

'Erie County Association of School Boards (ECASB) & New York State School Boards Association (NYSSBA) together' provides members with important news, notes and updates related to our collaborative efforts in the area of professional development, news, events, and advocacy.

The NYSSBA Let's Connect Program was held on August 12th and 13th. ECASB Program Services Jane Sullivan and I both attended. Other registrants from the ECASB organization included:

Linda R. Hoffman (Area 1 Director and Erie 2 CC BOCES Board Member)
Dr. Kathy Evans-Brown (Buffalo Board Of Education Vice President)
Sylvester Cleary (NYSSBA Board of Director and Erie 2 CC BOCES Member)
Sherry Steffans (Grand Island CSD Board Member)
Christine Schnars (Area 3 Director, Erie 2 CC BOCES Board, and Jamestown CSD Board Member.

Below are notes that re-cap the Let's Connect Program from Program Services Manager Jane Sullivan.

The event began with breakfast speaker *James Baldwin, Senior Deputy Commissioner for Education Policy, New York State Education Department*, setting the tone of connection and civic engagement.

["The Critical Role School Boards Play in Promoting Democracy"](#)

Jay Worona, Deputy Executive Director and General Counsel of NYSSBA, moderated a discussion titled "The Critical Role School Boards Play in Promoting Democracy." The entire session was designed to make us think about civic education and how to promote civic readiness in our students. The panel defined civic readiness as a person who can understand the issues, is able to vote, and is able to serve on a jury. Additionally, students with basic readiness in a broad and rich sense would have civic knowledge, civic skills, a civic mindset, and some civic experience during their school career. Students who can demonstrate exposure to these four tenants would be eligible for a Civic Seal on their diploma. NYSSBA has developed a solid example program.

["Running an Effective and Civil Meeting"](#)

Darci D'Ercole, Director of Leadership Development at NYSSBA, and Barry Entwistle, Director of Member Relations, lead a discussion on running effective and civil meetings. They asked the audience to list three categories: anxieties, assumptions and hopes. For each category, attendees were asked to write three or four reflective ideas about how they think about a board meeting. The audience then shared their collective responses and thought about what the answers tell us about how others also see board meetings. Completing this exercise with your own board would be a great conversation starter. Audiences in attendance at Board Meetings would start to see the common ideas and the places where your board can come to new insights about how your colleagues think when walking into the board meeting. The focus then turned to the foundational tips and suggestions such as having a welcome bro-

chure, explaining the rules of public comment and following Roberts Rules of Order guidelines for the operation of the meeting. The whole session continually stressed the importance of having a set of policies and procedures as a blueprint and that boards stick to them. The presenters also stressed the importance of practicing respect, even when others in attendance, whether they be members of the public or other board members, are not being respectful.

“Building Unity for Successful Governance”

What do you do when there isn't unity on your board and with the Superintendent? That is exactly what *Mark Snyder, the NYSSBA Leadership Development Manager; Dr. Marie Wiles, Superintendent of Guilderland Central School District; and Gloria Towle-Hilt, a Guilderland CSD School Board Member* talked about during this session. Fostering a positive Superintendent and Board of Education relationship is the key to long-lasting unity. A governance team is just that: a team. No one person is in charge. Presenters talked about roles and responsibilities of all members of the governance team; the importance of finding “unity in purpose,” ideas and ways to engage in team building; and to really get to know one another and forge positive relationships, the development of a Board of Education Member Handbook. They all agreed that transparency was crucial. My favorite quote from the session sums it up well: “Unspoken expectations are premeditated resentments” ~ Neil Strauss. Unity comes from open and honest communication with each other.

“Best Practices for Building Constructive Community Engagement”

Jay Worona once again served as moderator of panel discussion, this time on community engagement. Sitting on the panel were *John Yagielski, Chair, New York State Educational Conference Board; Jenn Collazo, NE Region Director, Parent Teacher Association of New York; and Anne Savage, Vice President, City School District of Albany.* This session focused on building trust within the community and the importance of upholding a policy on public comment that is based on respectful discourse. The panel members shared their ideas about how to listen and stressed the follow-up methods to address public comment as a key to building trust with the community. Mrs. Savage said she refuses to be yelled at by her public. She sees them as “caring at [her] loudly.” The panel confirmed the idea that it is not the job of the board to solve everyone's problem; that is the job of the district employees. The board's job is to create the vision of the bigger picture and long-term systemic change; find your goal in that. A board needs to stay focused on the goals and let the district administrators focus on the urgent issues. They also suggested the board share three or four sentences prior to a consensus agenda vote explaining the process, policies, and practices of how a board receives information so it is recognized that the board is paying attention and not just rubber-stamping items on an agenda. The panel stated that the follow-up after public comment is key to fostering positive relationships with the community. The Board should have some type of practice in how issues raised at the podium by the public are addressed. The conversation also turned to the relationship between the board and the PTA/PTO organizations in a district and how these parents can be instrumental in promoting positive communication with the rest of the community.

“World Café: Panel of Member Roundtable Discussions”

The World Café presentation had veteran board members and newly elected members sitting with Superintendents to share solutions to one of five scenarios. Once everyone had a chance to brainstorm a response and share those ideas with the larger group, a panel *Moderated by Bob Schneider, Executive Director of NYSSBA, and Darci D'Ercole,* responded with their ideas. The panel included *Kathleen Dillion, Board President of Churchville-Chili Central School District; Lisa Johnson, Board President of Amityville Union Free School District and Officer of the NYS Caucus of Black School Board Members; Anne Savage; and Edward Marin, Board President of Beekman Central School District.* The overall purpose of the session was to help newly elected board members understand the perception and the reality of board

service and governance and for all to think outside of the box to creatively solve typical problems that school districts may face.

[“Learning Not Realized—Seizing the Opportunity to Turn the Tide”](#)

Jay Worona led another panel discussion, attendees learned of sobering statistics regarding learning loss through the pandemic. Panel members included *Kellie Solowski, Research Program Manager, Center for Education Policy Research, Harvard University; Doug Staiger, Professor Economics at Dartmouth College and Member of the Center for Education Policy Research Advisory Board, Harvard University; Jason Harmon, Deputy Commissioner, P-12 Operational Supports at New York State Education Department; and Dr. Shari Camhi, Superintendent of Baldwin Union Free School District and 2022-2023 AASA, The School Superintendents Association President.* It was suggested that schools not refer to the phenomena as “Learning Loss”, but as “Learning Not Realized”. The term “Learning Loss” would indicate that learning took place, and then the information was lost, which really is not the case. In many instances, learning of some concepts and facts never took place.

[“Mental Health: A New York State of Mind”](#)

Moderated by Kathleen DeCataldo, Esq., Assistant Commissioner for the Office of Student Support Services, New York State Education Department, a panel made up of Brandon Beauchamp, Director of School Mental Health Resources and Training Center at MHANYS; Dr. Gladys Cruz, District Superintendent, Questar III BOCES and President-Elect for the American Association of School Administrators; and Jeffrey Simons, Superintendent of East Greenbush Central School District discussed the state of mental health in New York school districts, particularly post-pandemic. Relationships during the pandemic were frayed and now students are coming back to school ill-prepared for learning. Schools need to rebuild the safe spaces in for children to come back to. The panel helped to portray a road map for comprehensive mental health programs in schools across the state and included the updated guidance, available on the NYSED’s website, for various groups of students. Many students see an uncertain world and have felt unseen and adrift for the past two years, says Brandon Beauchamp. As a result, he contends, districts will face waves of challenges that include increased behavior problems, school avoidance issues, and students who act out and are angry. Gone are the days of supporting a select group of students. He insists, “every single child needs to be supported in a way they weren’t before supported prior to the pandemic.” The panel raised awareness and discussion on creating trauma informed classrooms, parent awareness, and the importance of addressing the mental health of not just the students, but also of the faculty, staff, and administrators of a school district. They stressed the importance of spending time cultivating relationships again, with students, with each other, and with the community. All this must happen at a time when, like in other professions including education, there is a shortage of mental health professionals qualified to work within our schools. Last year was exhausting for district adults who were not only dealing with the onset of COVID, but also with the loss of learning results and declining student mental health because of being isolated for so long. The experts on the panel suggest now is the time to double down on our efforts to take care of students by finding ways to support the adults in the district as well.

This panel emphasized the need to rethink what we, as educators, do for New York State’s post-pandemic children. They pointed out some of the ways the pandemic helped some children thrive and how many children did learn to communicate well and become more proficient in technology because they had to. They also highlighted the ways in which children missed out on creative outlets and learning critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Kellie Solowski and Doug Staiger summarized their research, which demonstrates the ways the pandemic affected the children in New York State. Not surprisingly, those in economically challenged/ high poverty schools were affected most, demonstrating losing nearly 20 weeks of instruction, while some areas saw a reduction of only about eight weeks. Most children show 16 weeks of loss, meaning many New York State students lost 1/3 of a year of school

instruction. Interestingly and surprisingly to the researchers, home environment did not play a vital role in the overall loss; the data shows setbacks align more with the overall district. The overall message was that we as districts now need to reflect on our schools and where we are to understand the context of what needs to be done to make up for the losses. We will need to think outside of the box to find solutions rather than going back to what used to work. We need to think about how kids learn and see new ways to address those learning styles instead of forcing them into the traditional settings used. Dr. Shari Camhi spoke about a program in which some students are sitting in college classrooms and asked why, if a student can pass a course with college level rigor, why are we still forcing them to spend energy and resources to take the regents exam? She contends the system needs to change: "That does not mean lowering the expectations for kids. That means keeping the expectations high but changing the way we measure." The discussion also included the dollars and cents. We are challenged by funding restrictions, once again demonstrating our need to think creatively out-of-the-box for positive solutions.



Above: Several pictures of the various speakers, presenters and panelists at the NYSSBA Let's Connect Program that was held in Albany on August 12th and 13th.