said highlighting successful programs in districts would be helpful to show the possibilities districts have if they grow their programs for visually impaired students. Other recommendations were for an increased number of videos of accommodations for specific students (perhaps packaged by ECC with synopsis), increased training for Health and Human Service Center requirements, and increased model videos and lesson plans to share with professionals in partnership with Comprehensive Programs. Additionally, recommendations included creating a mentor program for teachers of the Deafblind, holding refresher courses for professionals to teach braille, technology and other refresher courses and providing evaluation support for students who are visually impaired and have autism, dyslexia, or other learning disabilities.

Kate Borg asked how many residential students are enrolled at TSBVI and Mr. Schultz answered that there were 103 but he would like to see that number increase to 110 for the 2023-2024 school year.

The commendations for Outreach were that they have an increased knowledge for itinerant services and independent school districts. Ms. Coleman stated that was due to the department hiring staff familiar with services and districts. They said their trainings are tailored to the education service center needs and kept the audience in mind. They funneled requests to the right expertise. Student consultations were well received and excellent. Deafblind Outreach services were of high quality and expertise. Mentor Centers were highly valuable to the community. Texas Focus, Deafblind Symposium, and excellent family support were among the many things that make TSBVI's Outreach Program great.

A curriculum recommendation was that reading curriculum was needed to include teaching instruction and reading pedagogy.

Short-Term Programs recommendations included to grow the program and to obtain an increased summer transportation fund/budget, especially for SWEAT and WALIC programs. A sport enrichment weekend or summer camp was recommended as well as an increased awareness of STP and the TVIs role within students' participation. Other recommendations were to increase class offerings based on user surveys, increase student recruitment for Short-Term Programs statewide, and increase summer credit classes. In addition, recommendations were to include another dorm and grow the number of students with greater needs served by the School, include a greater and intensive Expanded Core Curriculum support instead of Comprehensive Program referrals. Asynchronous learning or more recorded lessons was also recommended.

Commendations for Short-Term Programs were that the Algebra class was amazing and they want it to continue. Short-Term Programs was noted as a strong department and people around the State look to them for guidance. The unique relationship built with students and the low ratio to teachers help them to be successful despite the short duration of instruction. Individualized instruction allowed students to grow and maintain skills that otherwise might not be maintained after an in-person class; even more so, if the district TSVI does not have the skills to provide continued learning.

Athletics and extra-curricular recommendations were to provide a soccer field for blind students within the existing track and obtain funding for sport clinics around the State; especially goalball and continue residential special Olympics. Other recommendations were to host more all-inclusive activities in the Recreation Center, bring recess back for the Elementary Program and create a residential program donation closet for students to be able to work and shop.

Weekends Home Program recommendations were to increase routes to include Brownwood, Texas.

Early childhood was a topic that was raised often and could be tied to growing Outreach; however, if the School received funds for one or the other it would still be helpful. The recommendations included consistent training for Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) caseworkers to accommodate the high turnover rate and training to write goals for Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSP). Ms. Borg added that the next Coffee Hour session would be on writing IFSPs. Other recommendations were related to Child-Find and increased evaluations for infants and toddlers, training administrators on the importance of 12-month paid staff for Early Childhood Intervention, creating an infant/ toddler center in partnership with a local district and continued playdates in Outreach for children ages four to five.

Family engagement recommendations were to create a family friendly referral process - don't ask families the same questions multiple times. Other recommendations included to review TEA communication regarding referrals; families don't understand it's a district referral, especially, when coming from out of state, increase workshops for families, bring in family organization leaders for a weekend collaboration, and support parent training to help students achieve independence.

STAAR support recommendations were to increase STAAR support for online implementation. Brenda Lee stated that students within her region were having trouble viewing tests on a computer screen. TSBVI should get back on Texas Education Agency's STAAR committees. Other recommendations were to offer student testing of STAAR materials at TSBVI, provide professional development or share information regarding "hot style" STAAR questions and other ways the test is utilized with students, including transcription notes. Ms. Coleman explained the hot style questions were test questions that referred or tied to the previous test question. Increased training was recommended for TSBVI staff supporting students prior to testing.

Stakeholder staff recommendations regarding inclusion of staff and students was to ensure accessibility in all platforms and processes for staff, have cross-departmental job shadowing, increase the focus on onboarding new staff and supporting new teachers, increase top-down guidance and communication from leadership. Other recommendations were to promote sensory rooms in local districts and ways to create or provide them, increase Comprehensive Program collaboration with Short-Term Programs and Outreach, provide more assistive technology training for all teachers and schedule the staff holiday party when all departments can attend.

Stakeholder student recommendations were to increase student learning alongside their peers in districts, let teachers provide reading instruction while the TSVI provided the braille code, increase local school partnerships, have a unified school system for student applications and create a student pen pal program statewide. Student "ambassadors" could be connected to those with similar interests/disabilities. Increase integration between students of the same age and varying abilities and offer students more opportunities to prepare for public school like training on the use of a monocular.

Stakeholder recommendations for preparing students for the future were to have a peer mentor program and create a food trailer business that the public could access. Mornings are rushed and students are being helped to be ready for the school day by overnigher staff who have a lot of responsibilities and the lack of morning staff. Other recommendations were to increase one-on-one tech time to learn software used by public schools, increase O&M training at Austin Bergstrom International Airport (ABIA), move beyond the questionnaire with more preparation for transition and the future by addressing them earlier within ARD meetings, and increase training and education for students to learn about their medications.

American Council for the Blind and National Federation of the Blind recommendations were to encourage cane usage, develop activities and initiatives for goals, spread the "Go faster, go smarter" campaign with testimonials from different community members, allow job shadowing for students of all positions around campus, provide opportunities for students to learn what they like and dislike, teach problem solving and critical thinking to students, and hold parent and educator training to help students gain high expectations and results.

The commendations for TSBVI were that it is a great place to learn. Another commenter said they love TSBVI. The popcorn machine is amazing. They had great mentors. The classes are small. The technology assistance was great. The transcribers are knowledgeable. Supervisors don't micromanage and trust professionals. Cafeteria staff are excellent. There are knowledgeable staff with lots of experience. New staff are enthusiastic. Residential is becoming more unified and staff make an effort to include all students.

Ms. Coleman invited staff/leadership in the room to add to what she shared. Mr. Brackett said that he would like to increase cyber security. Mr. Schultz said there is a need across the visually impaired field for positive behavior support from knowledgeable professionals. Ms. Williams said creation of funding options is needed for staff pursuing their degree including tuition reimbursement. Non-monetary recognition to engage and retain our employees is needed as well as competitive pay. Mr. Fain stated the need to continue to empower and promote student independence, focus on restorative practices, mental health, and hire and retain effective and diverse staff members including visually impaired persons. Ms. Wolf added the Curriculum department is working on making materials accessible. Mr. Schultz said they were seeing better staff retention and positive movement. Ms. Du stated that she noted many of the funding recommendations stated in the meeting and added needs for replacing nine vans, asking for more funding for minor construction, for technology refresh and additional technical help in the next legislative session.

Board Team Building Session: Discussion by the Board and TSBVI Staff of Strategic Planning Needs for TSBVI

Ms. Coleman opened the floor to the Board regarding any additional strategic planning needs they would like to add. Many of the Board members stated that their items were covered in the session and they were delighted.

Elaine Robertson stated that businesses could mentor students to increase job opportunities and job experience. She asked if the School considered offering staff housing on campus to ease the housing burden and expensive cost of living in Austin.

Dan Brown liked the idea of staff being compensated for awards and tuition reimbursement.

Julie Prause stated that the School is an amazing place and added that the strategic session had improved since the last one two years ago.

Mr. Brown suggested broadening opportunities for EXIT students at the legislative session to gain attention from the Legislature.

Adjournment

At 1:34 p.m. Elaine Robertson motioned to adjourn the meeting of the Board of Trustees for the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired. Beth Jones seconded the motion and the Board voted unanimously to pass the motion.