



Stephen Furnari <stephen@lawfirmsuites.com>

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## Re: Flagler Schools ESE Information Request

1 message

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**Eric & Amy Jackson** <ejackson.1996@gmail.com>  
To: Stephen Furnari <sfurnari@furnarischer.com>

Sun, Feb 2, 2020 at 1:55 PM

Good Afternoon Mr. Furnari,

I spent time this weekend to respond to each question your organization provided. Please let me know if I can provide any additional information that addresses my experience and views in service to students with disabilities.

Take care,

Eric

### **What is your position on ESE inclusion?**

Exceptional Student Education (ESE) inclusionary practices involve ensuring equity, access, and support for all students. Serving students with disabilities has always been near and dear to my heart and has been a personal passion of mine. My educational career has been heavily influenced through my work as an ESE aide and teacher for students with a variety of intellectual and physical disabilities, emotional and behavioral disorders, and learning disabilities. In each role, I have always been a proponent of ESE inclusionary practices that best support the academic, social, and emotional needs of students with disabilities. My philosophy is centered on understanding what success is for the individual child and gaining a deep understanding of how each student learns best. It is important that teachers know their students in terms of their respective learning rates and styles and provides appropriate instruction and accommodations to set a student up for success. This starts with ensuring that our teachers are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and disposition required to best support students with disabilities.

In Sarasota, Florida, we have been very fortunate to have access to multiple resources that assist our schools in implementing inclusive education practices. At each school I have served, I have worked closely with Florida Inclusion Network (FIN) and The Florida Diagnostic and Learning Resources System (FDLRS) so that we may provide relevant professional development to teachers and aides. Our teachers deliver research-based, inclusive educational practices that best support students who have diverse learning needs. Our partnerships with FIN and FDLRS have contributed to new practices and are reshaping our school's culture. Recently, we have established data teams that consist of teachers collaborating across all content areas. Teams of teachers are now designing standards-based assessments and instruction with interventional supports that consider the personalized needs of all students. They share effective practices, agree upon common expectations for students' performance, and develop targeted strategies and resources to better serve all students.

Research has established the significant benefits of inclusion. Today's students are regularly exposed to academic content that prepares them to be college and career ready. They engage in academic tasks and experiences that require creativity, critical thinking, communication, socialization, reading, writing, problem-solving, as well as functional skills. Research tells us that students have more positive attitudes and improved self-esteem as they have more opportunities to socially and academically interact with peers. Inclusive education has benefits for all involved to prepare all students for college and career readiness.

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

As a leader at the elementary and secondary levels, I have strived to create rich learning environments where all students are challenged and learn at a deep level. Inclusionary practices have been linked with on-going school improvement and school grade goal-setting to increase achievement and growth for students with high-needs. I have always maintained a mindset that if we continue to do what we have always done, we will continue to get what we have always got. After conducting a longitudinal review of academic performance among students with disabilities at Venice High School, it became clear to us that we had to do something different to boost student achievement in the areas of math and literacy. I have worked

closely with teacher-leaders and the administrative team to consider new, promising, and innovative approaches that have the potential to improve student learning. This summer, we made the decision to invest in a number of co-teaching class environments along with push-in services. We felt this approach to teaching and learning could have the greatest potential to support literacy and math skill growth for students with disabilities.

To date, we have maintained our commitment to a co-teaching model for on-level Algebra and Geometry sections. Teams of teachers, who agreed to take on this challenge, are all certified in math, and two of whom are ESE certified. In terms of developing literacy skills among students with disabilities, we have embedded disciplinary literacy across content areas. Teachers, with reading credentials, are now pushing into on-level science and social studies classes. These teachers are working collaboratively to support the transfer the literacy skills associated with the reading of informational text across content areas, proper note-taking, and writing for an intended purpose or audience. Thus far, the results are promising. We now have teachers requesting the opportunity to co-teach next year, which will expand our inclusionary model with proper supports. Very exciting!

Teachers are our greatest resource. Therefore, it's important that we properly train, equip, encourage, and empower our teachers to provide high-quality instruction that supports the learning needs of students with disabilities. Professional development for inclusionary practices involves a variety of approaches, strategies, and curricular adaptations that are tailored to each student's learning abilities and needs. Effective inclusion involves on-going, focused professional development to ensure fidelity of practice among staff. Over the past eight years, our Instructional Leadership Team has designed and delivered several professional development sessions to support our instructional priorities. It has involved deepening our staff's study of Visible Learning through the study of Standards-Based Lesson Planning, Teacher Clarity, Data-Driven Decision Making, Feedback, Differentiated Instruction, Interventional Supports, Classroom Discussion, Mindset, and Building Positive Relationships. These professional development sessions help our staff to focus on skills and capacities associated with being thoughtful and reflective practitioners.

If selected as Flagler School's next superintendent, I would establish an entry plan that involves partnering with pupil services personnel, professional learning specialists and directors. Together, we will plan out professional supports around curriculum, instruction, and assessment that boosts inclusionary practices for students with disabilities. It will involve the following considerations:

**CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT** - Establish a collaborative working relationship with the Board of Education, district and school leadership, and the staff that ensures cooperation with a common, united purpose.

**CULTURE AND COMMUNITY CONNECTEDNESS**- Foster a supportive, positive school climate and culture through open, honest communication and positive relationships leading to the fulfillment of the district's mission, beliefs, and goals.

**STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT (CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION)**- Align standards, curriculum, assessments, and academic programs ensuring rigorous instructional practices to meet the personalized needs of all students.

**RESOURCE MANAGEMENT**- Review instructional resource funding, expenditures, and organizational systems and structures that support teacher quality and student achievement.

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

I strongly believe that faculty, parents, and students should to have a voice in matters that impacts our students. Genuine buy-in begins by bringing stakeholders together to listen and learn. Education is a shared responsibility. A true partnership. There's a correlation between community involvement and high student achievement. I have a history of bringing stakeholders together to respond to their interests and needs and engage them to further the educational goals of the district. At the elementary and secondary levels, I would meet regularly with various school community groups to ensure solid lines of communication that include a variety of Booster Clubs, Tatum Dads' Group, Parent-Teacher Organization, and the School Advisory Council.

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

Clear and timely communication is at the heart of successful leadership. I take pride in maintaining open lines of communication, being visible and approachable, and providing responsive, clear, and timely information. As superintendent, one of my first actions would be to meet with the ESE community to listen

and learn. I would want to better understand what we could be doing better or different to enhance our lines of communication. Listening to what stakeholders have to say and acknowledging their voice will hopefully serve as a valuable source of on-going feedback to improve the district. I would want to learn more about our district's communication plan and respective strategies to ensure the district is properly utilizing our internal and external lines of communication. The use of social media should be fully utilized to enhance stakeholder and community communication and outreach. With stakeholder input, I would want to solidify a routine communication protocol. If selected as superintendent, I will work closely with the District's ESE Parent Advisory Council (EPAC) to build a strong and productive relationship.

**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?**

The work of a superintendent involves providing leadership in the development, maintenance, evaluation, and advocacy of a high-quality educational program that serves all students. My mission has always been taking an active role in advancing the district by building capacity and providing support. At all levels of leadership, I have strived to be highly-collaborative with a team-builder mindset. Currently, the administrative team I lead consists of 5 assistant principals and several teacher-leaders. Over the course of 4 years with this team, I am very pleased to share with you that we are a well-run machine, but it took considerable time and effort to achieve this. Each school leader on the team possesses a variety of skills and talents that moves our school in a positive direction. They also have areas for improvement and growth. I believe in fostering collegiality founded on transparency, open communication, and collaborative leadership. Our team became far more collegial once we established trust. This evolved through honest conversations and a willingness to be more open to constructive feedback. Team trust and collegiality took us the better part of three years with considerable coaching and team-building. I am a collaborator and team-builder by nature who takes the initiative to move schools forward. I know enough to know that I don't have all the answers. I am always seeking input and feedback, which has led to genuine buy-in within the team. Twice a week, we meet to solve problems of practice and resolve various issues and challenges that arise. We understand team communication protocols, roles, and responsibilities, norms for best practice, and expectations. Together, we work through complex challenges through open and honest discussions. Over time, we established a work environment and team dynamic that is empowering for all. Each member of the administrative team executes their responsibilities as true leaders.

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

As superintendent, it's my job to create an optimal learning environment for students and staff. Ending retaliatory management should be addressed as part of any district's effort to establish a more positive culture and climate for staff. Building positive and productive relationships, founded on trust, requires an intentional focus. One of my primary goals is to set the tone for all leaders in how they lead their respective schools. Historically, my style of leadership is relational and has always centered on being highly visible and approachable. As superintendent, I will model a form of servant-leadership by regularly visiting teachers and leaders. It has always served me well to better understand what I may do to equip, encourage, and empower them to be the very best they can be for their students. This will allow me to learn more about the strengths and challenges of the district through the lens of various stakeholders. I will take the time to build relations and listen that will serve me well as feedback is important for setting overall objectives for the organization, determining strengths and weaknesses, and making sound decisions that align with the district's vision, mission, and goals.

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

One of the single most important responsibilities we have as instructional leaders is to provide the highest level of teacher quality for our students. This begins by building trusting relationships that will allow me to engage in constructive coaching with specific feedback that is honest and fair. This approach promotes a more reflective approach to their leadership.

Throughout a given school year, I work very closely with members of my administrative team in developing best practices and processes that are aligned with the 45 performance indicators aligned with the district's evaluation tool for sound supervision, leadership, and development of teachers. Together, we engage in on-going book studies that are relevant to their leadership growth. We conduct a series of regularly scheduled learning walks that calibrates our understanding of instructional rigor, engagement, and clarity. Finally, we regularly discuss how to best support struggling teachers as we reference the district's evaluation tool for teachers. Cultivating the next generation of leaders involve the following mindsets:

- Possess a genuine concern for the development and success of individuals
- Build people and teams
- Make everyone feel successful
- Equip, encourage, and empower

In Sarasota, we offer a leadership academy as well as a preparing new principals program. Each year, I am asked to deliver presentations to both cohorts to support their growth as leaders. Additionally, I receive three to four aspiring teachers each year for an all-day shadowing experience. I enjoy receiving aspiring leader candidates for a shadow experience as it involves them observing a variety of relevant experiences from multiple perspectives.

My experience in cultivating leadership is on-going. Over the past ten years, I have helped many aspiring leaders to lead their own schools as well as one lead at the State level. I have also prepared several teacher-leaders to take on new leadership roles as assistant principals. My support of leaders and teachers is based on on-going mentoring and sharing professional learning experiences.

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

A new generation of leaders will require a deep understanding of social-emotional learning (SEL) skills to support the whole child. Future leaders will need to know how to effectively integrate social-emotional learning, with staff fidelity, to improve students' lives, improve the culture of schools, and enhance teacher well-being. An overarching intention with SEL is to support student success in school, the workplace, relationships, and the community. Today's leaders can accomplish this through our on-going efforts to increase academic success for all students, enrich positive and respectful relationships between teachers and students, and decrease bullying. We should be striving to build upon a set of social, emotional, behavioral, and character attitudes and competencies that foster self- and social awareness and the abilities to manage one's own and others' emotions and behavior. These qualities include cooperation, interpersonal problem-solving, self-regulation, and empathy. We want our respective staff and students to be equipped with the knowledge and skills required to make good decisions, treat one another with respect, and feel more connected and included on our campus. Future leaders will need to make SEL a primary focus. It will require them to regularly engage staff in advanced-level SEL professional development that will provide them with the knowledge and tools required to enhance one's well-being through self-care, build positive relationships with colleagues and improve their work and interactions with all students, not just those with behavior problems or who have experienced trauma.

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

Having spent substantial time in the classroom serving students with special needs, I know we need to be responsive to the diversity in students' learning rates and styles and offer instructional experiences designed to meet those needs. As a teacher of students with disabilities, I regularly monitored curriculum, material, and methodology in compliance with students' IEP's and special education mandates. I also maintained knowledge of current laws and regulations pertaining to individuals with exceptional needs in the school setting.

I have participated in several Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings over the course of my education career. Our collective goal for the IEP process was always to review student progress and determine the next steps and accommodations that would help reach their potential. I always made every effort to keep the meetings child-centered with a focus on creating a plan that best suited the needs of the child.

Over the course of 26 years, I have served as an ESE aide, ESE teacher, and administrator overseeing a range of ESE programs. In all capacities, I was always sensitive and empathetic with regards to the needs and challenges of my students and families. I was able to accomplish build trusting relationships with them by providing strong lines of communication. The families I worked with were partners in our collaborative work to support their child. I made sure that families of students with disabilities always felt welcomed, respected, trusted, and heard.

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

The many relationships I was able to forge with families of students with disabilities has led to a genuine culture of collaboration. Our collaboration and partnership with families allowed school personnel to become more informed, responsive, and sensitive to the needs of the children we served. All stakeholders contributing to providing appropriate levels of support for their children. Families always knew we were working together towards a common goal, which made for a more positive school climate.

On Fri, Jan 31, 2020 at 2:03 PM Stephen Furnari <[sfurnari@furnarischer.com](mailto:sfurnari@furnarischer.com)> wrote:

Dear Mr. Jackson:

Regarding your application for Superintendent of Flagler schools, please see the attached letter from the Flagler ESE Parent Advisory Council requesting more information about your positions on exceptional student education.

We look forward to receiving your response.

Sincerely,

Stephen T. Furnari  
*Chairperson of EPAC*  
Direct Tel: (386) 202-3041

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