

MEMORANDUM

TO: North Syracuse Community Advisory Committee

FROM: Deb Ayers, Jen Heckathorn, John Wisniewski

RE: Meeting Notes - Meeting of July 28, 2025

DATE: July 31, 2025

Attendance: Committee Members: Dave Babikian, Taryn Bakal, Brian Berlin, Sophia Burden, Katie Burke, Liz Cannella, Nancy Congdon, Kate DeBottis, Rosemary Farfaglia, Sara Garvey, Sarah Jones, Jillian Knapp, Cheryl McDonald, Sara Morrice, Nicole Parah, Phil Smith, Heather Stauffer, Sean Sullivan, Naomi Trivison, Shannan Vaillant, Emma Watson

Consultants: Deb Ayers, Jen Heckathorn, John Wisniewski

District Administrators: Don Keegan, Matthew Erwin

Location: Jerome F. Melvin Administrative Office Building

1. A building tour of NSEEP located at Main Street, North Syracuse, was led by Dawn Hussein, principal, and Matt Erwin, director of facilities. Upon return, the committee noted their “notices” and “wonderings” about the building, which can be found at the end of the notes. The agenda for the meeting was presented and reviewed as well.
2. Committee members not in attendance at the June meeting introduced themselves, and the meeting notes from the June 30, 2025, meeting and the July meeting agenda were reviewed.
3. Deb reviewed the upcoming meeting schedule as follows:

Date	Topic	Location
Monday, August 25	Facilities/Brainstorming	NS Junior High School
Monday, September 15	Transportation & Staffing (Part I)	Gillette Road Middle School
Tuesday, October 21	Staffing (Part II) & Exploration of Future Facilities Options	KWS Bear Road Elementary School

Monday, November 10	Finances & Exploration of Future Facilities Options	Cicero Elementary School
Monday, December 8	Review Draft Report	District Office

4. Deb then reviewed the 6/30/25 meeting takeaways along with the district’s critical question:

“How can the North Syracuse Central School District strategically restructure its staffing, facilities, and grade-level configurations to optimize educational outcomes and emotional well-being for all students, while addressing declining enrollment, reduced state aid, and future growth opportunities like the Micron project?”

5. The NSEEP building tour generated many programmatic questions, so Jen Heckathorn began the discussion on instructional programs by reviewing the pre-kindergarten program.

6. Following this discussion, Jen led the committee members in an exercise to generate ‘forward momentum’ by capturing what is working well in the district as a foundation to build upon. Committee members individually identified ‘bright spots’ (What’s working? What do we love about the district? What do we want to see continued?) and ‘boulders’ (What are areas where we think improvements can be made? What are obstacles to improvements?). Results of that work are summarized in the table below.

Educational Outcomes	
Bright Spots <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - PLC process is moving forward districtwide - Kids can start pathways for college in 9th grade - Many AP, SUPA, OCC, SUNY Oswego courses offered at the high school - Number of courses and programs offered - Diverse educational opportunities - Project Lead the Way - OCC classes offered tuition-free at CNS - SUPA credit-bearing classes offered at very reasonable cost - HS test scores - NSEEP is doing <u>amazing</u> things for 	Boulders <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - New Visions programs - HS programming -> leading to associates degree - More focus on buildings and classroom funding are extracurriculars - Grading alignment with essential standards - No baccalaureate. “Tract” students might miss elective opportunities - Program consistency - makeups/redos/HW - We need to dig deep into the success of ALL kids and in some spaces we’ve allowed ‘high’ scores to limit us

<p>students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strong sense of community - NSEEP amazing community - something to be proud of! - We are investing time and energy on grade-level, rigorous teaching to increase student success - Curriculum changes for the better - Investment in early grades PK-2 - Strides being made to change the image of the JH - Knowledgeable, helpful directors who are on the ground working with us - There are amazing teachers who do the hard work every day 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - IEP waitlist - Listen to the staff regarding their noticings and needs regarding class size and make up - Reading scores - Buildings that are pigeonholed as the “bad” or “dumb” schools - HS programming communication - Lack of funding for PK - UPK not staffed by school employees or in school - Consistent poor test scores and state rankings
<p>Facilities</p>	
<p>Bright Spots</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bear Road renovations! - Upgrades happening around the district - Beautiful athletic complex, brings section and state contests here to our community - Renovations at Smith Road are awesome! - Being flexible/creative with current constraints for renovations. ‘Making the best of it’ - Most buildings are welcoming - Multiple buildings have wonderful, hard work staff who strive to meet student needs - HS has good facilities 	<p>Boulders</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Main Street - really need to start over - Space v. number of students - Classroom sizes too big - Main Street needs improvements to allow the current program to continue its success - Main Street building - Aging facilities like NSEEP - Staff not listened to for renovations - Many buildings in need of updates - Geographical size of district - Small buildings - Old buildings - A/C issues, security, roofs, bathrooms - Disrepair of some buildings - District office seems better suited for UPK - one floor, newer, AC - Outdated, overcrowded buildings - Many inequities in facilities - Not sure there is room to add anything in most of the elem buildings - Having enough buildings to support programs and student need (ex: bathrooms within classrooms for pre-k)
<p>Grade Level Configurations</p>	
<p>Bright Spots</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Elementary building K-4 allows consistency and kids to know staff/building better during early years - Class sizes seem appropriate - What research is being done to look at best 	<p>Boulders</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Keep kids in elementary buildings through 5th - 8-9 building makes scheduling a challenge - Kids on buses for too long - 8-9 grade configuration NOT GOOD

<p>practices for grade level practices?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Glad conversations are happening surrounding best configurations for K-7 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Putting 9th graders in HS (9-12) - 9th grade separated from 10-12 causes students to be stuck on accelerated track meaning less opportunity to try these courses/stricter criteria - 9th graders without adequate credits are 'trapped' at JH - HS to include 9th - 10-12 seems to work but wouldn't 9-12 be better? - So many building moves - Too many transitions K-4 -> 5-7 -> 8-9 -> 10-12 - Too many transitions - Grade level configuration is poor - Too many building changes in the district - Challenging grade configurations
<p style="text-align: center;">Staffing</p>	
<p>Bright Spots</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Veteran staff - stay committed to NSCSD - Very dedicated elementary/MS staff from experience so far - GRMS weekly communication - Dedicated teachers - Great staff - Dedicated staff - Certified staff - Thoughtful and responsive administrators and leaders - Teachers - Staff working very hard - Teacher to class size ratio (elem) - Highly engaged staff - Teachers are dedicated and care about what they do - Student support services (speech, OT) - Professional development opportunities 	<p>Boulders</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - You hear of teams/teachers that you do/don't want because of how much your child will grow - Inefficiencies for MS courses (tech, FACS, health) - MS: grades 5-6 vs 7th grade..different schedule, different contract language - Need to align subject area with teacher strengths at the elementary levels - Support staff to help teachers - Most help poured into the elementary so that they are "ready" for the upper levels - Lack of true support for the 811 program - Teachers leaving midyear for other positions in district - Music programs are staffed by seniority rather than specialty - 5-7 inefficiencies for AIS, Special Educ, ENL - Spec educ CDT model does not allow enough support to students - Staff changes every year - Give teachers resources they need without adding more duties such as guidance counselor, janitor, nurse, etc. - Enough teachers - Teacher contract is limiting and in some instances does not allow student needs to be met. We need to go back to <u>kids</u> always

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training & programming - more kids with more needs at young ages. Do the TAs get enough training? - So many shared staff between buildings especially at JH and HS - Teacher turnover in elem schools - Some staff members with low scores would benefit from support (like the mentoring program) to work on ways to grow/be effective - We need pre-1st - Lack of training for new leadership in buildings - Lack of service providers for special needs students, IEP, reading, writing, 504, etc. - Teacher movement within district constantly
Emotional Well-being	
Bright Spots <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mental health resources are very accessible to students - Areas of play - Athletics - Great extracurricular activities that aren't just sports - Forward thinking throughout - Supportive community - Supportive administration working hard to help students & staff - District is making efforts to better know all populations we teach - Contracts with Liberty Resources 	Boulders <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not enough focus on staff/student relationships - Large discrepancies in socio-economic status of residents - Could have more extracurricular activities - Junior High school should not be the first time our kids come together - Teachers are given full plates and changes that hinder their focus on teaching - Elementary uses Second Step - are their groups/programs/time in day to support Middle/HS? - Socio-economic differences between schools - Do we have systems to catch or refer students in all buildings?

Summative comments from each group at the end of the activity:

Emotional Well-being - There are many good things happening (counseling, social/emotional learning, athletics, co-curricular BUT efforts are disjointed and inconsistent.

Staffing - Dedicated staff but the boulders include staff changes, shared staff, staffing by seniority, and decisions not always made in the best interest of kids.

Grade level configurations - Too many transitions, 9th grade belongs in high school, group preference for K-5, 6-8, 9-12 configuration, bus ride length is much too long (especially for sports).

Facilities - Positive feedback about building renovations but some buildings are dated and need renovations.

Educational outcomes - There is a large variety of academic opportunities for students (ex., Advanced courses, BOCES, etc.); however, there is a lack of student engagement and absenteeism leading to poor test scores. A lack of funding affects all levels.

7. Jen reviewed the demographic and achievement data for the district and each elementary building (Allen Road, Bear Road, Cicero, Lakeshore Road, Roxboro Road, Smith Road) and highlighted several observations:

- District student population has grown more diverse; still predominantly white
- NYS uses free and reduced price lunch (FRPL) participation as an indicator of poverty
- Percentage of students with disabilities has increased over the past 10 years (13% → 18%) as has the percentage of economically disadvantaged (34% → 46%)
- Chronic absenteeism rate in K-6 is 18.8%, 7-12 is 25.5%
- Chronic absenteeism has high correlation to student success and dropouts
- Roxboro Road Elementary identified as a school in need of targeted support and improvement by NYSED. One school in this designation places the district in the same designation
- Roxboro Road ES is significantly more economically disadvantaged and is more diverse than other schools
- English Language Learners are located in 3 buildings (Cicero, Roxboro, Smith)
- Chronic absenteeism is higher at Roxboro (27%). Other elementary schools are relatively similar (10.1% - 19.3%)
- Expenditures per pupil is similar across all elementary buildings
- Percentage of students with disabilities in each building ranges from 21% to 32%
- District ELA grade 3 and 4 scores are below state average with the exception of Cicero at 57% (state average = 56%) and Roxboro is lower than other district elementary schools
- District Math grade 3 and 4 scores are slightly below state average and Roxboro is lower than other district elementary schools

- District elementary class size average ranges from 18 to 21 with the overall elementary average slightly less than 20 students. NSEA contract has provision that states K-6 average of 25 students with 30 student maximum
- Elementary school day schedules are generally consistent across buildings (9:20 a.m. - 3:15 p.m.) with consistent instructional time allocation across all schools
- Elementary specials (art, music, etc.) time allocation is consistent across buildings
- Instructional time expectations for ELA, Math, Phonics, Tier 3 Support, and WINN are clearly established and consistent across buildings
- Instructional time expectations for elementary science and social studies are not co

8. The allocated meeting time expired so the demographic and achievement data for the middle schools, junior high school, and high school will be discussed at the beginning of the August committee meeting.

9. Deb briefly reviewed the recommendations presented by consulting firm Russ Haber and Associates in its study report dated February 2024. Further review will occur at a future committee meeting.

10. Meeting takeaways:

- North Syracuse CSD is growing increasingly more diverse across the district as a whole. Some buildings have higher levels of poverty, non-white students, and students with other needs (homeless, ELLs) than others.
- North Syracuse CSD is performing near or below statewide averages in almost all measurable academic program categories.
 - Achievement gaps at the elementary level are most pronounced at Roxoboro Elementary, while Cicero Elementary demonstrates stronger academic outcomes.
- Students are still recovering from the academic impact of COVID and remote schooling. Changing norms around technology use also affects students' academic achievement.
- Chronic absenteeism is an indicator to keep an eye on. While not *all* chronically absent students struggle, many do.
- Prekindergarten plays a vital role in the NSCSD and occupies a significant amount of space.
- The previous study completed by Ross Haber and Associates provides a

“discussion starter” for our committee’s work.

11. The next advisory committee meeting will be held on Monday, August 25, and will begin with a building tour of North Syracuse Junior High School at 5:30 p.m. The group will convene in the library for the meeting, which will start at 6 p.m.

We believe this covers the essence of the discussions at our meeting on July 28. If you have questions about these notes, please feel free to contact Deb, Jen, or John. We will also review these notes as an agenda item at our next meeting.

Looking forward to seeing you again on August 25 at 5:30 p.m. at North Syracuse JHS, followed by the meeting at 6:00 p.m. in the Library. The focus of the meeting will be on the instructional program and facilities.

**NSEEP
Building Tour Debrief**

Noticings	Wonderings
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Amazing work in a facility that is “long past its useful life” and wasn’t designed for that purpose.<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ The program at NSEEP, despite the concerns about the building, is very appreciated. The culture is strong.○ It looks a lot better than it did 5 years ago (in some ways) but in others it really hasn’t changed.● The space doesn’t have the most welcoming environment/feel that we normally envision for PK students.● Elevator is a safety issue--people have been stuck in it. Students with walkers/wheelchairs on 2nd floor with an elevator that might malfunction is concerning.● The only playground for 2-5 year olds that is fully accessible (and fenced in!) in the immediate Syracuse area.● District-provided transportation to PK	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Because the program is funded by the county/state, does that mean they kick in for renovations?<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Answer: They get about ⅓ of the state aid facilities funding that a typical elementary building receives (Matt Baldwin provided response)● Is it a state requirement to have a PK program?<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Answer: No, but the state does incentive PK; there are also many reasons why PK is beneficial to communities (Jen Heckathorn provided response)● Is the big space (e.g., high ceilings, 2 floors, bathrooms) intimidating for the little students?● What other options are there to house a program like NSEEP other than the current building?● Is there a way to have a space that has

<p>programs (at Main St. for Special Education services and in CBOs) is a highlight.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no “wraparound care” (before/after school hours) at Main St. 	<p>more aspects of Universal Design for Learning (so more accessible)?</p>
--	--