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Stephen T. Furnari, Chairperson  
EPAC / ESE Parent Advisory Council  
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February 3, 2020

Good afternoon Mr. Furnari,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the questions written by members of the District's ESE / Parent Advisory Council (EPAC).

I present responses to you with an apology in advance for their length. After many years of working in the field and my desire to learn as much as possible about matters which impact students, I have an abundance of information, experiences, and opinions regarding "full inclusion". The responses include both my professional and personal opinions. They include references to current research and literature. They are the view of a superintendent of schools and a father who strongly believes that full inclusion is a social and ethical responsibility that school districts have that is central to the equality of educating all students.

Many years ago, as a young superintendent I spent much of my time and energy overseeing "management-operations-finances" of the school district. Currently I find myself focused on values and ethics of educational leadership. Specifically, the importance of multicultural and ethnic understanding and sensitivity, the role of schooling in a democratic society, the importance of full inclusion, and formulating plans to coordinate social, emotional, health, and other community resources to support each child in the district.

Thank you again for the opportunity to respond to your questions.

Sincerely,



Bruce W. Thomas, Ed.D.  
(330) 703-6287 cell

# EPAC | ESE Parent Advisory Council

January 31, 2020

*Via eMail Only to bwthoma@uakron.edu*

Dr. Bruce Thomas  
425 Castle Pines Drive  
Akron, OH 44333

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

Dear Dr. Thomas:

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. Here are our 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 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,

# EPAC | ESE Parent Advisory Council

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

# EPAC | ESE Parent Advisory Council

*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

### ***1 (A) What is my position on ESE inclusion?***

Students with disabilities are less likely than students without disabilities to start school and have lower rates of staying and being promoted in school. All children should have equal access to quality education. While students with disabilities have historically been educated in separate special schools, inclusive schools and classrooms provide a more equitable way to provide an education to all students. Inclusive education is better able to reach the majority and avoids isolating students with disabilities from their families and communities. A range of barriers within education policies, systems and services may limit disabled children's inclusive educational opportunities. Systemic-District change to remove physical and attitudinal barriers and provide reasonable accommodation and support services are required to ensure that students with special needs have equal access to education. Every child has a fundamental right to education and must be given the opportunity to achieve and learn.

During my tenure as a teacher and school superintendent inclusion has become increasingly the focus of many national and international policies of education. Children with disabilities often are victims of an educational system which is not able to meet their needs. Inclusive education is a human rights issue. Current research indicates that special needs students who have been educated in regular classes do better academically and socially than comparable students in non-inclusive settings. Research also suggests that students with disabilities who were educated in inclusive settings made significantly greater progress in math than their non-disabled peers. Inclusive education plays a key role to ensure individual development enabling children and youth with disabilities to attain the highest possible degree of autonomy and independence.

My position on ESE inclusion is that it must be appropriately implemented and sustained.

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

My "non-negotiables" for successful inclusive practice include:

- **Visionary Leadership** in the area of inclusive education. I will initiate and sustain the changes needed for full inclusion. The collaborative vision will be clearly and broadly articulated, consensus built, and all stakeholders will be involved in a meaningful way.
- **Collaboration Opportunities.** Research indicates that successful inclusive education does not require that every teacher have the expertise to meet the educational needs of every student. Rather, giving teachers the opportunity to collaborate and develop new skills is a prerequisite for success.
- **Refocused Use of Assessment.** Implementation of authentic assessment approaches that are more about how students learn and what their potential is. Shifting the focus to the student's work and performance records to identify strengths, interests and communications preferences. The objective is to determine how the student is smart, rather than how smart the student is.

- **Effective Parental Involvement** is critical for a school district to successfully practice full-inclusion. I would support and defend parents' rights to be involved in the planning and implementation of inclusive programming across the district. The 1997 reauthorization of the IDEA reinforced parental participation by requiring full engagement of parents in all decisions involving their child's eligibility and placement.

As superintendent I would provide **professional development** to all staff members in the instructional models identified through national studies which produce the best outcomes in inclusive classrooms:

- Co-Teaching
- Parallel Teaching
- Consultation Teaching
- Team Teaching
- Support Teaching

As superintendent I would energize the teaching focus on "**Best Practices**". Classroom adaptations designed for students with disabilities are often also helpful to students without disabilities. Instructional strategies for inclusive education are the same good-teaching practices recommended by general educational reformers and researchers

In the past funding formulas encouraged segregated placements for special education students. Under IDEA (as amended in 1997) funds follow the student regardless of placement and must be sufficient to provide necessary services. During my tenure as Superintendent lack of adequate personnel or resources would never be used as an excuse to relieve Flagler County Schools of its obligation to make a free appropriate public education available to students with disabilities in a least restrictive environment.

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

In my current position as superintendent my district percentage of special needs students fluctuates between 38% and 40%. With that number comes many involved, articulate, and knowledgeable parents of special needs students. We have a particularly high number of ASD children in the district and the ASD Parent Advisory Council has presented me with opportunities to implement communication and meaningful involvement strategies to reduce conflict. Building a relationship to communicate was essential in reducing conflict with this group. As the superintendent I am responsible for:

- **Understand Motivations and Goals (on both sides):** Making sure everyone understands why the partnership is important, what both sides hope to gain from the partnership, and to make sure there is an obvious win-win relationship
- **Build a Relationship:** Reducing conflict involved setting the stage for relationships in the partnership that conveyed trust. Everyone needed to know they could count on each other to solve problems. That means there must be someone dedicated to nurturing partner relationships,

growing mindshare, and responding to their needs. That responsibility falls to me as the superintendent of schools.

- **Communicate Regularly:** Regular communication is critical.
  - It was necessary to discuss and support the following:
    - Expressiveness: Creating clarity around the full spectrum of communication styles
    - Assertiveness: Allowing all ideas to come to the forefront
    - Flexibility: Creating multifaceted scenarios that create new opportunities and reinforce elements of stability to allow optimal communication to occur

**2 (B) If selected for the superintendent position how would you improve communication with the ESE?**

- John Maxwell wrote in his book “The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership” that connecting with people was the most important factor is successful communication. I agree and utilize the following as I communicate with others:
  - Connect with yourself. I know who I am and know what I believe in.
  - Communicate with openness and sincerity. I am an authentic leader.
  - Know your audience. I take time to learn about the organization(s) and people I communicate with. I want to learn as much as I can about what they care about.
  - Live your message. I practice what I preach.
  - Go to where they are. I am aware that successful communication requires that I be attuned to others culture, background, education, and more. I adapt to others and don’t expect them to adapt to me.
- Designing an environment that encourages the exchange of information, opinions, concerns, and dreams, is a critical component in district growth. As the superintendent of Flagler County Schools, the ESE will play an integral part in the further development and success of inclusive practices across the district.

**3 (A) Please explain how you have successfully changed management practices of administrators in your previous positions for the better, including processes used for recommended for holding administrators accountable**

While I would like to reference a book or current research, I believe this question is best answered by sharing a few professional experiences. I began my career as a special education teacher and learned quickly that teachers in special education worked very, very hard. At that time in my life I was looking for the “path of least resistance”. I began a master’s degree in counseling hoping to be hired as a school counselor. School Counselor positions were few and far between, so I accepted a position as an elementary school principal. I spent several years in that role utilizing my counseling and teaching skills to get me through each day. My lack of administrative skills escaped no one. I was able to transfer to a school counseling position several years later. Being a school counselor allowed me to be an advocate for students 100% of the time. I liked it. It fit me. The opportunity came along to research, develop, implement, and lead an alternative school for students who were unsuccessful in a more traditional setting. Once again it fit me. I developed the administrative skills needed but was once again able to spend time advocating for students. I completed a doctorate in early childhood education to continue to grow my understanding of the needs of children. Wanting to have a greater impact on students and

families I moved into different administrative positions including several superintendent positions. Each position required a “re-tooling” of administrative focus for those administrators remaining in the district with me as their superintendent. While this sounds strange to write, my priorities became the administrator’s priorities. It was non-negotiable. My background and strengths were in helping students and families and that was why I was hired. My expectations were shared with the administrators and included: less suspensions, better use of support staff such as counselors, the hiring of parent liaisons in each building, a focus on mental health and the needs of children and families. Training and support were offered to administrators who were interested in making the “transition”. Some administrators were able to see the importance of building these foundations and others were not. Everyone is accountable for providing a safe, caring, kind and compassionate environment in our schools. Anyone who is unable or unwilling to do that is not welcome to stay.

**3 (B) If selected for the superintendent position, what would you do to end retaliatory management practices against staff?**

As part of my 35+ years in education I was honored to serve as a teacher’s union president (SELTA) for 10 of those years. The experiences and the opportunities while serving in that capacity, to work with the administration regarding retaliatory practice, was substantial. I was involved in unique training opportunities offered through the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS) to establish better, non-retaliatory, labor management relations including:

- Resolving Labor Management Disputes
  - Collective Bargaining Mediation
  - Alternative Bargaining Process
  - Eliminating Retaliatory Management Practice
- Building Labor Management Relations
  - Effective Contract Administration
  - Effective Communication
  - Labor Management Partnership Building

Practical strategies that I would implement to end retaliatory practice include:

- I will make sure there is a reliable avenue for submitting complaints or concerns
- I will facilitate the distribution of our organization’s anti-retaliation policy to every employee. It will be updated and amended if needed
- I will facilitate training for all district administrators on workplace ethics and laws banning retaliation and discrimination
- I will make sure employees understand that retaliation will not be tolerated and that violators will be recommended for termination
- We will respond to allegations immediately and investigate quickly
- We will communicate with the person who complained or reported wrongdoing and show that we are taking the complaint seriously
- We will reduce gossip by communicating facts to the workforce
- We will establish and enforce safeguards against post-employment retaliation



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

I believe that there is no substitute for quality training, experiential opportunities, and high expectations for aspiring administrators. In each district where I have served as superintendent, I have collaborated with local universities to develop a principals training program. In addition, I have used the following administrator support model for aspiring educational leaders:

Leadership-Focused Coaching

- Model to promote best leadership and decision-making processes and skills
- Coach and administrator work together using state, or district instruments, evaluation tools, or resources
- Administrator plans activities with guidance from and support from coach
- Administrator leads sessions with coach facilitating
- Focuses on connecting theory and practice, leadership skills, and decision-making processes
- Provides formative, constructive feedback

Rather than having principals work in isolation, this model promotes networking opportunities and support for aspiring school leaders. Effective leadership development programs include networking among participants, which can help to foster collaborative problem-solving and alleviate the sense of isolation that some school leaders feel. Aspiring leaders benefit from greater coaching, mentoring, and collaborative support.

**4 (B) If selected for the superintendent position, what would you do to improve the leadership skills of this new generation of leaders?**

I would provide training and support to help them understand the 5 concepts below:

- Developing self-awareness: A good educational leader needs a solid understanding of oneself.
- Developing excellent communication skills: The strongest educational leaders are excellent communicators and know how to reach a variety of people in many ways.
- How to become more resourceful: To be an effective leader, you need to be resourceful and open to new ideas.
- Leading by example: The best leaders in the educational system make it a point to lead by example, and not simply by words.
- The power of teaching and learning: Perhaps the most important trait of being an educational leader is believing in your students and the power of education.

It seems repetitive to say but no change or growth will occur without self-reflection, training opportunities, and support. Those must come from the superintendent. At this stage of my career I reflect daily, I consume training opportunities, and I value the support of others.

**5 (A) In your previous positions, what experience do you have in working with the ESE community.**

In my current role as superintendent I have developed the following collaborative relationships with agencies, Universities, and organizations in North East Ohio and across the state.

- Ohio Coalition for the Education of Children with Disabilities
- Ohio Department of Education Office of Exceptional Children
- Disability Rights Ohio
- Ohio's System of Support for People with Disabilities and Their Families (OCALI)
- Ohio Early Intervention
- Ohio Family and Children First
- ABILIKIDS
- Linking, Employment, Abilities, And Potential (LEAP)
- Milestones Autism Center
- Connecting for Kids
- REM Ohio
- Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD)
- Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD)
- National Attention Deficit Disorder Association (ADDA)
- Autism Society of America
- American Foundation for the Blind-Midwest
- Brain Injury Association of Ohio
- Cerebral Palsy Association of Ohio
- Epilepsy Foundation of Greater Cleveland
- National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Ohio
- National Down Syndrome Society
- Ohio Speech-Language-Hearing Association (OSLHA)
- Tourette Syndrome Association of NE Ohio
- Ohio Family and Children First Initiative
- Catholic Charities Health and Human Services
- Parent Training and Information Center (PTI)
- The National Children's Advocacy Center
- The Upside of Downs of Greater Cleveland
- National Council on Independent Living
- Baldwin Wallace University
- Cleveland State University
- Cuyahoga Community College
- Lorain Community College

**5 (B) What positive results were you able to accomplish as a result of that/those relationships?**

Partnerships serve to strengthen, support, and even transform individual partners, resulting in improved program quality, more efficient use of resources, and better alignment of goals and curricula (Harvard Family Research Project, 2010). When schools and community organizations work together to support learning, everyone benefits.

- First and foremost, learning partnerships support student outcomes.

In addition to supporting student learning directly, partnerships established other benefits to students and their families. In my current role as superintendent those benefits are:

- A continuity of services across the day and year, easing school transitions and promoting improved school attendance
- Access to a range of learning opportunities and developmental supports, providing opportunities for students and teachers alike to experiment with new approaches to teaching and learning
- Better support of transitions across the school years, particularly the critical middle to high school transition, which research indicates is a key predictor of high school graduation
- We improved school culture and community image through exhibitions and performances that help “shine the light” on students whose talents may not be apparent in the classroom
- We have gained access to mentors, afterschool staff, and other resources to support in-school learning and improve the teaching and learning in the classroom itself
- The collaboration has helped gain access to and recruit groups of students most in need of support services
- We have improved program quality and staff engagement, particularly when there is crossover between school and community organization
- We have fostered a better alignment of programming to support a shared vision for learning, one which aligns curriculum to support state and local standards