

# EPAC | ESE Parent Advisory Council

[Date], 2020

*Via eMail Only to <email>*

<Sal> <First> <Last>  
<Street>  
<City>, <State> <zip>

*Re: Your Application for Flagler Schools' Superintendent; Information Request  
from the Flagler Exceptional Student Education Community*

Dear <Sal> <Last>:

I write in connection with your application for the Superintendent of Schools position at Flagler Schools and on behalf of the District's ESE Parent Advisory Council (EPAC).

EPAC is a 21-member volunteer board consisting of families, teachers, staff, administrators and a school board member with the mission to improve communication between stakeholders, continuously improve outcomes for students receiving exceptional student education (ESE) services, and create a more inclusive community for students with disabilities.

Approximately 16% of Flagler Schools' students receive ESE services, making it one of the District's largest student populations.

Flagler Schools' next superintendent will play an important role in continuing improvements to the ESE program in which EPAC has participated. As representatives for the ESE community, we intend to actively participate in this search process.

We would like to know more about your position on a few issues related to ESE, and we would greatly appreciate it if you would provide us with a response to the following questions. Your response can be in writing, video or audio recording. Please send your response to us by email to [stephen@flaglerese.org](mailto:stephen@flaglerese.org).

For your information, an identical version of this letter was sent to every candidate for the Superintendent position. In light of the fact that the Community Advisory Committee is currently in the process of narrowing candidates, and EPAC will be preparing our recommendations to the CAC and School Board on February 12, 2020, we recommend that you return a response as soon as possible, but no later than February 10, 2020.

Here are EPAC's questions:

1. During the 2014/15 school year, Flagler Schools moved to a "full inclusion" ESE education model, whereby, students with disabilities were placed in general education classrooms with neurotypical peers where they receive ESE services. The conversion to inclusion was done without adequate training of general education teachers or investing in additional ESE support facilitators to handle the increased

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caseloads created by the conversion. Five years later, the district is left with a legacy of support facilitators managing caseloads of over 50 students, students underperforming, general education teachers and paraprofessionals in inclusion classrooms feeling frustrated, untrained and unsupported. Notwithstanding the challenges with the District's transition to ESE inclusion, in overwhelming numbers, parents prefer their children to be educated in inclusion classrooms and do not wish to return to the days where students with disabilities are summarily assigned to self-contained classrooms. In Flagler Schools there are some bright spots with respect to ESE inclusion, including pilot programs being conducted at several schools which have demonstrated that, with appropriate training and support from administrators, ESE inclusion can thrive and staff attitudes towards inclusion will dramatically improve.

*What is your position on ESE inclusion?*

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

2. In the past two years, the District has been involved in high profile disagreements with the ESE community. Many of these disagreements have been the result of decisions being made by District administration that had a material impact on ESE students that the District did not adequately address with ESE stakeholders prior to making the decision, or afterwards. Additionally, in the past two years, there have been high profile incidents involving students with disabilities where parents of ESE students felt the District did not adequately address their concerns. District administration has acknowledged that its communication with ESE stakeholders is poor, and that it has led to many of the problems it has experienced with the ESE community. There have been minor improvements in this area, including the formation of EPAC, but there is much work to be done.

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

*If selected for the Superintendent position how would you improve communication with the ESE community?*

3. It is an open secret among staff that there is a culture of retaliation in Flagler Schools that discourages teachers and staff to come forward with problems related to, among other things, violations of special education laws, regulations and school district policy. Teachers report having their grade levels changed as a penalty, being berated in front of peers, getting poor reviews, and not having annual contracts reviewed merely for reporting problems that need to be resolved. Of the dozens of staff members who have reported incidents like this to EPAC leadership, all of them contend that this behavior is being encouraged at the highest levels of District administration. EPAC contends that management by fear and retaliation reflects incompetent leadership. This is an issue we are interested in resolving because retaliatory management practices have directly resulted in several ESE students being abused or injured, many schools being out of compliance with special education laws and regulations. Further, it stifles creative problem solving by District staff, it undermines the work EPAC is engaged in to improve ESE and, we believe, it has resulted in the loss of many highly competent teachers and paraprofessionals.

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Changing a long-imbedded culture such as this will require strong leadership skills from the new Superintendent.

*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?*

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

4. Flagler has a number of very young, smart principals and assistant principals, who also have emerging leadership skills. These are high profile, high stress positions, that require extensive leadership training, mentoring and support from administration to face challenging issues head on, including the retaliation problem referenced above. This will require a top-down commitment starting with the Superintendent's office.

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

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

5. During his tenure as Superintendent, the ESE community has enjoyed a positive working relationship with James Tager. As a result of this good relationship, many improvements have been made to ESE, including routine meetings with Mr. Tager to discuss ESE successes and challenges, the formation of EPAC, several ESE pilot programs, improved skills with our District's staffing specialists, an ESE Awards night and more. In some cases, the District has engaged in collaborative projects with members of the ESE community. But there is still much work to be done.

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

*What positive results were you able to accomplish as a result of that relationship?*

The members of EPAC and the ESE community look forward to receiving your responses to our questions.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Stephen T. Furnari, Chairperson