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Sylvia Lazos, Treasurer
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Dachresha Harris, Officer
Dr. Alee Moore, Officer
Heather Nay, Officer

Miriam Benitez, Executive Director



Strong Start Academy Board Meeting Minutes
July 21, 2022
5:00 PM

Lorna: ...get started right on time to honor everybody's time. Thank you everybody for coming to this special meeting of the board. I want to announce that we are recording the meeting tonight as usual, and we'll start tonight with roll call. Lorna James-Cervantes, I'm here. Alain Bengochea.

Alain: Present.

Lorna: Sylvia Lazos.

Sylvia: Present.

Lorna: Jamie Gonzalez. Not present. Alee Moore.

Alee: Present.

Lorna: Dachresha Harris..

Dachresha: Present.

Lorna: Nicole Thompson. Not present at this time. Heather Nay.

Heather: Here.

Lorna: Okay, thank you. We...

Heather: Or present. Sorry.

Lorna: That's okay.

Dr. Malich: There's somebody else.

Lorna: Who is the caller, Call-in User_1?

Sylvia: It was me. I'm trying to disconnect from my iPhone because my iPad... I'm just trying to get off the phone, but I'm not being successful.

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Dr. Malich: I see her though.

Lorna: Okay. So, but so you were on two different ways. Got it. Thank you.

Dr. Malich: But she's here and here.

Woman: Yeah, there's somebody there.

Dr. Malich: There's somebody here.

Woman: Is that Heather Nay?

Dr. Malich: No, because Heather's there in the middle.

Woman: Someone else is there.

Lorna: Is there another calling user?

Dr. Malich: Okay. I mean we're in a public meeting, so it won't matter.

Lorna: So, in compliance with Open Meeting Law, tonight we are recording this meeting, and at this time we'll move to public comment. Comment during this portion of the agenda must be limited to matters on the agenda for action. If you wish to be heard, come forward and give your name for the record. The amount of discussion, as well as the amount of time any single speaker is allowed, will be limited to two minutes absent board approval. Is there any public comment? Okay, I don't see any at this time, and unless there's anyone on the call-in that wants to give public comment, we will move on to item number four.

So item four, this is a discussion for possible action to designate the position of the executive director as one...the position as one, subject to critical labor shortage as of at least July 1st, 2022, pursuant to NRS 286.523, and to make all necessary findings attendant thereto for submission to the Public Employees' Retirement System in Nevada. So, at this time, I'll open it to discussion. Because I know that Dr. Malich did a lot of the initial search for the executive director, we'd like to, or we would appreciate it if you would just share with us some of the work that you did in your search for the executive director, and then we'll open for discussion.

Dr. Malich: Okay.

Lorna: Before you do though, Colleen?

Colleen: I just wanna bring everybody up to speed because not everyone was here last week.

Lorna: Oh, yes. Thank you, Colleen.

Colleen: Colleen McCarty, Board Council. So, you know, as we've discussed lots of times the challenges in finding bilingual educators for our school, we are finding that it may be necessary to employ persons who are already retirees under PERS. And there is a statute in the PERS section that allows for that in a circumstance where a critical labor shortage exists, and you as a board can deem a critical labor shortage. We're supposed to make written findings. And the criteria that you're supposed to look at is the history and the rate of turnover for the position, the number of openings for the position, and the number of qualified candidates for those openings after all other efforts of recruitment have been exhausted. The length of time the position has been vacant, the difficulty in filling the position due to special circumstances including without limitation special educational or experience requirements for the position, and the history of success of the efforts to recruit for the position including without limitation advertising, recruitment outside the state, and all other efforts made.

So, tonight, we're going to be talking about why the position for both executive director and also bilingual teacher may require you all should you so find to deem those positions falling under the critical labor shortage exception under the law.

Lorna: Okay. Lorna Cervantes for the record. Thank you so much for that, Colleen. So, at this time then, if Dr. Malich would just walk us through some of the steps she took when initiating the search for the executive director for the school, because she started a lot of that work along with her team here at the City of Las Vegas when they initiated the vision and the mission, and trying to move forward with the application process for the school itself.

Dr. Malich: Thank you. Dr. Tammy Malich, City of Las Vegas, for the record. So, once the decision was made that we were going to pursue a charter school within the City of Las Vegas, we immediately started reaching out to all of our partners in search of an executive director. At that point, the school...we had not even come to the idea that the school would be bilingual. It was that we were gonna open this K-5 school or we were going to apply rather, I'm sorry, to open a K-5 school. We reached out to Children's Advocacy Alliance. We reached out to Opportunity 180. We reached out to the Public Education Foundation. We reached out... my supervisor, Lisa Morris Hibbler teaches at the collegiate level, upcoming... incoming administrator, I did a presentation to her class. I did presentations to the NAACP, to the LAVAVSI [SP], the Las Vegas Retired Administrators... Or no, Las Vegas Black Superintendents and Administrators,

something like that, that organization. I reached out to Workforce Connections. So, again, all of the co-partners we have, searching a principal for this K-5 school, specifically, a principal that matched the demographics of the school. We were looking for an African American or Latina/Latino candidate for this position.

As we started to craft the application and looked at the research around what high-quality education looks like, that was when we decided that we were gonna go with a bilingual model. It was also largely predicated on the fact that our pre-K programs serve mostly predominantly kids of color, and for our second language babies they speak second language with people in their home, grandparents, parents, what have you, but they don't read or write it. And in preparation for CCSD, we work to give them literacy and numeracy in English, so they can be successful in kindergarten. And it occurred to us that these kiddos have a great asset in that they already speak two languages, and so why don't we capitalize on that? And CCSD currently will... At that point, it's my understanding they have plans for the future, but at that point had no bilingual schools.

So, at that point, we continued searching, now looking for somebody that was bilingual and that had experience in a bilingual model. Unfortunately, our efforts failed. We had multiple people that we talked to very seriously. Oh, also the mayor reached out to The Meadows School and the private school network looking for somebody. Several of those efforts failed. We identified individuals, went after them specifically to no avail. And Opportunity 180, for those that don't know, they support school choice in the states. They're a nonprofit. They also train groups of administrators to take over charter schools or to start at charter schools. That's one of their functions. They too were unable to... And they don't just do it locally. They bring in people from all over, looking for principals that match what schools' visions, admissions are.

After all of that, we were unsuccessful all the way around. I started looking at retirees from the Clark County School District, and it became known to me that Miriam Benitez was retiring from the district. I had worked with her in the past and knew that she was no-nonsense and wasn't afraid to hold staff accountable in another high-quality program. I also knew that she had experience with the bilingual model and was bilingual. And so, at that point, we enlisted Miriam as a contractor to help with...working with Lorna, to help rewrite the academic plan. By this point, we had submitted the application, we got some feedback, and they wanted us to tighten up our academic plan specifically around the bilingual education component.

So, we contracted with Miriam as a consultant to work on that plan based on her experience and wealth of knowledge around that subject. She and Lorna worked diligently on that and created the new draft of that academic plan, and made it...did it very quickly. They worked at their own pace on it, but it was a quick one, so that we could get that submitted for that January 27th board meeting. Through that process, it became obvious to us that we needed somebody of Miriam's caliber to be able to pull this off and be successful. So, at that point, I began having conversations with Miriam about her openness to serving in the role as executive director for the school.

Lorna: Thank you, Tammy. Lorna Cervantes for the record. I too have worked with Miriam previously as her supervisor in the school district, so I know directly what her abilities and credentials are in that area, and have worked with her also through the ELL Department in the school district. So, we know that she's highly qualified. Another thing that she brings with her is the fact that she has a wide network of bilingual teachers and educators who she's worked with that are either current or retired staff members. So, that was another positive that we saw as we were looking at her. The main reason that we're really having to, or that we need to just discuss this again is just to say that we really did...Tammy and the team did an extensive search with the help of many partners to try to find somebody who was not a PERS retiree, but you can see that that was to no avail.

Also, as we look at some of the current research that's available from the U.S. Department of Education, we see that there's actually critical labor shortage in the entire U.S. The pipeline of educators and especially either TESOL endorsed or bilingual educators is very small. As a member of the English Mastery Council, I received a report from the State Department of Education that stated that there are actually currently as of this past school year where only 210 teachers in the entire state of Nevada are bilingually endorsed. I happen to be one of them and I've retired, so that just gives you an idea of kind of where those numbers lie.

Dr. Malich: 209.

Lorna: Yeah, so I made it 209, and Miriam made it 208.

Dr. Malich: 208.

Lorna: So, in the 2020/21 school year, that's the year that just passed, right? In that school year, there were only two people who applied for a bilingual endorsement in the state of Nevada as well. So, I don't think it goes...that it's a

stretch to say that there is a critical labor shortage in this area because there's a concern that there are not people...there's not a large number of people to fill bilingual positions in the state of Nevada, and that teaching and especially at the elementary level has already been deemed a critical labor shortage area in the state of Nevada and across the U.S. So, I will just put that in as part of this conversation.

Included in the documents that were given to everybody for the meeting tonight is some backup that supports the...it supports the statistics that we just shared. I think anybody who's lived in Las Vegas for a while now... I've been here for I guess it's going on 31 years now. We know that over the last several years, there has been a concern every year for the last five years that there aren't enough teachers to fill all the vacancies in the Clark County School District. So, it's constantly been in the news and it's been a concern. And then also another piece of the documentation that you were given shows you the demographic statistics of teachers who are either licensed support or administrative personnel in the Clark County School District. And so, that just helps you also to understand the pipeline that we could recruit from within the Clark County area for teachers or administrators in this area. So, I will stop there and we can open it up to any further discussion or any thoughts as to why we should or should not support the recommendation or the idea that we should apply for a critical labor shortage exemption in this area.

Dr. Malich: I would also add...Tammy Malich for the record again, that when we were initially searching, we weren't even limiting our search for non-PERSible employees or those that still had years in PERS because we got verbal guidance from PERS that led us to believe that this was not a concern. So, we were looking at even a larger population, if you will. Those that were still able to collect PERS, as well as those retirees, because again, we believed we were solid. So, even within that larger population, it was a struggle. And some of the documentation I found from the U.S. Department of Ed, each state reports their teacher shortages. It's not mandatory. You don't have to. But for the State of Nevada going back to 2001/2002 school year, every year moving forward except three, there was a shortage of both bilingual education as well as elementary education. In those three years, all three of those years, the shortage was elementary ed that was reported, but every other year there was a shortage of bilingual or TESOL endorsed teachers.

And the pot for those that aren't in education, the pipeline for principal is the teacher route. It's rare that somebody comes in as a principal without having taught. And I for one believe in Clark County you can't do that unless you have

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taught, you have to student teach. And if you never did, you lived in a state where that wasn't a requirement to be a teacher, then Clark County would make you go back and student-teach anyways because it's really important that you have that experience and context. And so, the pipeline for elementary principals and for bilingual principals is coming straight from these teacher ranks, which has been a shortage my entire time in the state, in the district, and I was born and raised here. So, I would just offer that information as well.

Lorna: Thank you, Tammy. Lorna Cervantes for the record. I wanna make sure that Heather, Sylvia, and Alain know that these documents that I was referencing have been sent to you electronically in case you didn't see that email. I wanna make sure you got them, and I see the signal that you have, so thank you for that. I know that Dr. Bengochea is working to help with this shortage by teaching pre-service teachers at the university level, but until those teachers are ready to move into the ranks, we have to have teachers in our school.

I would also just point out that it is to our credit as a school that we've actually been able to work through a lot of the networking in being able to hire teachers who really believe in the vision for this school and are ready to be on board. Some of those are teachers who still have years left in PERS, so no problem there, but others are teachers who are ready to retire or have recently retired who would like to return, and that's why we included the teacher. Although it was my understanding, I know that elementary teaching is already a critical labor shortage area, so we should not have any problems there, but I am not sure about bilingual.

Dr. Malich: Tammy Malich for the record. I know that Colleen was ready to say this. So, when you do a critical labor shortage, it's done by the governing body. So, for CCSD...

Lorna: Got it.

Dr. Malich: ...it's done by the CCSD Board of School Trustees. That doesn't automatically grandfather in Washoe. And for a charter school, it's done by this body. So, the fact that every other district might have elementary Ed as a critical labor already identified does not automatically allow us to say that unless this board agrees.

Lorna: Okay, thank you, Tammy. Appreciate that. Lorna Cervantes for the record. So, I'm glad for that clarification, and that helps us to understand why we have both item four and five, which really seem to be the same thing, and I

think we're talking about both of those at the same time discussing them, but it really helps us to understand why we have both of those items on our agenda. And we would have teachers who would fall into that category, who are ready, willing and, you know, ready to go to work for us tomorrow as long as, you know, there's no concern.

Dr. Malich: And one final point, Tammy Malich, is, and I'm not sure that all of you know this, charter schools are not required to hire all licensed teachers, just like private schools. It's a percentage of their total. Under statute it is allowable. So, many charter schools' parents are often surprised to find, or private, they're paying all this money, those teachers aren't always licensed. It used to be 50%. They may have raised it in the last session, I don't remember.

Colleen: Colleen McCarty, Board Council. It's 80%.

Dr. Malich: [Inaudible 00:20:43.079].

Colleen: And they must be licensed for all core curriculum.

Dr. Malich: Okay. So, that just tightened up, thank goodness, because parents are thinking, you know, they're getting this better... And not that a license alone makes you a great teacher, I wouldn't say that, suggest that, but I mean, we committed from the gate to make sure that everybody was licensed, that we went 100% because it's important that parents, if we're offering choice, we wanna offer choice that is above what the choice they have in their neighborhood school, so.

Lorna: Lorna Cervantes. Thank you so much Tammy and Colleen both for your input. And with that, I'd like to just open the floor for any questions or any other discussion or points from any of the other board members.

Dachresha: Dachresha Harris for the record. So, every teacher has to be bilingual?

Lorna: Lorna Cervantes for the record. Yes, at this school we need the teachers to be bilingual because all of the children are working within what's basically a 50/50 model. So, 50% of their day or their curriculum is being presented in English, and the other 50% in Spanish. So, even in their specials classes like PE and art and music, again, the children would be receiving their curriculum in both languages. So, if I'm a music teacher, I would need to be able to teach the kids part of the time in English and part of the time in Spanish, because our goal is that every child would leave fifth grade biliterate and bilingual. And there's a big difference between those two, so we want 'em to be able to speak the

language and understand and hear the language, but also read and write it. And that's the reason that we're being so concrete, if you will, with that requirement as much as possible.

Dachresha: Dachresha Harris for the record. Are there other charter schools just, not even just locally, but across the country that have that same model? And if there are, what are their success rates of that?

Lorna: This Lorna Cervantes for the record. Yes, there are. Actually, the model of the Dual Language of New Mexico is a perfect example of that, and that's the model that we're using and we're training the teachers using the model. They have a very high success rate using that model and have for many years had also their schools across Texas, schools all across the country. And they use not only Spanish, some schools, like there's a school that's just opening in Hawaii that's using a native Hawaiian language or another school using... So, it could be Japanese and it doesn't matter the two languages. It's just that in Las Vegas, Spanish is the most prevalent language that's being used.

Also, a lot of language acquisition research shows us that kids who go through school in a dual language, bilingual model, actually by the time they're ready to graduate high school outperform their monolingual peers. And that's a longstanding language acquisition research that we've had access to. So, we know it's successful, we know it works, you just have to have everything you need in place to make it work. And it's good for kids in the end. If anyone wants to add to that, please feel free.

Colleen: Colleen McCarty, Board Council. If everyone would take a minute and look over the resolution for the board, which sort of sums up largely what we've talked about today. What we'll do if you approve it is we will include the resolution and the minutes along with...

Dachresha: Was that the only information?

Lorna: Yeah, some of it.

Dr. Malich: Tell me if it's needed.

Colleen: ...along with the form that PERS requires in order to get the designation on.

Lorna: [inaudible 00:25:11].

[00:25:13]

[silence]

[00:27:42]

Lorna: This is Lorna Cervantes. It looks like everybody who's here in the room has finished reading. Have all those online completed reading? I see a nod of the head and a thumbs up, so I think we're good. Heather, if you need more time, please just let us know, but it seems like maybe you're ready as well. So, having read the resolution, if we're in agreement that it's important for the model of our school and the mission of our school to have bilingually certified teachers, as well as an executive director who fits those same qualifications, and we're in agreement that we should request the State Department of Education to grant a critical labor shortage status so that we can hire retired teachers, then we really just need a motion at this time.

Dr. Moore: I have a question, a couple questions, sorry.

Lorna: Okay.

Dr. Moore: Dr. Alee Moore for the record. Question, does it matter that our agenda does not say the executive director should be bilingual, but the resolution does?

Lorna: Is that all?

Dr. Moore: Okay.

Lorna: Yeah, it's fine.

Dr. Moore: Okay, because that was a little different for me. I didn't know that we were focusing on a bilingual executive director as well, so that's fine, I just didn't read that until I got this. The other question is does the bilingual teacher designation equal an endorsement?

Lorna: This is Lorna Cervantes, I can answer that. You do have to have a separate endorsement on your license to be a certified bilingual teacher, and it is different than an English as a second language endorsement on your license. Often a teacher can hold both licenses. For example, I have both on my license, but you can be TESOL endorsed and not necessarily bilingually endorsed.

Dr. Moore: Okay.

Lorna: And it does take a test in that second language in order to receive that bilingual endorsement as well.

Dr. Moore: Okay. So, the 210 that we have in the state are specifically the bilingual endorsement, not ELL?

Lorna: This is Lorna Cervantes. That's correct.

Dr. Moore: And so we're not looking for ELL in the principals?

Lorna: Lorna Cervantes for the record. We would probably hire ELL over non-TESOL or bilingual teachers because at least they have the background in second language acquisition. Currently, the teachers that have been identified are actually all bilingual teachers. It's just that some of them are retired teachers who have received PERS. And so, in order for them to be hired at this school, then that's what we would need to see that we're granted a critical labor shortage situation at this school.

Dr. Moore: Okay. And based off of what Dr. Malich was saying, we're focusing on only licensed?

Dr. Malich: Correct.

Lorna: This is Lorna Cervantes. Yes.

Dr. Moore: Are going to meet the 80% threshold?

Lorna: We are definitely going to have to meet that 80% threshold, but we're really focusing on trying to have 100% of our teachers fully licensed.

Dr. Malich: And Tammy Malich for the record. The rule applies for license in support as far as if they're already receiving PERS it would be a problem. There is currently not a critical labor shortage option for support employees, because it's a harder argument to say, "We can't find a custodian. We can't find a secretary. We can't find..." So, but it does exist for those licensed positions.

Lorna: Does that answer your question?

Dr. Moore: It does. Thank you.

Lorna: Good? Lorna Cervantes. All good questions. Any other questions before we move forward? It's important that anyone who has a question that we answer it. If not, then if there's somebody who would like to make a motion regarding this resolution, this would be the appropriate time.

Dr. Moore: I move that we designate the position of executive director as one subject to critical labor shortage as of July 1st, 2022, pursuant to NRS 286.523,

and to make all necessary findings attended thereto for submission to the Public Employees' Retirement System of Nevada.

Lorna: Is there a second to that motion?

Dachresha: I'll second the motion. This is Dachresha Harris for the record.

Lorna: Thank you. There was a motion by Alee and seconded by Dachresha that we designate the position of executive director as a critical labor shortage area as stated in item number four. All those in favor.

Alain: Aye.

Heather: Aye.

Sylvia: Aye.

Lorna: Any opposed? Okay, that passes unanimously. And at this time, if we could also have then a motion on item number five, which is the designation of a bilingual teacher critical labor shortage.

Dachresha: Dachresha Harris for the record. I move that we approve the pass of the action to designate the position of bilingual teachers while subject to a critical labor shortage as of July 1st, 2022, pursuant to NRS 286.523, and to make all necessary finding attended thereto for submission to PERS.

Lorna: Thank you. Is there a second to that motion?

Dr. Moore: I second.

Alain: Bengochea, second.

Lorna: Okay, thank you. It's been moved and seconded that we also adopt a critical labor shortage designation for bilingual teachers. All those in favor.

Heather: Aye.

Alee: Aye.

Sylvia: Aye.

Lorna: Any opposed? Okay, that motion passes, and is it necessary for us to adopt this?

Colleen: No.

Lorna: No, because we have done that in those two both. All right, thank you very much, everybody. We will take care of the signing the necessary paperwork before leaving here today so that this can be submitted as quickly as possible. At this time, we can move to item number six, which is adjournment of our meeting. And I thank everybody for taking the time out of your afternoon to join us today, and for making this special extra effort this day that was out of our normal schedule. So, thank you everybody, and have a good evening.

Together: Bye.

Alain: Thank you. Bye, everyone.