

Dr. Raymond Bryant, Jr.

Response to EPAC/ESE Parent Advisory Council Questions

1a. What is your position on ESE inclusion?

Let me begin by saying unequivocally, and without hesitation, I am a strong proponent of ESE inclusion. If allowed to serve in the role of Superintendent in Flagler County Schools, I would ensure that ESE and regular education students receive the absolute best educational experience possible.

I believe the best way to express and describe my positive support and position for ESE inclusion can be directly attributed to my work experience at both the school and district office level. I am a professional educator with 26 years of experience that includes seven years of serving as an assistant principal and principal at Factory Shoals Elementary in Douglasville, GA. During this time, while serving in these roles, our school was the only elementary school in the district of approximately 25,000 students to serve regular ed. Students (K-5), and (K-5) ESE students with exceptionalities ranging from Speech to EBD (Emotional Behavior Disorders) Also, we served students who were identified with Severely Emotionally Behavior Disorders (K-5). The service model for SEBD students was identified as H.A.V.E.N. Academy (Hope, Achievement, Victory, Encouragement, Nobility). As a leader in this building for seven years including as a principal my love, appreciation, understanding, support and advocacy for my ESE population grew tremendously. Besides, it taught me what can happen when you have a highly trained, dedicated, and committed set of educational employees working together on a common cause can achieve on behalf of students. Specifically, for me as a principal, it inspired me to work as hard as I could so that the appropriate resources and support were leveraged on behalf of the faculty and staff. I wanted to ensure that they had the proper training necessary to provide the absolute best educational experience for our students. To that end, we worked hand in hand with our district office to advocate for our ESE student's inclusion in regular ed. classrooms as much as possible. I firmly believe that sound data, adequately trained staff, adequate staff, positive school culture and climate, ongoing 2-way communication with parents and staff are just some of the keys to success when properly implementing inclusion classrooms. Hence, as I stated previously not only am I a proponent of inclusion classrooms but, I have had first-hand knowledge of seeing inclusion work and the benefits reaped by the ESE students, as well as the entire school community.

Moreover, while serving in the District Office for 12 years in roles ranging from a Coordinator of Elementary Schools to Chief Operations Officer, my advocacy, support, and commitment to ESE students did not falter. As an Executive Officer in Henry County Schools in McDonough, GA, where I supervised 17 building level principals (ES, MS, and HS) for six years, I supported principals as a coach, mentor, and evaluator. Through this work, I ensured that the administrators did everything in their respective roles to help all students. I continuously championed inclusion in all aspects of the school day for the ESE students and asked principals to always be purposeful and intentional about their planning for their respective ESE populations. Collaborative School Improvement Plans, IEPS and other documentation identified to provide a roadmap for success for their ESE students were paramount in leading to our achievement of the goals developed for our students.

R.Bryant, Jr.

1b. If selected for the Superintendent position, what would you do to improve ESE inclusion at Flagler Schools?

I would want to come into the district and build upon the current positive components that are in place for ESE students and families. I would begin establishing positive relationships with stakeholders and begin to become fully abreast of practices going well and where there are areas for improvement. Next, talking with stakeholders including EPAC/ESE Parent Advisory Council, I would ascertain feedback and input from all stakeholder groups including business and industry, clergy, etc. to ensure there was a global perspective on what success looks like in action for our ESE students in inclusion environments.

Upon gathering and synthesizing this information, I would begin drafting an action plan for the next five years outlining the following:

- Develop collaborative definition for successful ESE Inclusion in a regular education environment
- Develop definitive action steps to include training, resources, personnel, etc.
- Identify and list aligned metrics & results associated with the definition of success
- Assign appropriate staff/personnel as a point of contact to ensure what we purport on paper comes to fruition

2a. In your previous positions, how have you worked to improve communications with a community group that has reduced conflict with the district?

I have numerous examples throughout my leadership career that lends itself to improving communications with a community group that has reduced conflict with the district. One example that comes to mind that I believe aligns with this question happened when I was an Executive Officer. While serving in this position, I supervised 17 building level principals (10 elementary, four middle and three high schools) Although, the example below is not specific to ESE students and families I believe it epitomizes the essence of reducing conflict between a community group and the district.

Previously, a principal that I supervised began to have a groundswell from a large and vocal component of his parent population. Specifically, the parents' concern and accusations were associated with the athletics program, the Athletic Director (AD) alleging favoritism, and allegations of mismanagement of school funds. Although, this process began for me with an anonymous letter and a subsequent phone call from a parent voicing their concerns; it took several months to remedy based on the level and degree of the accusations. Based on the allegations raised by this community group of parents, they had lost trust and confidence in not only the Athletic Director but also in the principal as well. Hence, the issues were multifaceted and had several levels of complexity.

Through my due diligence and investigation of the matters raised, several critical components needed to be addressed to remedy the issues at hand and set the stage for how all parties could move forward. Through the process of root cause analysis, the following takeaways arose from the community group a lack of trust, lack of effective 2-way communication and lack of ethical practices by school personnel. To improve communication between the community group and the district involved listening without bias to their concerns. This communication led to several parent meetings that I led both at the school and off-

site locations for the benefit of the community. A specific outcome implemented to address trust and ongoing communication included the school providing financial statements to all student-athlete parents monthly. To address a lack of ethical behavior included personnel changes necessary based on the results and findings of the investigation. A further measure to increase the confidence and strengthen the trust of the community group in the district office moving forward parents were made a part of the hiring process. Specifically, the community group was allowed to provide input on the characteristics and traits they sought in the next employees to assume positions in the school building. The hiring process empowered them to feel like an active contributor to the conclusion.

This example is just one of many that I have working directly with parents and community members who had what they felt was an unresolved conflict with the district. However, through a meticulous process that I led, which included ongoing and active two-way communication with the stakeholders, the situation was resolved amicably for all parties involved.

2b. If selected for the Superintendent position, how would you improve communication with the ESE community?

In my experience, as an educator, everything rises and falls on effective and efficient two-way communication. Hence, I would come into the district and ascertain what our current methods of communication are with the ESE community. Once I was aware of what we currently do, I would then ask if it is effective or not and then if we believe that it is, how do we know? I would want to see the data to support that assertion. Next, I would want to ascertain direct feedback from as many of our ESE community as possible on what they feel is effective and efficient feedback. Indeed, taking an opportunity to determine and define what effective communication looks like in practice is paramount. I think it is important to ask parents what they want to know, ask parents what they need to know and ask parents how often they want to know. Sometimes, although well-intended, if you don't take the time to ask what works for the people on the receiving end of the communication, your efforts can fall short.

Moreover, I would employ several methods to ascertain this information to include but limited to surveys, parent forums, school council meetings, PTO/PTA meetings, etc. These opportunities for parents to let us know what is currently working and if it is meeting their needs will be invaluable. Finally, after ascertaining all the appropriate feedback and input, my staff and I would devise a plan of action based on the information from stakeholders that is realistic and sustainable to meet their needs. This plan would be implemented and monitored to determine the success to include following up with ESE parents through surveys to ensure it was meeting their needs.

3a. Please explain how you have successfully changed management practices of administrators in your previous positions for the better, including processes used or recommended for holding administrators accountable?

As mentioned previously in another answer, I served in the role of Executive Officer, where I supervised 17 building-level principals. I served as Assistant Superintendent of Leadership Services, Assistant

Superintendent of Administrative Services and as Chief Operations Officer. While serving in these roles, I supervised Coordinators, Directors, and Executive Directors. Some of those positions include but are not all-inclusive of Coordinator of Safety and Security, Executive Director of Transportation, Executive Director of Facilities and Maintenance, Director of Legal Compliance, Director of Student Conduct, Director of Social/Emotional and Wraparound Services and many others.

I mentioned the positions I have served in and the types of jobs I have supervised to convey that I have had vast experiences with different personalities and leadership styles. And, from these experiences, many valuable lessons come to mind when working to change management practices of administrators successfully. The first lesson is to lead by example. I consider myself as a consummate professional, that has strong communication skills, I am trustworthy, ethical, competent, humble and have the innate ability to develop and foster positive relationships. I expected the same from any of the administrators that I worked with supported, mentored, and coached. Lesson number two, when working to change management practices of administrators successfully is understanding you have to meet them where they are in their practice. Administrators, whether they are in the role of an assistant principal to assistant superintendent, have their journey that they have embarked upon to bring them to the point our professional lives intersect. To that end, it is taking the time to get to know them as a person, their strengths, their areas of improvement and fostering a relationship that affords opportunities for growth. This requires being extremely observant, seeing them in their professional setting, respecting their expertise, and conclusively ascertaining the root cause to support them in becoming the best administrator they can be where there are areas of improvement. Lesson number three is you must hold administrators consistently too high levels of expectations and standards. Providing appropriate and deliberate supports for areas of growth, provided timely and on-time feedback, treating them as professionals and when necessary, take the proper actions to manage personnel issues when they arise.

A final lesson when holding administrators accountable, you must clearly articulate what they are being held responsible for and ensure they fully understand these expectations. Moreover, provide the conducive conditions for them to be successful, provide appropriate training and be consistent in the decisions made involving administrators.

3b. If selected for the Superintendent position, what would you do to end retaliatory management practices against staff?

First, I would want to apprise myself of all relevant anecdotal and quantitative data regarding this concern. Second, I would have substantive conversations with the head of Human Resources to ascertain insight about prior and current practices. Third, I would want to review the school board policy designed to address staff complaints, how to file, methods of grievance, and consult with appropriate personnel to determine if there are edits or updates warranted for the policy. At a minimum, the items mentioned above would begin my process of review.

Once a level of assurance was there for me that there is a pervasive and systemic problem, then additional steps would be taken to include but not limited to the retraining of leadership staff, and other staff on following appropriate expectations on board policy and how to remedy complaints. Consequently, if there are subsequent changes to board policy, protocols, etc., I would have the appropriate staff to develop training for all faculty and staff to participate in that articulates how to file a complaint and ensure it is processed appropriately and in alignment with board policy. Finally, as Superintendent, I would be the

lead leadership voice letting all faculty, staff, and administrators know that any retaliatory acts against subordinates go against board policy. It is wrong and will not be tolerated.

4a. In your previous positions, what have you done to cultivate the next generation of leaders?

In my previous leadership positions, I have had many opportunities to cultivate the next generation of leaders. Through multiple roles to include serving as an Executive Officer where I supervised 17 building level principals, as an Assistant Superintendent of Leadership Services where I managed 50 principals and led all aspects of leadership in the school district, to Assistant Superintendent of Administrative Services and Chief Operations Officer where I supervised Coordinators, Directors, and Executive Directors. And, in my current role as a Leadership Consultant with the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement, I am working with three school districts (Burke, Emanuel, and Jefferson) in the state of Georgia providing coaching, and on-time support to superintendents, district office personnel, and school-level leaders. These experiences in increasingly progressive leadership roles have offered me innumerable opportunities to cultivate the next generation of leaders and make a positive impact. Some specific steps that I have undertaken include but are not limited to:

- Met monthly with 17 building level principals to develop their leadership skills
- Completed leadership evaluations for principals, coordinators, directors, and executive directors
- Ongoing, mentoring and on-time coaching for varying levels of leadership positions (school level and district level)
- Recommended and appointed numerous administrators to principal, assistant principal, coordinators, directors, and executive director positions
- Served on district leadership team tasked with the design, development, implementation, and monitoring of district leadership succession program (GOLD Academy- Aspiring teachers, Aspiring administrators, Aspiring Central Office positions)
- Led the development and implementation of the Rising Stars Initiative leadership academy with Griffin RESA
- Participating in mentoring, on-time coaching, and building leadership capacity on improvement science framework for building level and district level administrators in 3 school districts in Georgia (Burke, Emanuel, and Jefferson counties)

4b. If selected for the Superintendent position, what would you do to improve the leadership skills of this new generation of leaders?

Vital work that we can do as professional educators is continuing to invest in the people who work to ensure that our students receive the best educational experience possible. Specifically, having strong leadership is needed now more than ever to ensure that the goals and initiatives of the school district are reached. It requires a particular set of skills and attributes that cannot be taken for granted or left to chance. Hence, to improve the leadership skills of the new generation of leadership of leaders would include, but is not limited to the following:

- Review the administrator's evaluations to determine areas of strength and areas of growth
- Have administrators complete a leadership inventory based on, "what a high performing administrator should know and be able to do"

- Determine with the Human Resources Department and Leadership Department what professional development is in place and planned to support effective leadership both now and in the future
- Determine what areas of growth we want to see outlined in district strategic plan and develop goals, action steps, and appropriate metrics to determine the success
- Develop leadership credentialing modules to create and build specific areas of leadership capacity:
 - Becoming an Effective Change Agent
 - Develop Effective and Efficient Communication Skills
 - Developing and building trust among stakeholders
 - How to develop an effective culture and climate
 - Develop Instructional Leadership Skills
 - Develop knowledge of assessments and data management
 - Develop a framework for systems-based thinking and processes

5a. In your previous positions, what experience do you have working with the ESE community?

As previously stated in other responses, my experiences have been vast and comprehensive working with the ESE community in multiple school districts. My experience at the building level as a principal and on the district level, includes as an Executive Officer and Assistant Superintendent. A cornerstone of all my interactions with the ESE community was working daily to develop positive professional relationships. I always worked to serve as a support advocate for the students and their respective families.

While serving in the role of Principal my daily interactions with students, family, and the staff was always about making sure that the students had the best educational experience possible. Working with local universities and other support service entities outside of the school helped me to build bridges of support and commitment to help my students and their families. Both at the building level as well as at the district level, I wanted to ensure that the appropriate funding, resources, personnel and up to date instructional tools were provided for my ESE students. Ongoing staff development on the latest curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices available was paramount to galvanizing the learning experience for all ESE students no matter their exceptionality.

Finally, working to ensure that components, including transportation, before and after school care were accessible as well to maximize the opportunities for ESE students to flourish and be a part of their educational setting was important to me.

5b. What positive results were you able to accomplish as a result of that relationship?

I know that the positive results that we were able to accomplish as a result of the relationships fostered were student success. This success included not only academic achievement but also those non-academic successes that may not get reported on the school or district report card. These successes include so many anecdotal statements and observations provided by parents, faculty, and staff and others sharing the impact that the educational experience their child received under my leadership was exceptional. In the field of education, parents are entrusting their absolute most precious commodity to us, which is their child. In my 26 years of service and experience, I have never taken this notion for granted. The trust that parents place in educators daily is vast and requires a substantial amount of responsibility. My aspiration as an educational leader is always to establish “authentic trust” with all stakeholders. Authentic trust encompasses three components “the capacity for trusting, the perception of competence, and the perception of intentions.” As defined, *the capacity for trusting* means that your total life experiences have developed your current capacity and willingness to risk trusting others. *The perception of competence* is made up of your perception of your ability and the ability of others with whom you work to perform competently at whatever is needed in your current situation. *The perception of intentions* is your perception that the actions, words, direction, mission, or decisions are motivated by mutually-serving rather than self-serving motives. All three components need to be in place for true trust to happen. (Magnusson, 2010) When schools and school districts set up systems and processes to ensure that the practices they purport are happening systemically and pervasively, they are poised for success.

Finally, my professional experience has taught me that whether it is a regular education student or an ESE student, each needs the positive impact of what I call the “educational trifecta.” When parents/guardians, educators, and community are working in tandem and placing the child in the center of all decisions made on his/her behalf, everyone wins. Ultimately, schools and school districts will produce sound, educated, and skilled citizens who are prepared to step into the next phase of their life. I believe that is the epitome of what every school district should strive for every day they open their doors.