

Dear EPAC/ESE Parent Advisory Council:

Thank you for your commitment to Flagler County School's Exceptional Education Community. I truly respect your council's mission and passion for ensuring all students' unique needs are met. My drive for serving as a leader is grounded on creating an educational environment for all students that provides a fair and equal learning experience. I earned my Master's Degree in Physical Education with a focus on Adaptive Methodologies to equip myself as a teacher when presented with unique circumstances to help students excel. These skills are part of my foundation as an educational leader and have assisted me in the various roles I have been fortunate to provide service. The answer to your questions will demonstrate my leadership skill set which includes developing high-performing teams that are held accountable for performance outcomes while thriving in a culture that celebrates accomplishments and always seeks resolutions.

Q1. Establishing a school climate that embraces, supports and engages an inclusive learning environment can present a complex situation. When this environment is achieved it reaps mutually beneficial rewards for students with disabilities and general education students. I am very proud of the Exceptional Education Services we provided during my tenure as Principal at St. Augustine High School. Our enrollment was approximately 1,800 students, 16% of whom received ESE services via an inclusion model, Emotional Behavior Unit and Gifted services. As Principal, I prioritized our ESE students scheduling first and deliberately created common content area teacher planning time to align with ESE teachers throughout our 7-period, 45-minute instructional periods each day. The first step with achieving a successful inclusion model is affording teachers time to work collaboratively together in order to provide the highest quality of curriculum and instruction for all students. Professional development must be provided on an ongoing basis for educators to continue to refine their craft and respond to yearly legislative changes. Additionally, I allocated revenue to provide temporary duty elsewhere (TDE) and training opportunities beyond what the district budgeted. This strategy was also applied to grant additional planning days to the ESE Teachers to manage their caseloads and frequently meet with parents on the academic progress of students. I utilized a dedicated Assistant Principal to support the ESE Department. As a school we developed a robust Best Buddies Club, supported Special Olympics and made time for celebrations weekly with our students. Parents were deeply vested in our efforts and provided mentoring and volunteer time as needed for field trip opportunities. Student data for Students With Disabilities (SWD) showed positive trends of improvement during my tenure with the focused efforts by our teachers, appropriate training, planning time and support from our leadership team. What gets measured gets done, and this process to elicit the results requires a leader with a firm, but supportive style which I am proud to bring forward.

The current conditions as described for Flagler County schools provide optimistic promise as you champion the cause to improve the ESE inclusion model district-wide. As your Superintendent, I would ensure there is a mechanism in place to capture the return on investment for your pilot programs. Drilling down on the data from your pilot programs will provide a justification for future decision making by your School Board as recommended through district leadership. The EPAC's efforts should be linked to district leadership and have a systematic process for reporting the council's concerns and recommendations. The district website indicates the Strategic Plan ends its 5-year cycle this year. Teaching and Learning Goal 1, is providing staff with job-embedded training and mentoring to support the social, emotional, and academic needs of all students. With the School Board's guidance on developing goals for the future Strategic Plan, I would encourage an emphasis be placed on ESE program services district-wide, to include the Inclusion Model. Community stakeholders, such as your council will play a key role for future Strategic Planning. I applaud, your efforts thus far and recognize there is much more work to be done. My leadership experiences position me well to serve as a guiding light for ongoing progress in this area.

Q2. Communication is paramount for establishing a trustworthy organization in which all stakeholders know their voice is heard. I had the honor to serve as Principal for R.J. Murray Middle school located in west St Augustine. Our school was nestled in a neighborhood that is rich in Afro-American tradition yet economically disadvantage. We served 900 students of which 20% were ESE and 48% economically disadvantaged. The school was the Center for the Arts middle school for the district attracting non-zoned students to access opportunities in chorus, band, dance, art, and theatre. However, the immediate neighborhood students were disproportionately enrolled in the arts programs. A pre-existing culture discouraged the neighborhood students, mostly black, from accessing the Center for the Arts. In my tenure I changed the culture within the school to foster an acceptance for all students to pursue opportunities within the Center for the Arts programs. The process involved a teacher mindset shift, establishing a clear vision, developing trust with the local community and celebrating all students' success. The effort was met with initial resistance, however I worked tirelessly with my leadership team, and local faith-based groups. We had to re-establish trust with parents, create an inviting climate within the school that welcome parents to be actively involved in their child's education. The Center for the Arts program thrives today with a diverse student population that has enriched the learning environment school-wide.

The establishment of EPAC provides all stakeholders a professional forum and opportunity to come together and discuss ESE services in Flagler County Schools. The advisory council's mission must be honored and purposefully linked to the Superintendent's initiatives. As your Superintendent, I would assess current communication flow as it relates to the engagement of key stakeholders. The voice of employees, parents, community members and students would have a holistic pathway for collaborating. In my previous roles, I formalized student advisory councils, teacher/staff advisory boards, parent groups, community groups and task force workgroups to allow for specific perspectives to be shared and honored. As a former coach, I

know the collective efforts of the entire team produces results when trust has been developed and all members are aligned with the common goal.

Q3. All School Boards have established rules and internal policies District Leadership must execute in order to fulfill the mission. The first component of Flagler County's mission is to provide educational success through high expectations and innovative thinking in a safe learning environment. In my current role as Deputy Superintendent of Operations providing a safe and secure learning environment is a top priority. In response to the tragic event at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in 2018, several legislative acts brought forward new statutory mandates for Florida school districts. I orchestrated a Task Force to review current district-wide practices regarding these new initiatives and their direct impact to our students, teachers and school leaders. Our team worked diligently acquiring community input, Principal input and recommendations from our local Sheriff's office. The result was to establish common district-wide standards to ensure safety and security at our 40 schools and 3 charter schools. The new standards were communicated through various professional development sessions, internal school faculty meetings and school newspapers. Several building leaders did not embrace the new expectations with school-wide fidelity. During safety audits teachers would state their leadership allowed variations from the standards. I worked with the Principal Evaluation Team, which I am a part of, to hold leaders accountable for the expectations and when necessary indicators on evaluations were documented. Over the past two years we have enhanced the safety and security measures district-wide and our school leaders are held accountable for enforcing the expectations. We continue to monitor fidelity with our safety checks and recently Florida DOE has also established a similar practice through the Office of Safe Schools.

The long-imbedded culture described is accusatory at several levels and would require time to assess before determining an appropriate plan. It is evident by the comments shared there is distrust among teachers and staff, and a lack of support for their efforts. As your Superintendent, I would lead with the end in mind which is ensuring all students are empowered to reach their full potential. The process to achieving that is layered with interdepartmental efforts aligned with a clear vision to optimize all students' learning environments. It begins with trust being established from top down and unilaterally among all stakeholders. Quality school leaders are the driving force to execute the district mission. Identifying the source of the retaliatory management practices against staff would require further assessment and collaborative discussions. I would create an atmosphere grounded in trust that fosters support for all personnel and stakeholders who bring forward concerns.

Q4. Every day I lead with the mindset of Model, Connect and Involve. I am an educator for life and recognize my sphere of influence regardless of the positions I have held. As a former teacher I strived to develop learning lessons that ignited students love for more knowledge. As a coach, the best practices left my athletes begging for it not to end inspiring them to excel in their talents. As a Dean administering discipline, I was never heavy handed. There are life

lesson mistakes students make and helping them reflect and learn from their mishaps can be very meaningful. As an Administrator serving as a mentor, creating teacher cohort groups, sharing best practices and participating in district leadership development programs all play a role in cultivating the next generation of leaders. Model the behavior you expect, connect with the targeted group you are serving, and involve them in decision making.

Growing from within an organization is powerful when resources, time and a framework are established. A succession plan should be created for current employees to see how their achievements can articulate to the next level or expand laterally. A school leader today faces a tremendous amount of pressure to serve as both an educational leader, and a manager of their day-to-day school operations. Internships, mentoring, district leadership groups, state professional organizations all play a role supporting both current and future leaders. Aspiring new leaders must be provided ongoing support and appropriate staff development which should align with the district's mission.

Q5. My passion to serve all students has been part of my educational journey. Attending IEP meetings as a teacher, and administrator helped shape unique needs for disabled students to achieve success. In both my tenures as a Principal, ESE students' academic performance increased. Just as important, in both school's enrichment opportunities and clubs were established which enhanced the school culture and provided a positive impact to the learning environment. Students' successes were celebrated often through various student of the month programs and award events we aligned with our district Character Counts initiative. Parents were encouraged to volunteer, join our School Advisory Council and PTSO.

The culmination of my efforts described above is captured at graduation. Regardless of the student's ESE disability the district's mission to ensure all students reach their full potential is our greater purpose. I am blessed to have many wonderful memories of students embracing their disability, supported by their families, and provided a learning environment with amazing teachers to walk, push or in some cases carry a student across the stage to receive his/her diploma.

Thank you for allowing me to share some of my experiences in working with Exceptional Education students.

Respectfully- *Cathy*