



State Board of Education

Andy Tuck, *Chair*  
Marva Johnson, *Vice Chair*  
*Members*  
Ben Gibson  
Tom Grady  
Michael Olenick  
Ryan Petty  
Joe York

Richard Corcoran  
Commissioner of Education

December 8, 2020

Dr. Brennan Asplen  
Superintendent  
Sarasota County School District  
1960 Landings Boulevard  
Sarasota, FL 34231

Ms. Shirley Brown  
Chair  
Sarasota County School Board  
1960 Landings Boulevard  
Sarasota, FL 34231

Dear Superintendent Asplen and Chair Brown,

I am following-up on the now concluded investigation by our Inspector General regarding Sarasota County School District (District). Herein this letter, I am requesting your cooperation with further oversight, including financial restrictions, which will be necessary to ensure all matters related to the investigation are appropriately implemented in a student-centered and legally compliant manner. To date, I am not convinced that the District is consistently acting with students' interests at the forefront.

The Florida Department of Education's (FDOE) Office of Inspector General is granted the authority by statute to conduct, coordinate, or request investigations into substantiated allegations relating to waste, fraud, or financial mismanagement within school districts. While the investigation found insufficient evidence to conclude that the District placed students on the alternate assessment to avoid state testing or accountability in order to benefit financially, the investigation's findings and the continued public actions of the District demonstrate that all necessary changes in practice and culture have not occurred within Sarasota County School District. Pursuant to the investigation, the District made inconsistent decisions for several years that directly impacted numerous students with special needs. The investigators found that 27 of 66 sampled student files either showed the students were improperly placed or contained insufficient documentation to demonstrate that the student was placed correctly. A minority vote of your board has frequently suggested that the District take ownership of the blame and truly fix these inconsistencies. Yet Chair Brown's own public statements suggest that the District believes the case of "DJ" was an "[isolated case](#)" and even referred to this student as "[baggage](#)."

Dr. Brennan Asplen  
Ms. Shirley Brown  
December 8, 2020  
Page 2

As such, I am ordering my staff to commence regular on-site monitoring of Sarasota County School District's Exceptional Student Education (ESE) Services until such time that we are either satisfied that the District has implemented a system of appropriate services and placements or financial consequences become necessary due to persisting failures by the District. Ultimately, the ability to prove the District is appropriately serving students with special needs is in your hands and my staff will be present to see first-hand.

Furthermore, we are placing the following financial conditions on your IDEA and Title 2 awards to ensure that necessary portions of these funds are going to training and support activities that will create sustainable changes in serving the District's at-risk students:

1. The submission for approval by FDOE of a plan for evidence based professional development related to the provision of support for students with cognitive disabilities in regular education classrooms, to include co-teaching models, providing a minimum of 20 additional hours of professional development to identified teachers and administrators for the next fiscal year. Once approved, the District will be required to submit a monthly narrative on progress related to this requirement to the FDOE.
2. Participation of all identified, essential District staff in monthly targeted technical assistance and desktop monitoring with the FDOE. Additionally, the District will be required to participate in either virtual or face-to-face monitoring for compliance for the next two years, to include FDOE interviews of staff and parents, a review of policy and data and classroom observations and walk-throughs.
3. Quarterly submission of data to the FDOE regarding participation in alternate standards, to include the status of the District's continued self-assessment of pertinent student records and data related to the re-evaluation and review of identified students as well as the deployment of resources, to include financial data on resources related to staffing, curriculum and training, in support of students currently in self-contained classrooms, transitioning from alternate standards or into regular education classrooms.
4. The development for prior approval by the FDOE of parent training programs and supports for families of students with significant cognitive disabilities on the risks and potential consequences related to participation in instruction in alternate standards and assessments and options available for supports for students with cognitive impairment within regular education classrooms to include post-secondary training options. Once approved by the FDOE, the District must report monthly on progress related to this requirement to include number of distinct, District parents accessing the approved training and supports and outcome/impact data from participation in the approved training.

Dr. Brennan Asplen  
Ms. Shirley Brown  
December 8, 2020  
Page 3

5. The District must upload and submit every year for the next three years the following for FDOE approval in Part V, Appendix B, Section II.B.8 of the District's Specific Policies and Procedures for students with disabilities on FDOE's General Supervision Website:
  - a. The District's policies and procedures for students with disabilities detailing its efforts related to parent training and professional development specific to students with significant cognitive disabilities;
  - b. Additional assurances related to the delivery of any awarded compensatory education or Extended School Year Services specific to the support of students with significant cognitive disabilities; and
  - c. The result of an annual review by a team identified by the District of the performance of current students with significant cognitive disabilities and post-secondary outcomes for former students with significant cognitive disabilities.

The actions of your District have likely caused irreparable harm to the students in the forefront of this issue, which may never be truly quantified. Districts are supposed to serve the best interests of students and their families; not their own self interests. It is imperative that the District cease blaming former colleagues and past administrations and take responsibility for corrective actions immediately.

Superintendent Asplen it is now your burden to ensure changes in leadership translate into the District's ESE leadership owning verifiable and transparent changes in practice. Florida's school districts should have long since moved on from forcing families of students with special needs to take their claims to court and choosing to pay off a student in a stubborn effort to avoid simply serving the student appropriately. Unfortunately, Sarasota County School District's public actions suggest that this archaic mentality still has a foothold amongst the District's leadership.

I look forward to working with you to move on from this mentality and embrace a student-centered vision. If this endeavor is unsuccessful, then FDOE will need to proceed with elevated sanctions against the District's leadership and funding. Having said that, I am proceeding forward with the belief that you will ensure a new ownership mentality and best practices are implemented in the District and that Sarasota's students and families will be able to say they are grateful for the changes you implement.

Sincerely,



Richard Corcoran  
Commissioner of Education