

**RIVESP
Advisory Board
May 19, 2021
Minutes**

Members Present: Lisa Colwell, Will Potter, Molly Faerber, Paul Troxell, Joann Alger, Chris Butler, Kelly Charlebois

Members Absent: Greg Waldorf, Christopher Bove, Nikki McPeak

Ex Officio Members: Laurie Diorio (DHS), Heidi Munsch (RIVESP), Amy Grattan (Sherlock Center), David Sienko (RIDE), Kelvin Roldán (RIDE)

The meeting was called to order at 5:30PM via Zoom.

Paul Troxell thanked Speaker Joe Shekarchi, Governor Dan McKee, Senate President Domenick Ruggiero, and Education Commissioner Angelica Infante-Greene for their efforts on behalf of the RIVESP program and their public commitment that the program would be fully funded, that teacher layoff notices would be rescinded, and that the program would stay intact for the next two years while a long-term plan is crafted.

Advisory Board Makeup and Leadership

Kelvin Roldán reported that he has met with RIDE legal counsel regarding ex officio members. He expects that an advisory opinion will be issued soon.

Paul Troxell raised the question of whether the Advisory Board has been officially constituted as the membership and officers were never officially appointed by the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education. Kelvin Roldán indicated that this is part of the current legal review.

Paul Troxell announced the resignation of Greg Waldorf from the Advisory Board. Dr. Waldorf will be asked to submit a written letter of resignation, which will be forwarded to RIDE.

Current Role of the RIVESP Advisory Board

Laurie DiOrio asked what the status is of legislation given the announcement by state leaders on May 10 regarding program funding. Kelvin Roldán indicated the legislature is forming an eight-member legislative panel to review services for children who are blind and visually impaired.

Chris Butler suggested that the Advisory Board should begin working on updating the eleven goals identified in the Final Plan. He cited Goal #6 (early intervention) and Goal #11 (assistive technology) as examples of information that is outdated. He indicated that updating the goals would provide the legislative panel with a good sense of the current array of services as well as gaps in the system.

Kelvin Roldán indicated an interest in the Advisory Board working on a landscape analysis, however he believes that the work should not commence until the Advisory Board has been officially constituted by the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education.

RIVESP RFP Progress

Kelvin Roldán reported that the process is still open, but that he expected it to be closed within the next two weeks. He indicated that he would reach out to Advisory Board leadership with more information as soon as the contracts were finalized.

Current Status of RIVESP

There was a great deal of discussion regarding the status of layoff notices that were issued to the RIVESP staff in April. Amy Grattan indicated that she is seeking clarification about who is responsible for rescinding the notices (Rhode Island College or the Department of Administration).

In response to questions about whether all the layoff notices will be rescinded, Amy Grattan indicated that the Sherlock Center currently does not yet have a contract with RIDE for the coming school year and is also waiting to hear back from Local Education Authorities (LEA's) about their intention to maintain services through RIVESP in the coming school year.

In response to questions about a letter that was recently sent to the LEA's from the Sherlock Center, Amy Grattan indicated that the RIVESP rate for the coming year would be \$149 per hour as opposed to the current \$170 per hour. She indicated that this rate is based on RIDE funds and service hour capacity.

Paul Troxell asked about the current status of the deficit. Amy Grattan explained that final figures will not be known until all the billing is out for this year and the invoices are paid.

Kelly Charlebois asked if at a future meeting the Advisory Board could be provided with additional information about the RIVESP program including the budget, the number of LEA's continuing with RIVESP, the total number of students, and caseload statistics. Amy Grattan and Kelvin Roldán indicated they would share what information they can with the Advisory Board.

Kelly Charlebois asked if the federal IDEA grant funds would be distributed to LEA's or provided directly to RIVESP. Kelvin Roldán indicated that the funds would be used to help fund RIVESP directly.

Heidi Munsch expressed concerns that the proposed plan for increasing billable hours is not reasonable as it does not consider the need for teacher travel, professional development, and the ebbs and flows of caseloads throughout the school year.

Chris Butler asked when the LEA's were expected to indicate their plans for the next school year. Amy Grattan responded that she hopes to have commitments from most of them within the next couple of weeks.

Kelly Charlebois asked what the deadline is for rescinding the layoff notices. Lisa Colwell indicated that districts have until the last day of school to rescind them. If they are not rescinded by then, employees could then apply for unemployment. Heidi Munsch indicated for districts using the Rhode Island school calendar, the last day of school is June 25. Later in the meeting Larry Purtill from the National Education Association indicated that they could be rescinded anytime before the first day of the new school year.

Paul Troxell asked if anyone on the Zoom call could provide a guarantee that all the issued layoff notices would be rescinded. There was no response.

Several questions were asked about whether the commitments that were made by state leaders at the press conference on May 10 were being fulfilled. Kelvin Roldán indicated that RIDE is doing what they were asked to do. He urged everyone to be patient and wait for the results of the RFP process before making judgements.

Open Discussion

There was no open discussion.

Review and Discussion of the House Oversight Committee Chair

After discussion about the proper timing of sending the request, the issue was tabled until the next meeting.

Public Comment

Elizabeth Doyle Payne, a Teacher of the Visually Impaired at RIVESP, talked about the issue of equitable funding for low incidence disabilities. She pointed out that services for kids with hearing impairments are fully state funded but services for kids with visual impairments receive no state funding. She also indicated that there are many challenges to setting hourly billing benchmarks given the unpredictability of caseloads.

Hilary Conners, a parent, expressed frustration that RIDE cannot confirm that the Sherlock Center won the master price agreement despite it being announced at the recent press conference. She also said that she was dismayed that the status of the teacher's jobs cannot be confirmed as it was announced that there would be no layoffs. She indicated that while her child's school district does not use RIVESP for TVI services they do use a RIVESP orientation and mobility instructor, and she is concerned about that person's job status. She asked whether the Advisory Board could meet in two weeks to receive and update from RIDE.

Ryan Lukowicz, a student, indicated frustration that despite the announcement on May 10 that RIVESP won that there is still confusion around funding for the program. He also expressed concern that the current situation could lead to service disruptions for students.

Diane Lukowicz, a parent, expressed frustration that promises were made regarding funding and staffing and that she would now be reaching out to legislators for clarification.

Bethany Carpenter, a parent, expressed frustration that the RFP process is still open despite a hard deadline that has already passed. She also asked how, if RIVESP is a state program, the state can contract with itself to provide these services. She pointed out that the law makes it clear that RIVESP should be fully funded by the state.

Judi Lambert, a RIVESP teacher and a parent, cited the national shortage of teachers of the visually impaired as well as orientation and mobility specialists as a reason for not laying off current staff. As a parent with the experience of knowing how consistency with service providers contributed to the success of her child. She also questioned the number of layers the Advisory Board needs to go through to get to the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education, which is the body that the board is supposed to be advising. She suggested opening a direct dialogue between the two groups.

Larry Purtill, president of the National Education Association and a member of the Council on Elementary and Secondary Education, noted that he believes that state leaders will live up to the commitments that they made. He said that he would welcome updates from the Advisory Board directly to the Council.

Julie Casimiro, a state representative, said that she is confident that legislative leadership will fulfill their commitments. She also indicated her intention to recommend a legislative oversight hearing on the RIVESP issue.

Sara Shaffer, a parent, expressed frustration about the continued funding issues and the inability of the state to follow the law related to RIVESP.

With no further business, the Advisory Board adjourned at 7:35 PM.

Respectfully Submitted,
Christopher Butler