

**MINUTES  
STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION  
MEETING**

January 15, 2025  
Destin High School  
4325 Commons Dr. W.  
Destin, FL 32541

Chair Ben Gibson called the meeting to order at 9 a.m. and welcomed members and guests to the State Board of Education meeting. The following members were present: Vice Chair Petty, Esther Byrd, MaryLynn Magar, and Daniel Foganholi. Kelly Garcia and Grazie Christie attended by phone. Chair Gibson recognized Pastor Jack Wheatley to deliver the invocation and asked everyone to remain standing for the Pledge of Allegiance.

**Welcome**

Chair Gibson recognized Mr. Willie Williams, Executive Director, and Dr. Diane Kelly, Principal of Destin High School, to welcome the board. Mr. Williams shared that Destin High School is a comprehensive charter high school in Destin, Florida, dedicated to meeting the diverse needs of its 600-plus students. The school's dedicated faculty and staff contribute to its success, and its students excel in academics, arts, and athletics.

Dr. Kelly shared that the school's theater, art, and athletics programs have been exceptional, with the first state champions in girl's weightlifting this year. The school was only one point shy of an A grade, a testament to its staff and students and the influence of superintendents from various counties.

**COMMISSIONER'S REPORT**

Chair Gibson recognized Manny Diaz Jr., Commissioner of the Department of Education, to present his report. Commissioner Diaz shared that he is honored to have an impressive group of leaders in attendance, as several superintendents from the surrounding counties were in the audience.

Commissioner Diaz expressed his excitement about continuing to work towards keeping Florida number one in education in 2025. He highlighted Florida's support for classical schools, which provide students with a strong foundation in reading, math, and grammar while learning the Constitution and Declaration of Independence and the fading of cursive writing in education.

Commissioner Diaz shared an update on teaching and instructional personnel salary increase allocations with more than \$4.6 billion in teacher pay and \$1.25 billion dedicated to the Focus on Florida Futures budget. This is the most significant pay increase for teachers in Florida history, thanks to Governor DeSantis. However, there is concern that the allocated funds are still not in the pockets of teachers.

Commissioner Diaz shared that Florida's graduation rate for the '23-'24 school year has increased by 1.7 percent to 89.7 percent. This success is attributed to students returning to the classroom in 2020, despite lockdowns in other blue states. Governor Ron DeSantis has made education a top priority, ensuring the highest graduation rate in the state's history.

Chair Gibson called for a motion to approve the Commissioner's Report. Mr. Foganholi made the motion with a second by Ms. Magar. The motion passed unanimously.

## **Minutes**

Chair Gibson called for a motion to approve the meeting minutes from October 15 and November 20, 2024, board meetings. Mr. Foganholi made the motion with a second by Ms. Byrd. The motion passed unanimously.

## **Updates**

### **K-12 Public Schools – Superintendent McQueen, on behalf of the Florida Association of District School Superintendents (FADSS)**

Chair Gibson recognized Mark McQueen, Superintendent of Bay County School District, to provide the FADSS update. Superintendent McQueen shared that the Bay County District School System has 28,000 students, offering 35 schools in public and private settings. The goal is to provide the best education for families and students, focusing on the five A's: Accountability, Attendance, Academic Achievement, Arts and Athletics, and preparing the workforce for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Bay County District Schools has reduced its budget by \$30 million and follows the Governor's leadership, offering a starting salary of 50,000 for teachers, with step increases. The Bay County School District achieved its highest graduation rate of 91.4 percent, an increase from 42<sup>nd</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> in the state. Since Progress Monitoring 1 and 2, attendance has improved in all schools, and decreased turnaround schools from eight to one.

### **College System President Ponder on behalf of the Council of Presidents**

Chair Gibson recognized Mel Ponder, President of Northwest State College, for an update on behalf of the COP. President Ponder shared his appreciation for the outstanding leadership by President Albritton in the Florida College System. President Ponder shared that President Plinske, Valencia College, is working with Epic Universal to train 14,000 new staff for Universal Studios. This partnership is part of the State College System's workforce and educational training. The 28 college presidents are working towards becoming the state's workforce engine, a primary access point for higher education, and focusing on equipping and empowering students despite facing growth, aging infrastructure, and rising costs.

### **Classroom Teacher and Other Instructional Personnel Salary Increase Allocation**

Chair Gibson recognized Suzanne Pridgeon, Deputy Commissioner for Finance and Operations, for an update on Teacher Salary Increase Allocation. Ms. Pridgeon shared that the '24-'25 budget allocated \$1.25 billion for Florida's largest teacher salary increase in history, a significant investment in the teaching profession. Before receiving funds, school districts and charter schools must develop a salary schedule and distribution plan. Superintendents submit plans to the district board for approval. Final expenditure reports are sent in by August 1<sup>st</sup>, outlining salaries, contributions, and future goals. Just 59 districts are currently approved; Leon County just reached an agreement; and 16 districts have board meetings set for the week of January 20, 2025, for approval of their plans.

## **ACTION ITEMS**

### **Approval of Amendment to Rule 6M-8.604, Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) Curriculum Approval Process**

Chair Gibson recognized Cari Miller, Chancellor, Division of Early Learning, for an overview of the amendment to rule 6M-8.604. Chancellor Miller shared that the proposed revisions for the VPK curriculum rule aim to revise policies and procedures for curriculum submission,

review, and approval. This will address new statutory requirements, such as the new VPK provider accountability system, curriculum package review, evaluation protocols, and probation requirements for providers on probation.

Chair Gibson called for a motion to approve the amendment to rule 6M-8.604, Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) Curriculum Approval Process. Ms. Byrd made the motion with a second by Mr. Foganholi. The motion passed unanimously.

### **Approval of the General Education Course Review and Reform**

Chair Gibson recognized Kathy Hebda, Chancellor of the Florida College System, for an overview of the General Education Course Review and Reform. Chancellor Hebda shared that Senate Bill 266 in 2023 reformed general education requirements. General education prepares students with foundational knowledge and skills for speculative content in major courses. The five subject areas include humanities, social science, natural science, mathematics, and communication. Institutions are required to submit their official list of courses by September 1<sup>st</sup> to the Board of Trustees, then approved by 28 Florida College System Institutions, the Articulation Coordinating Committee (ACC), and finally, the state Board of Education.

Chair Gibson called for a motion to approve the 28 Florida College System Institution's General Education Course List as presented and authorize the Commissioner of Education to make any necessary technical adjustments requested by the colleges. Ms. Magar made the motion with a second by Mr. Foganholi. The motion passed unanimously.

### **Approval of Turnaround Option Plans for the School Districts of Bay, Escambia, Madison, Pasco and Polk County**

Chair Gibson recognized Dr. Paul Burns, Senior Chancellor, for an overview of Turnaround Option Plans for Bay, Escambia, Pasco, Polk, and Madison County school districts. Sr. Chancellor Burns shared that five superintendents will present their turnaround option plans for five schools in their districts. They are implementing the second year of their plan, which requires a C or higher grade for the next school year. The plans have been reviewed and approved by the local school board. Three school districts, Bay, Pasco, and Polk County, are requesting extensions for their current turnaround plans. Escambia County Public Schools is requesting an extension of their charter operation plan. Madison County is requesting to close the school.

Chair Gibson recognized Mark McQueen, Superintendent of Bay County School District, to present their plan. Superintendent McQueen shared that Bay County Schools are requesting an extension for Cedar Grove Elementary School to improve attendance, academic achievement, and enrichment through the arts and athletic program. The district has worked closely with Sr. Chancellor Burns and the Bureau of School Improvement team to achieve success. Superintendent McQueen believes Cedar Grove will exit turnaround status by the end of this year and they are focused on a comprehensive action plan, including increased support structures, instructional specialists, and addressing barriers to attendance. He shared that the school has significantly improved staff effectiveness, with a VAM score of highly effective teachers driving higher levels of instruction. The district has invested nearly \$700,000 in additional funding with incentives implemented, including a \$15,000 teacher bonus. Since using progress monitoring there is a significant increase in attendance.

Chair Gibson recognized Commissioner Diaz for his recommendation. Commissioner Diaz recommended the approval of the TOP Plan for Cedar Grove Elementary School.

Chair Gibson called for a motion to approve the commissioner's recommendation. Ms. Byrd made the motion with a second by Mr. Foganholi. The motion passed unanimously.

Chair Gibson recognized Dr. John Legg, Superintendent of Pasco County School District, to present their plan. Superintendent Legg shared that Rodney B. Cox Elementary School is in its second year of district-managed turnaround. A new principal has been appointed and has implemented reading, math, and science coaches, iReady, and math interventions. The plan involves an immediate partnership with external operator MGT to work on Tier 1 instruction and curriculum at the school, focusing on D-status students. The school implements dual-language immersion programs and technology translations. The new superintendent has hired Dr. Shana Rafalski from the University of Florida Lastinger Center to focus on turnaround.

Chair Gibson recognized Commissioner Diaz for his recommendation. Commissioner Diaz recommended the approval of the Top Plan for Rodney B. Cox Elementary School.

Chair Gibson called for a motion to approve the commissioner's recommendation. Mr. Foganholi made the motion with a second by Ms. Magar. The motion passed unanimously.

Chair Gibson recognized Fred Heid, Superintendent of Polk County School District, to present their plan. Superintendent Heid shared that Nicole Bennett, Superintendent of Turnaround Schools, has restructured the department to collaborate with regional structures, ensuring sustainability. The proposal includes a turnaround option plan and highlights school improvements over the past year. The number of A, B, and C-rated schools has tripled, with eight D-rated schools expected to improve to a C or better. Polk County Public Schools improved 21 schools in 2022, addressing challenges like low enrollment and mobility, staff turnover, and science data. All administrators received professional development and support to become instructional leaders.

Ms. Bennett shared the significant improvements in instructional delivery at Crystal Lake Elementary, focusing on transparency, accountability, engagement, and the importance of student expectations and goals.

Chair Gibson recognized Commissioner Diaz for his recommendation. Commissioner Diaz recommended the approval of the Top Plan for Crystal Lake Elementary School.

Chair Gibson called for a motion to approve the commissioner's recommendation. Vice Chair Petty made the motion with a second by Ms. Byrd. The motion passed unanimously.

Chair Gibson recognized Keith Leonard, Superintendent of Escambia County School District, to present their plan. Superintendent Leonard shared that Warrington Preparatory Academy's performance earned a D grade last year. The school district has submitted a TOP plan and is committed to meeting assurances. They are partnering with Charter Schools USA to ensure quality teachers. The new principal, Delvin Vick, has experience in turnaround schools and has improved standards-based instruction and learning environments with the goal of a C or higher.

Chair Gibson recognized Superintendent Ruiz, Charter Schools USA. Superintendent Ruiz shared that the partnership is progressing well, with teachers and students understanding the systems. The plan is to continue moving forward, gaining momentum, and adjusting as needed. Attendance is a concern, and we are monitoring and helping those students with services to get to and from campus.

Chair Gibson recognized Commissioner Diaz for his recommendation. Commissioner Diaz

recommended the approval of the TOP plan for Warrington Preparatory Academy.

Chair Gibson called for a motion to approve the commissioner's recommendation. Ms. Magar made the motion with a second by Mr. Foganholi. The motion passed unanimously.

Chair Gibson recognized Dr. Karen Pickles, Superintendent of Madison County School District, to present their plan. Superintendent Pickles shared that Greenville Elementary is proposed for closure. The school's 96 students will be reassigned to other schools in Madison County.

Chair Gibson recognized Commissioner Diaz for his recommendation. Commissioner Diaz recommended tentatively approving the TOP Plan with three conditions. The first condition includes monitoring and regular updates on the consolidation process. Second, monitoring student performance. Third, monitoring and updating reports on the facilities themselves with updates throughout the rest of this year, and for the board to reserve the right to add additional conditions as recommended by the commissioner at a later date.

Chair Gibson called for a motion to approve the commissioner's recommendation. Ms. Byrd made the motion with a second by Mr. Foganholi. The motion passed unanimously.

### **Approval of A.A.A. Scholarship Foundation- Florida, LLC as a Scholarship Funding Organization for 2025-26**

Chair Gibson recognized Adam Emerson, Executive Director, Office of Independent Education and Parental Choice, for an overview of the A.A.A. Scholarship Foundation – Florida, LLC as a Scholarship Funding Organization for 2025-26. Mr. Emerson shared that the board considers renewal applications for scholarship funding organizations annually, which are crucial in administering the school choice movement in the state.

Chair Gibson recognized Kim Dyson, President of A.A.A. Scholarship Foundation, to present their application. Ms. Dyson shared that the scholarship funding organization has met all 17 requirements for the '25-'26 school year and will relaunch its scholarship management platform for the '25-'26 application cycle. The organization has passed its Florida Auditor General Operational Audit with flying colors, becoming the only scholarship-funding organization to achieve this for the 5<sup>th</sup> time in a row.

Chair Gibson requested clarification on an outstanding bill of \$10,000 to Florida Virtual school and rejected claims from parents.

Chair Gibson recognized David Chappell, Interim General Counsel. Mr. Chappell shared that Section 1004.6495(5)(e), F.S., authorizes the University of Central Florida to create a universal purchasing guide for parents and scholarship funding organizations. Based on parental contributions, the guide aims to clarify approved or prohibited items and provide broad categories for using funds from specific scholarships.

Mr. Emerson shared that House Bill 1 tasked SFOs with creating a purchasing guide for various items. The legislature introduced the University of Central Florida Center for Students with Unique Abilities and tasked them with creating the guide, which was published on July 1st. Reimbursement was requested for a home education student's desk, chair, and playground set, which are common in public schools in Florida, but the request was denied.

After much deliberation, Chair Gibson called for a motion to table this item for a future board meeting. Vice Chair Petty made the motion with a second by Mr. Foganholi. The motion passed unanimously.

### **Approval of Step Up for Students, Inc. as a Scholarship Funding Organization for 2025-26**

Chair Gibson recognized Ms. Gretchen Schoenhaar, the new President for the Step Up for Students, Inc. Ms. Schoenhaar shared her appreciation and thanked the choice office and the department for their hard work. Step Up has significantly improved its performance metrics, halving the average processing time from three to four weeks in 2023 to 10 days in 2024. This includes halving the processing time for tuition payments, allowing families to buy pre-approved items, and processing reimbursement requests. Step Up is launching artificial intelligence, machine learning, and optical character recognition to improve reimbursements.

Chair Gibson called for a motion to approve the Step Up for Students, Inc. as a Scholarship Funding Organization for 2025-26. Ms. Byrd made the motion with a second by Mr. Foganholi. The motion passed unanimously.

### **Approval of Amendment to Rule 6A-10.0401, Gold Standard Career Pathways Articulation Agreements**

Chair Gibson recognized Chancellor Hebda, for an overview of the amendment to rule 6A-10.0401, Gold Standard Career Pathways Articulation Agreements. Chancellor Hebda shared that the Gold Standard Career Pathways Articulation Agreements allow students who earn industry certifications in high school to receive guaranteed college credit for those certifications when enrolling in an associate in science or applied science degree. These agreements provide benefits such as earned college credit, faster degree programs, and the Gold Seal Florida Bright Futures Scholarship.

Chair Gibson called for a motion to approve the amendment to rule 6A-10.0401, Gold Standard Career Pathways Articulation Agreements. Ms. Byrd made the motion with a second by Vice Chair Petty. The motion passed unanimously.

### **Approval of Request from St. Johns River State College for a Bachelor of Science in Biological Sciences**

Chair Gibson recognized Joe Pickens, President of St Johns River State College, for an overview of the proposed Bachelor of Science in Biological Sciences. President Pickens shared that St. Johns River State College, a six-time Aspen Top 150 award winner and home of the National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA) Division 2 National Champion Softball Lady Vikings, is presenting a bachelor's degree proposal in Biological Sciences. The program offers opportunities in fields like biological sciences, technicians, natural science managers, food and forensic science technicians, and other technical skill-requiring careers. The college has an unmet need for over 80 graduates per year in its workforce region 8.

Chair Gibson called for a motion to approve the Bachelor of Science in Biological Sciences. Mr. Foganholi made the motion with a second by Vice Chair Petty. The motion passed unanimously.

### **Approval of Request from St. Johns River State College for a Bachelor of Science in Social and Human Services**

Chair Gibson recognized President Pickens for an overview of the proposed Bachelor of Science in Social and Human Services. President Pickens shared that the program will prepare students for various fields like human services, social work, and substance abuse counseling. The curriculum develops critical thinking and analytical skills, preparing students to assist in public well-being programs and supervise organizations. The college supports this degree and shares the importance of offering bachelor's degrees to dual-enrollment students who are seeking an associate's degree.

Chair Gibson called for a motion to approve the Bachelor of Science in Social and Human Services. Vice Chair Petty made the motion with a second by Mr. Foganholi. The motion passed unanimously.

### **CONSENT ITEMS**

Chair Gibson called for a motion to approve the consent items. Ms. Byrd made the motion with a second by Ms. Maga and Mr. Foganholi.

Chair Gibson recognized Kathy Boehme, Jeannie Ford, Carole Gauronskas, and Alexis Underwood in opposition of the High Demand Teacher Needs Areas.

The motion passed unanimously.

### **Member Comments**

Ms. Byrd expressed her appreciation for Sr. Chancellor Burns and the impressive turnaround programs in the Bureau of School Improvement, which not only improves failing schools but also the entire district and every student. Dr. Christie expressed her hope for Florida's education system, that a well-educated populace will benefit the state of Florida in many ways. Mr. Foganholi expressed appreciation for the state's passion for education and commended the staff for their preparation. Ms. Garcia thanked everyone for their hard work, highlighted the approval of general education courses, and shared the importance of providing students with critical thinking skills and promoting constitutional republic. Ms. Magar expressed her gratitude for Florida's school choice, highlighting the benefits of hybrid, charter, public, Catholic, and private schools. She also highlighted the importance of relationships with Scholarship Funding Organizations (SFOs). Vice Chair Petty echoed member comments shared about school safety and thanked the governor and commissioner for their leadership. Chair Gibson thanked the staff for their hard work and praised the commissioner's leadership, and expressed his gratitude for the state's impressive rankings, including being ranked number one in education and higher education. He then shared the highlights of the meeting.

Chair Gibson announced that the next meeting would be in Tallahassee on April 9, 2025.

### **ADJOURNMENT**

Having no further business, Chair Gibson adjourned the meeting of the State Board of Education at 1:35 p.m.

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Chris Emerson, Corporate Secretary

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Ben Gibson, Chair