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Loudoun County School Board, Equity Committee Meeting, Thursday, November 2, 2023

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- BoardDocs (School Board): <https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/loudoun/Board.nsf/Public>

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[00:00:00] Good evening, everyone. Today is November 2nd, 2023. My name is Brenda Sheridan, and I am calling to order the Loudoun County Public Schools Equity Committee meeting. Thank you all for being here. We have established a quorum this evening, so I'm really excited to get going. And while our agenda does say remote participation, Ms. Corbo let me know earlier today that she wasn't able to join us this evening. So we'll move right to public comment and we have one speaker this evening will allot two minutes for public comment and our

[00:00:36] speaker is andrew weisskopf you know the rules and the ropes so i'll just let you go ahead good evening i didn't write anything down because frankly sometimes it's not worth my time because you don't get a quorum i come to this committee to support you to encourage you i wish i could do that tonight. I don't like having to feel like you need to be chastised. I don't know if it's

[00:01:12] because this committee has gotten too big, but you didn't have a meeting last month. Our children need the work that you are supposed to be doing. When I look at policies, when they come back with feedback. I might see one or two people have offered feedback, but I wonder if some of you are even looking at the policies as they're going through. I want to come here to support you.

[00:01:48] We fought hard to get this committee. I like to think that my advocacy played a small part. We fought hard for this committee. Our children need this committee. You need to show up. You need to

understand how serious your work is and get busy on it.

[00:02:13] Thank you. Black Lives Matter. Thank you. And that concludes public comment for this evening. We will move to item three, the approval of our September 2023 minutes. Is there a motion to approve the minutes? Remember, just turn on your mic.

[00:02:29] Please say your name and make the motion. Any member of the committee can do so. I make a motion to approve the minutes of the meeting. And that was Michelle. Thank you. All right. Is there a second? I second. Jill. And Jill. Thank you. So motion made by Michelle, seconded by Jill to approve the September 2023 minutes. Is there any discussion or changes to the minutes?

[00:02:58] Please raise your hand. Do you have anything? All right. Seeing none, all in favor of the motion to adopt the September 2023 minutes, please raise your hand and say aye. Keep your hands up, please. All right. Anyone opposed? Please raise your hand and say nay. Seeing none, the motion carries. I believe we have 18 members in the room, so that'll be 18-0.

[00:03:19] All right. So our next item is number four, introduction. And our person that we're introducing is on her way down. Do we go to the next person? Is that all right? So we will go to item 402 and introduce the communications coordinator, Ms. Amy Freeman. Yeah, come on up, take the mic, and tell us what you want to tell us. We're excited for you to be here. Thank you.

[00:04:16] To admit, I'm more familiar with being on that side of the podium. My name is Amy Freeman. I am a communications coordinator within the Office of Communications. I'm still fairly new to LCPS. I started in July of 2022, so I still feel like I'm getting used to things.

[00:04:37] Within our office, there are four coordinators. I am one of them. Each of our coordinators is assigned to a department. I have the pleasure of being assigned to equity. I'm also assigned to student services. In addition to this, I create newsletters for the Office of Communications.

[00:04:54] I create two of them, one for staff and one for families and staff. These go out on Thursdays. I hope you enjoy reading them. I enjoy putting them together. And that is really something that's in my wheelhouse, is sharing communication, something I enjoy doing. As I said, I started in 2022.

[00:05:12] I do not have an education background. The unifying theme through my background is communications. that and community building. The positions I've worked for in the past have all had that same theme, and it's something I've greatly enjoyed, and I've enjoyed learning about the different positions I've worked in.

[00:05:30] I began my career as a Peace Corps volunteer. I taught English in Kazakhstan. I was there for two years, from 1995 to 1997. It was a time of transition for that country, and I have to say I learned a ton. I learned Russian, and I learned how to teach. I had a crash course in teaching, and then I taught English as a second language to 7th to 11th grade. Upon my return to the states, I worked for a newspaper briefly, and then I worked for the U.S. Agency for International Development. Again, it was in the communications realm. I was working with a group of individuals who were very passionate about South Sudan, and I had the pleasure

[00:06:07] of visiting that country numerous times. With the birth of my daughter, I left the workforce, and I took some time off to raise my family. I did return to USAID briefly, but having a kid and several, I had three kids and working downtown with small kids at home was just a little bit too much for me so I

transitioned back and came back to the suburbs and worked for non-profits. The last place I worked was a non-profit focused on seniors and the elderly and housing options for them and then I came here and I've had a great pleasure getting to know this system and how it works and all the

[00:06:45] great people that work for it and it's been my pleasure to be here. So that's a little bit about me thank you thank you for being here and introducing yourselves it's it's funny because um i feel like as a board member we kind of know all of the people that well i shouldn't say we know all of the people but we try to get to know all the people that we interact with and sometimes the public doesn't get to see the face of the people communicating out so thank you for being here and letting us get to know you a little bit better appreciate it not here yet that's all right

[00:07:18] we're gonna hold on item 401 no we're not just come right up to the podium we're going to go move to item 401. Nothing like making an entrance. I love it. Welcoming the new Chief Communications and Community Engagement Officer. This is Natalie Allen. So I'm going to let you go right up to the podium and delight us with your words. Thank you. How is everyone doing this evening? Great. I'm so

[00:07:53] happy to be here and I'm very happy to be in LCPS. I am not exactly sure what you want me to talk about, but I can tell you that my passion for equity work is number one, and all of the storytelling needed to make that work happen is really important to me.

[00:08:09] I'm so excited to be in Loudoun County Public Schools and am a staunch advocate of all the work that Dr. Ellis Williams is doing, and I'm just so happy to be here and hope to be a support and resource for all of you. So thank you so much for having me, and if you have any questions, I'm happy to answer any questions that you have.

[00:08:31] So I'm going to start with a question. Can you just guide us a little bit through maybe what your responsibilities are? Absolutely. What the, I've lost the word. The department does? Yeah, what do you do? What's your purpose? What are your goals, like your role within LCPS?

[00:08:49] Absolutely. Maybe expand on that a little bit. That would be so great. I'd be happy to. So ultimately, our department is responsible for a lot of different things, but we oversee the website. We oversee all of the press and media coverage and those kinds of things. It's also our job to tell the really great stories that are happening in Loudoun County Public Schools.

[00:09:07] There are so many of them. So we oversee social media and want to make sure that all of our communication is strategic, up-to-date, transparent, and accurate. And so ultimately, my goal, being newer here, is to increase also family and community engagement in LCPS, that two-way communication.

[00:09:28] I know we're so great at pushing out information. And we've heard a lot in our community sessions about the improvement as it relates to communication and transparency over the last couple of years. But I would love to expand on that even more and make sure that we're getting out into the community and doing things with and for the community instead of always expecting folks to come to us.

[00:09:50] So really expanding on that family engagement piece of things and getting out into schools and into communities to make sure that we are hearing from the constituents we serve is really important to me, too. And I heard you say you didn't mind taking questions from the committee.

[00:10:07] So are there any questions about this office? Mark? Hello. So you mentioned press and media. So I wonder, is your department responsible for like press releases and things for the for the LCPS for

current events and things in the news?

[00:10:27] Yes, we are. Yes. So today's been busy, as you can imagine. And is there anything that you'd like to share with us about current events? I think I can probably share that our superintendent, I'm sure you all received the letter last night, but we all know that fentanyl in schools is a crisis that we are collectively trying to tackle and we're partnering with the sheriff's department and community organizations to make sure that folks are aware it's a crisis.

[00:11:01] And it has been ultimately not just in this school year, although we're seeing a trend at school. Parkview that's been concerning and that we're addressing with a team of administrators and folks from the sheriff's department. All that to say we've done a lot of education even before I got here and we'll continue to do that as it relates to the dangers of fentanyl and what we're doing to make sure to educate our students, our community, our families, and also support our families because there's more work that we can do. For example, you know, we've been talking a lot

[00:11:37] over the last day or two about the fact that in Loudoun County and Northern Virginia we don't have a lot of treatment facilities for students who are suffering from addiction and so what are we as a community going to do about that how do we advocate how do we talk to our elected officials and our legislators to make sure that they're aware that this is an issue of increasing importance to us and so we hope to work together with the community with our families to make sure that you know we are on the news we're talking about this very transparently and opening and openly in our newsletters and any town halls and those kinds of things that we're having

[00:12:16] so that it's it's something that everyone's aware of and and advocating for as it relates to treatment of addiction and those types of things and since I do have the floor related to the fentanyl crisis specifically we are partnering with the sheriff's office and there will be a an informational session at Parkview on Saturday at 10 30 and so the sheriff's office will be there to talk about the dangers of fentanyl prevention and there will also be a video so folks can get certified to use Narcan as well and I don't mean to put you on the spot about that but I did

[00:12:56] read on social media over the last couple of days that you can people can get a dose of Narcan to carry on them as long as they have been trained to do so that is that something that we can put that information out as well? Yes absolutely it's actually in the newsletter that is going out this evening or depending on what time it is may have already gone out to families this evening we will also be sending out a blackboard message to all families tomorrow and to the Parkview community specifically too. So as the representative of the the primary representative of the Parkview

[00:13:31] community and a parent of two Parkview graduates some years ago and this just being the Sterling representative i really appreciate the extra effort to focus on parkview but i also really the overall message needs to be that this is the entire community it is not just in our schools it is in our community and it is county-wide it is northern virginia it is the state of virginia and is the united states of america this has been a crisis that has been growing and while right now

[00:14:01] The spotlight is on Parkview for various reasons that we need to approach this as a community and the approach of making sure that we have what we need to treat our students, educate our students and families is really the most important piece to this. So thank you.

[00:14:17] Yeah, absolutely. And just to kind of add to that a little bit, just so everyone knows, and I know it was in the letter last night, but in case you haven't had a chance to read it, we do have Narcan and folks who are trained in all of our secondary schools. So it is something that we're aware of, and I think that you all as a board put that in place in 22-23, so this is new for us.

[00:14:39] But we know that it's, to your point, not just a Parkview issue. It's a national issue. It's something that we need to be talking about. In my previous school division, we were looking to do a recovery school because there were so many students who were having issues with prescription drugs.

[00:14:55] And it crosses all segments of the population, no matter race, poverty level, zip code. You're going to see that this is something that can really impact communities.

[00:15:11] And I would also say that, as we've kind of talked about before, we've seen that 7 in 10 of these pills have a lethal dose of fentanyl in them, which is really dangerous and scary for our kids who, you know, oftentimes they think they're taking a Xanax or an Adderall or something like that, which is dangerous in its own right, because they're not getting that from a doctor, but at the same time, I mean, this is really scary, and it's something that, you know, I'm going to talk about with my kids, and I know folks who have kids in school are going to talk about with their kids, because it's absolutely concerning, so. And I think the piece, to just

[00:15:47] reiterate what you said the piece with the the school division lcsd the community efforts that are out there and our parents talking to their students and really making sure that we have educated everyone because as you said seven and ten pills has something one pill can kill and students need to know that and they need to not take things from that is not prescribed to them and or that their parents have not given them that that message needs to be out there and so we have to collaborate and work together as a community there is there is no one finger to point here there is only a circle to create to protect our students and our children in our

[00:16:25] community so thank you for being here and taking the questions on that and absolutely i think we're going to continue to have conversations as a school division as a community and so we need to not be afraid to have that brought up whatever committee we're sitting in whatever meeting we're sitting in or at the grocery store keep talking about it and keep raising awareness so thank you yeah absolutely is there any other questions thank you all for having me i appreciate you very much thank you for being here all right so committee members um you might not be aware of this but as the chair of the committee i can move things around so i've been asked to move things around

[00:17:00] in our next section of our information items and so we're going to start with 503 mindfulness prayer rooms and we have um one of our parent committee members saba and i'm going to say we all go first names here and i'm just going to go with first names. How's that? And not, hopefully not butcher anybody's name. And we have students here to present tonight. Ali, Marja, am I saying it right? I should just have you all introduce yourselves. And Farhan, you made it too? Great.

[00:17:35] So hopefully you all, are you going to sit at the table and talk to us or did you want to come up in front of the room? It is your choice. It's probably easier to have you on camera if you come up so um because we do we are live on air um for the meeting so it might be better for the community that's watching so if you would um come on up and take the podium and we will give you the uh our attention thank you for being here good evening my name is suba big or suba um since we

[00:18:11] go by first names here um i am a parent of four uh students at in london county and um actually One of them has graduated, so three. And my oldest actually is Maria, and she'll be talking a little bit.

[00:18:27] She is the president of her Muslim Students Association, and we'll be giving her comments. I am a Muslim American, and I have been living in Loudoun County for about 18 years. So my kids have been in the school system for a while now.

[00:18:45] and i'm here primarily to talk about um a the need for a prayer space slash reflection room i can i want to talk to you a little bit about my experiences um in obtaining that and i'm actually going to go back to and date myself to when i was a senior in high school i grew up in new jersey and i um asked my principal to pray and just to give a little bit of background um as muslims we have to pray, we are required to pray five times a day. And it is a fundamental part of our

[00:19:20] faith, a core practice in our religion. And one of those prayers in that time fell during the school day. So I went up to my principal and I had a very good relationship with him. In fact, I was like the token Muslim American during that time. Like one time ABC News came to the school and he was like, hey Saba, I want you to represent Muslims. I was like, okay, I'm there. So anyway, when I went to talk to him, and I said, you know, I really would like to pray during the school day, and I need a space to pray in, and it can be anything, a corner of an office or a library, just something somewhat private, and usually our prayer takes about a few minutes, except for the Friday prayer,

[00:19:56] and the kids will talk about that later, and my principal said to me that, well, Saba, you know, we understand, I understand your need to pray, but, you know, the First Amendment, we have to have a separation of church and state, and that means you can't pray on school grounds during the school day you can pray in the morning before school starts you can pray in the afternoon when school ends we have a we have a students part of a bible group they prayed before the school starts so you can join them well that doesn't work for me and i went home and i discussed that

[00:20:32] with my parents who are immigrants and um did not really know much at the time and they said well you know maybe he's right sabba maybe you know it's government property and they're not allowed to mix church and state. So, you know, don't pray during the school day. Well, I'm an educator. I went on to get my master's in education and my university professors told me that that was absolutely unconstitutional what he did. I did not know that at the time. So now forward about 30 years and my kids are at Independence High School, two of them last year, and they asked for the same

[00:21:10] right and they were denied. And it took a whole year of discussions with the principal who had his, who had good reasons, I do understand them, but it took us a year, and multiple emails, multiple conversations, because one of our prayers falls during the school day throughout the entire year, it is the afternoon prayer, and when daylight savings time ends, which will be next week, the mid-afternoon prayer also falls during the school day, and I know from experience, and for my kids, when they miss that prayer, and when they were missing that prayer, it causes a tremendous

[00:21:49] amount of anxiety for us. I mean, it is fundamental. It is a part of our daily diet as equivalent to drinking water or brushing your teeth. And missing it was causing so much anxiety that I then told my daughter, well, you know what? Go use the bathroom pass and go pray. Because we all know, as a teacher myself and as educators in this room, the kids that are using the bathroom passes are not always using the bathroom pass, are they? Using the bathrooms, are they? And they're using

[00:22:23] it for prayer. And it's five minutes. They're not bothering anyone, but it makes the world of a difference for them. But beyond that, it's their right. So after multiple conversations and discussions, we were able to obtain a reflection room slash prayer space this year. We are very thankful. However, it comes with some caveats. And the caveat is that we have to have parental chaperones every single day to volunteer and monitor that space. You can only imagine how

[00:23:00] difficult it is to pull parents out from a working day at 1 30 p.m for a half hour. I am managing that and we are making it work but it is very difficult and my fear is that it is not sustainable. Now with a second prayer falling during the school day, pulling parents out twice a day to make this happen seems almost impossible. So my talk today is to make you aware and secondly for us to

[00:23:35] understand that this prayer space is not just for Muslims, and we did not ask just for us. People of every faith pray. People of no faith meditate, think, reflect, and I think this space is a space that could be used by everyone, many students, to pause, reflect, reset in their school day. We are asking for, A, these spaces to be made available in all of the schools throughout Loudoun County, and two, If there's a way to make this more sustainable, maybe having someone in the school that works

[00:24:14] there to monitor, I'm just throwing out ideas. But like I said, having parental volunteers during the school day to make this happen seems like it may not be able to happen for the long term, and that's what we're looking for here.

[00:24:30] I think I'm done. Well, I'll pass it out to Mariah, but thank you for listening. Good evening. My name is Mariah Syed, and I'm a junior in Independence High School.

[00:24:49] I'm a Muslim American, also president of the Muslim Student Association. I'm here to talk about my experience of tanning a prayer room at my high school. A central part of my faith, Islam, is to pray five times a day. I've been praying five times a day since I was a young child.

[00:25:07] It is the most fundamental practice of our religion. One of those prayers, the afternoon prayer, falls during the school day throughout the entire school year. The mid-afternoon prayer falls during the second day, during the school day, when daylight time saving ends, which is about November through February.

[00:25:27] Last year, when we did not have a prayer space, it caused tremendous anxiety for me to not be able to pray, as this is a fundamental part of my day. I started using a bathroom press to find a space and to be able to pray. This bothered me, as I don't like to have to say I'm doing something that I'm not really doing, but I found no other way.

[00:25:46] Finally, our principal was able to secure us a room to pray this academic year. However, we have to have parental chaperones every day to be able to pray. I'm worried that depending on parental chaperones for the prayer space is not sustainable, as we have been told by our principal that we cannot pray if there is no chaperone there.

[00:26:05] I believe having a prayer space in every school can be beneficial for all students. Even if you do not ascribe to religion per se, it can be a space for kids to come to meditate or just to take a brief pause during the day. My own prayer only takes a few minutes, but it is very meaningful.

[00:26:24] It's very meaningful. It's very positive to be set in my school day, and I believe it can be for many other students as well, religious or atheists, anyone really. Hello, everyone. This is Ron Kahn. I'm

from Independence High School, and I'm a senior.

[00:26:52] So prayer rooms have always been something that was difficult for me ever since my sophomore year. It wasn't too much of a problem for my freshman year, because unlike Maria, I didn't grow up praying like that. It was kind of just something that I had to do, and then it kind of grew on me.

[00:27:10] So much like how some people go home and they talk to their parents about stuff that happened in their life, or they talk to their siblings about stuff that happened in their life, I go and I talk to my God about that. And it is something that I do every day, so five times a day, like I said it.

[00:27:30] So when you have a practice that you do every day and you miss it, it does cause anxiety. Much like how you visit your parents every week, probably, some people here. You don't visit them that one week. You're worrying that whole week what's going on with my parents and stuff like that.

[00:27:48] So it's about the same. It's always been an issue. It started a lot during my junior year because that was when we didn't have a prayer space at all. So I used to pray in the hallways, under the stairs, in the chemistry, science, supply room.

[00:28:04] So just anywhere I could. And sooner or later, like, it became like I couldn't pray anywhere. So, yeah, and then I just had to start sneaking it, which I didn't, it didn't feel right, obviously.

[00:28:22] Why am I sneaking in a country of freedom, of religion, where I can pray? So, sooner or later, my worry became my family's worry. When I tried to express it to them, it was more of, you don't want to make the school mad, or you don't want to affect your future, basically, which is, again, like, God is dictating my future, So why am I not going to talk to him about it?

[00:28:54] When we gained the prayer room, it became a lot better. And the staff was definitely a lot more lenient about it. But there was definitely some people who were, like, not too fond of it still. I'd get pinged because there's a time limit.

[00:29:10] So I'd get pinged for being at the prayer room too long, which is like I'm not finished with my prayers, so I can't just leave and get up, you know what I'm saying? So that's definitely an issue. And then the parent chaperone is definitely an issue too because we can't rely on other people to have our relationship with God.

[00:29:35] It just doesn't make sense. You can't rely on someone else the same way Sabahanti said. You can't rely on someone else to feed you your food. You can't rely on someone else to drink your water. You can't rely on someone else to do something for you. You have to keep your relationship with God. So I believe that, and I don't believe that anyone should be dictating how I talk to my God, when I talk to my God, or any of that.

[00:30:00] So, yeah. And especially with the Friday prayers, The Friday prayers are a certain routine. Normal prayers are just you go in, you pray, you do your thing, you get out, right? Not too bad. 10, 15 minutes, it's fine, right? And then Friday prayers, just say, like, keep in comparison, at a normal mosque, a Friday prayer runs anywhere from, like, 30 to an hour, depending on who's leading it.

[00:30:24] And we have students leading it, so just, you know, get a perspective for a little bit. but um i'd say for our um for our school at least anywhere from 20 20 25 to 35 kids show for the friday prayer and um you know it can run a while and i think as of right now it's 15 minutes which is like it takes 15 minutes on

my house to do the normal prayer so the friday prayer that runs 30 30 to 40 to an hour at normal moss is just doesn't make sense obviously you know like um we are at

[00:31:00] school day so like asking for an hour or 30 minutes is like a drag i'm not going to deny that but 20 minutes 25 minutes granted the travel time you know you got to travel across the whole school building to get to the prayer room you gotta we have to wash ourselves before that and washing yourself is another challenge i'm in the bathroom i get weird looks when i'm washing my feet so um go and pray like what are you doing can't even talk to them can't even explain what i'm doing so yeah there's that so um privacy extended time programs are gifted off to us right now but

[00:31:38] obviously that's not the case for everyone and then um more freedom with um the parental things and like trusting us more you know like there's something happens you know there's consequences but i feel like we can work around that thank you assalamu alaikum peace and blessings to all my name is ali coker i'm a senior at briarwoods and i am the president of my school's muslim

[00:32:16] Student Association, and I was a former student, sorry, LCPS student equity ambassador. All right, so I've seen firsthand how Briarwoods has increased its diversity so immensely over the past four years of me being there. And as such, a changing community needs changing infrastructure. As the president of a student community group, I've been told firsthand about the different needs that my my fellow peers need, such as a prayer room. Now, sorry, that's why if you refer to the document

[00:32:54] in front of you, I am proposing a prayer room that is open to students of all faiths in every secondary institution in LCPS. Now, if we refer back to when LCPS created the moment of silence, just to give you a quick history lesson, I won't get too technical. The Supreme Court case, Lemon v. Kurtzman, it established that tax money in schools, sorry, government-sponsored schools cannot be used for a religious purpose, which is why LCPS created the moment of silence as a

[00:33:27] reflective moment. Now, as Sister Sabah was speaking earlier about how this prayer room could be for both religious and non-religious students, they could use it as a place to pray or as a place to reflect and meditate.

[00:33:44] So this prayer room would be accessible to all and would essentially secure the positive right of the free exercise of religion. So that's why I'm proposing that LCPS make some sort of policy that mandates this creation or allocation of a prayer space.

[00:34:02] Now, to give you some examples, at Briarwoods, I worked with my faculty last year to repurpose a conference room to serve as a prayer room. It was extremely simple. We had some counseling staff outside that would just ensure that we didn't take too long or we weren't goofing around inside.

[00:34:20] I know at Stonebridge, they have a janitor's room that has also been repurposed as a prayer room. Because of the growing popularity of the prayer room, it would be nice if we had a little bit more space because as my peers were talking about, the Friday prayer known as Jumma has usually garners more members upwards of at least in my school a dozen to two dozen people. We usually do it during lunch block so it doesn't interfere with any academic instruction and overall this prayer space would

[00:34:56] help to secure and facilitate the exercise of free religion and promote more equity among all the students in LCPS. Thank you so much. Thank you all for the information. I can only speak for myself but I learned so much tonight that I did not previously know so thank you for the information and the education and for being here tonight and sharing your very personal stories. We really appreciate it. I'm

going to, if you're okay with that, I'm going to open up to questions to the committee. Yep. All right. Anyone have any questions or anyone, Tom?

[00:35:36] So first of all, Saba, thank you for bringing this issue to the committee and to the students. You guys all did a wonderful job of expressing your reasons why that this is an important thing not only in your life, but in other students' lives as well.

[00:35:54] And I guess as I hear you describe some of those issues, the word anxiety really struck a chord. And I think that we need to look at this, even though this group brought it to our attention, this is beyond just a Muslim prayer issue.

[00:36:14] This is beyond just a prayer issue. This is a mental health issue. And sometimes that manifests itself in terms of a religious tradition. Sometimes it might manifest itself in a meditation or just a struggle that a particular student is having on a given day.

[00:36:29] For those of us who work outside the school system, you know, most offices have a break room, right? You've had a bad phone call, a stressful meeting. You go down to the break room, you get a cup of coffee. And students don't have that. But as we just heard about Parkview and elsewhere, we know there's a lot of stress on students right now.

[00:36:48] And so I think that I sort of think of this in a little different way, which is it might be used as a prayer room, but in the same way that we have, you know, restrooms when we have a physical need, if there is sort of a mental health room, we have a lot of special education students throughout the county that have emotional issues that are part of their special education needs, and sometimes those accommodations include the ability to go to counseling services essentially on demand at any moment that they might need a few minutes break but that's not a problem that's limited to special education students

[00:37:23] that's a problem really that all of our students have on any given day and so I think that it's a it's an excellent proposal and I would urge whatever recommendations might come back from this committee to the school board to look at a policy for this whether it's a an existing room that's repurposed whether it's a you know section of the library that's repurposed where we do have of course staff already there students are already sort of acclimated to the idea that this is a quiet and respectful environment hopefully um or whatever that that space would be that probably would take some study to to figure out kind of the right way to put it into the school to staff

[00:38:02] it etc but i do think that we look at this as a broader issue of not just a um and even though this is a group that brought it to us it's not just an issue of prayer this is a mental health issue. And I think that's certainly something that needs to be addressed sort of across the district. So thanks again, guys. Any other members have a question? Arjun? I called on Arjun, then we'll come to you. First of all, I just want to thank you guys for coming and speaking out about this issue. I think any form of student advocacy is something that our county really

[00:38:41] needs. So thank you for coming out and speaking about this issue. And Ali, I really like the points that you made towards the end about how there's been a history of Supreme Court cases that have prohibited school-sponsored religious activities. And I do want to echo some of the points previously made. I think the term prayer room might draw some controversy, but perhaps saying that this is a mental

health space might reinforce kind of the secular nature of Loudoun County Public Schools and also open itself up to a more diverse range of students who might need to

[00:39:16] have a space to relax or for your students to have a space to pray. Definitely. And I think that's reflected in the nature of the moment of silence, as I mentioned. Again, that can be used by students for any purpose, religious or secular. The last two speakers really spoke about what I really wanted to point out is about the mental health issue. And I know that one of the points in the proposal was about the secondary schools that we have. However, I do feel that it's a need across all age groups. My son currently will actually go to the guidance counselor when he

[00:39:54] needs to pray or when he feels like he really needs to just you know kind of recenter himself so and he's in the third grade now so um i definitely love the idea and love the proposal but more of a mental health aspect you know along with that as well but across all of the public schools that we have just to say like the the room at independence they call it the reflection room so i think that's a it's a great term for it and just to mention i also am a proponent of even elementary institutions in the Muslim faith. Like we teach, when my daughter says she's been

[00:40:30] praying from a young age, like our kids learn to pray from a very young age. So it becomes a part of their daily diet, usually from the age of seven onwards. And I would love for all levels, all institutional levels to have that space for them. Even my middle schooler, you know, I talked to, they were very, very accommodating, talked to the guidance counselor there. They give her space every day um in their office but again allocating a separate space is i think what we're what we're here for the other thing i just wanted to clarify um if in case you're wondering the friday prayer we keep bringing up is different because it involves a sermon and it's a congregational

[00:41:06] prayer um and so that's why it takes a little bit longer as opposed to the other prayers um and so just to just for clarity purposes say yeah so thank you all for being here we really appreciate My name is Syed Ashraf. I represent all Dala Surya Muslim society in this committee.

[00:41:29] And I'm really glad to see you all here. And again, I had my two boys in LCPS. One of them just now is in college. I still have my younger son in Stonebridge High School. And I can testify the issues that the student and Sister Saba mentioned.

[00:41:47] I think it is a big issue, especially for the Muslim community. But I think it's at the community at large as well. If you see any modern corporate offices or offices, they definitely have meditation or reflection room. I think that's what we are asking for. This is the issue that we brought up with some of the principals.

[00:42:06] And we're glad that in Loudoun County, it is a very welcoming county, a lot of schools, they were able to accommodate it. But for some schools, it is still a challenge. So I think we really appreciate if a school board can take this and come up with a policy where it is available at every school.

[00:42:22] pick you up. Dorothy? I was just going to mention that they, I know you guys have stated mental health room and you know, thank you for being here. You guys have done a really combined job presenting. But the high schools and I think middle schools, they do have what's called Swiss. So it does have accessibility to the students for like IEPs and for breaks and for, and it's monitored and it's, so they do have a room. And I believe all schools across the board have that room. It's just not a reflection room that would be used for for prayer or for meditation it's more for the mental health

[00:43:01] aspect of students to be able to take a break i have i have students that participate in it that use it and it's a swiss room so it is available it's we're not recreating the wheel with that portion as far as just making something that's more dedicated towards meditative space thank you any other comments or questions thank you um i learned a lot today too um i remember about 20 years ago at george mason they have a special uh designated prayer room and they also have

[00:43:38] uh washing facilities um so i'm drawing some connections here with the explanation so thank you for that um my question is about um uh and you know i don't know everything and so i'd like to learn um but is there any um would there be any problem with sharing that space during prayer i see in here it speaks to the need for privacy during prayer. I wonder if having someone else in the room during that prayer, if that would be detrimental, especially if that other person is using that space. And, you know, we all want to be respectful, but let's be honest, sometimes people

[00:44:18] aren't respectful. You know, have you run into any of those challenges with other people trying to use the space at the same time? A great question. So we have had a couple of problems. Some students, of course in every school there's always those kids they use it for other purposes um that's why i spoke with my principal and other staff and we came to resolution where our prayer space was in the counseling department so the counseling staff right outside they would ensure that the door is just kept slightly ajar so that they can still monitor what's happening they would always knock

[00:44:53] politely if they suspected something was up and they would enter um for the case of privacy usually students, do you want to answer, like, students usually, they can pray in groups. If they're praying by themselves, if they're meditating, then what we had is we just had a queue in the counseling department for other students who wanted to come in. Does that answer your question?

[00:45:17] I think so. It was more of a question of how would that be an imposition to you during prayer if there were someone else in the room with you? So I think that one, quiet is very important, very necessary. Um, so for sure that if there was noise and if there were other groups that needed to do something, like for example, the Friday prayer is the only one that is part of it's a sermon, right? So that is out loud, right? So for sure, if there are other groups that try to, it would probably be difficult for those groups to, to be able to do what they wanted to do. Um, and

[00:45:50] the second part is that, uh, in terms of privacy, um, it's, it, how can I say this? Um, it would be hard to do it if it was something that was like visible to everyone right like let's say it was like a glass door and everyone's praying i think that would make the students feel very self-conscious right um so i think that would be sort of like the privacy aspect of having something that's a little bit tucked away um if that makes sense am i am i answering your question okay so i i do and i i

[00:46:28] thank you for being here but um so i am a muslim and i am a principal of a high school and i think that a lot of it a lot of the issue is not necessarily about space but about education around the prayer and what people require just people here tonight have learned so much so we have the largest high school in the county and truly have no space so we don't have a dedicated room for prayer but all of our students know that if they need the prayer we will find a room for

[00:47:02] them. So all of the administrative offices during all lunch blocks, we make sure at least one of them is open every day for people to prayer. Kids bring in their prayer rugs. They leave them in the school. They know exactly where to go get it, find a space. So it really hasn't been an issue at our school. But I

think some of that has to do with the fact that I can help sort of facilitate all of that. And I'm not sure that, you know, my colleagues at other high schools know how to

[00:47:34] facilitate it. So education around what, you know, how to facilitate a time for people. Like, for example, at our high school, we didn't change our lunch blocks. We kept them at 1230. When we went to 930 school opening, some of the high schools did change their lunches for the second block of the day, and one of the reasons we didn't is because I knew it would cause a problem for prayer time.

[00:48:05] I was like, then they're going to be getting out of class, and then that's going to be an issue, so let's just leave lunch at the third block, and we cover it that way. So I think education around this is probably something that we need in the district.

[00:48:20] Yeah, I was going to say, so that was an issue. We were told, so we've been told throughout consistently, like last year, you can pray during your lunch break. Well, Maria here had lunch at 11.40. And there is no prayer, what? 11 a.m., sorry, 11 a.m. There is no prayer for us that comes in at 11 a.m.

[00:48:38] So it was, you know, and I agree with you. And I think that was, the principal had mentioned that the changing of the school day and how that affected things. But, right, like, what we have educated our principal about is that a universal time for our prayers, 1.30 fits the entire year round.

[00:48:54] Like, that is, because the daylight savings also messes us up because then it moves everything up an hour. But we have a window of prayer. And that 1.30 fits that window. But then again, like I said, starting next Monday, the second prayer, again, because that 15-minute change in the school day really complicated a lot of things because technically before that 4.18 time, the kids were still able to come home and meet that second prayer.

[00:49:19] And just that 15-minute change prevented them from doing that too, right? So I think education is such an important piece of this. And we're happy to, just to let you know, if this needs to go anywhere else, I mean, we're happy to work with you. I know the Adams Center is happy to work.

[00:49:36] They were working on this last year, too. So anything that's needed from our end, we're there for. Thank you so much. And, again, the education piece, just the information that leads to the education piece. And, Neelam, I think it's very insightful for you to let us know that.

[00:49:53] The 15-minute time change, it's an unintended consequence of that. I had no idea. You know, I'll just be completely honest. I had no idea about most of it. And so I really appreciate the education part of it. And I think that we can certainly have further conversation about it.

[00:50:10] And again, I appreciate you all being here and making sure we know. I just want to add one little thing. So the afternoon prayer has a very long period of time. So if you have lunch in the third block of the day, you can usually find your lunch time to pray.

[00:50:30] The problem with the mid-afternoon prayer that they keep referring to is that prayer has a very short window of time from the start to the end. So if you get out of school at 4.18 and you don't get home till 5 and your teacher doesn't let you out the last 10 minutes of the day, you can miss that prayer easily.

[00:50:54] So I think that's why the mid-afternoon prayer causes such anxiety because it has a very short window. Thank you. And thank you. I look forward to further discussion and, and I really appreciate your being here and sharing something that quite frankly is personal and sharing it to help others. So thank you.

[00:51:14] So I'll tell you when we first started this committee back in 2019, one of my goals and purposes was to bring in the student voice to let us know what you needed. So thank you for fulfilling that this evening. We really appreciate it. Thank you.

[00:51:32] All right. I don't see any other questions, so thank you for being here. We will move to, we'll move back to 501, which is MSAC updates, and we have our MSAC chair here tonight, Ms. Erin Kunkel, and we welcome you to the podium tonight.

[00:52:04] Good evening. Thank you for inviting me back and for having me this evening. My name is Erin Kunkel and I am the MSAC chair for the 2023-2024 school year. I am just here tonight to kind of bring you up to date on some of the changes that are happening in MSAC and what our focus areas are and a little bit about the vision that we're kind of working through and bringing to light this year for MSAC.

[00:52:31] So, our theme this year is stepping up for the community, and we really do want to step up for the community in a bigger way. We believe that we can do that through continued policy feedback and commentary, through advocacy and access for parents.

[00:52:47] We have gotten a lot of feedback from parents that are MSAC delegates and just out in the community that said they don't know about some of the programs and some of the options that they have as parents in LCPS have gotten a lot of feedback that when they need information about a resource or where to go for help, it's difficult to get to that resource because you're navigating a webpage when, you know, we're all used to Google, Google it.

[00:53:13] How do I fix this problem? And you have 7,000 options and choose one. And so we're working to bring more access to that information and kind of lay it all out there and let parents and the communities know when we go back to our school that hey this program might be of a benefit to you or it might benefit somebody else that you know we are also working on communications we have expanded from just one person in communications to a communications team which is very exciting for me because we have someone operating both social

[00:53:50] media and regular communications if you have a little time you should check out the LCPS MSAC website it is being updated regularly and we had an update roll through last night that we were all very excited about last night it's it is it says clearly what we're doing we're streamlining the information we're making an accessible and easier for everyone to access we also want to let everyone know what's happening we are working on the logistics of making sure that when we have our meeting set everybody can see not just in the live broadcasts but in social media posts like this is what was happening this was the topic we discussed if you missed this meeting come to the next join us

[00:54:29] here we want people to see this work we want people to see that we are being transparent and then we just want to continue to build relationships I'm a people person I am learning in a crash course called data 101 how to read it how to understand it how to process it but I understand people I have spent my life as first an army wife moving all over the country learning about new places new people new structures new rules new guidances and I just know when I walk into the room my thing is help me help you I'm the person that if we're having a family dinner we're having an event I'm in the back helping I want to know what you need I want to know how I can help you I want to know how you can

[00:55:09] feel more comfortable how you can feel empowered and so I want to build those relationships and those relationships are from the school board to the superintendent's office to the schools I have met

with administrators I have met well I have been on multiple floors inside this building I have let people know that if you have a resource if you have the ability to help us if you can offer five ten minutes of your time we will take it if you know of something please say hey Aaron I got an idea for you or that was great Aaron but look over here we need your help we need MSAC's help in this aspect and I take it

[00:55:46] back to my team and I take it back to them and say okay I got this feedback this is a suggestion that we have and a lot of the suggestions that I've been given this year have been implemented in our meetings our meetings are now the beginning of the meeting the first hour we meet from 7:30 or from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. the first hour of the meeting is our informational session where we're still giving you the details on programs how to access programs how to apply hearing from community organizers hearing from LCPS officials about what's going on within the division and how that impacts students of color and how that impacts minoritized groups and we're trying to make sure that we have

[00:56:26] that information out in the open our second half of the meeting is our working session and this year I am determined that when we sit down at the tables. We've got driving questions. We've got discussions happening. We're popping in making sure that the delegates are having these talks because feedback that we've gotten is we want to do the work. We don't always get to meet and the one time a month that we're all in the same room is the third Wednesday of the month. So we sit down and we go through these questions and we have these discussions about what we learned. Now this year we're narrowing our focus. We're not

[00:57:01] taking our eyes off of the issues that MSAC has always covered and MSAC has always been focused on, but this year we are choosing to dial into the work around two main issues. The first issue is access and advocacy. Again, parents want to know how they can advocate for their kids. When I moved here almost five years ago, I didn't know that I could go up to a principal and say, hey, I've got a problem. I had to work to build a relationship with the then principal at my children's elementary school. I didn't know who I could talk to when I had a problem. I didn't know what were the steps

[00:57:35] to ask questions about getting involved in a program. I wouldn't have known about Academies of Loughton had I not become an MSAC delegate. We want to take that, kind of peel back the curtain and say, this is the information you're looking for. And I have said many times to delegates and people I've met that if we have an N and we know where to go, who to speak to, what the access is, When MSAC holds open the door, call everybody and tell them, come on through.

[00:58:03] We're going through this door. This is the information you need. We're not leaving anybody behind when we find out the information that we need, when we get access to contacts. If I know a solid contact, we're now saying that a solid contact is something we're including in our resource guide.

[00:58:20] We're developing a resource handbook that is going to cover community resources, LCPS resources, school resources. And if you have that information, please let us know. We will take it all. We want to be a resource, and we want to provide that resource to the district.

[00:58:36] And then our second focus area will be racial slurs and hate speech. As you all know, it is on the rise. It doesn't get better, and it is distressing as a woman of color, as a parent to biracial children, and as a member of this community to know that this type of language is just proliferating and in a lot of cases it is going unchecked and as advisory committee MSAC wants to dedicate that time to digging into why this is happening what is causing this rise to be in the rooms within our

[00:59:12] schools talking to our administrators talking to the community and working to build we're saying a culture and a community that says that this language doesn't belong here when i had the opportunity to speak before the school board i said we now have an opportunity there's no time like now to do it don't delay we can't say to we'll get to it next year yes we know it's a problem now's the time because it only gets worse and it needs to be something that lcps confronts and confronts with openness and a willingness to be called in and hear that this is not okay anymore.

[00:59:49] And MSAC is partnering with the school board with the Division of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility. Got it on the first try. And so there are a lot of acronyms.

[01:00:05] I did not know that. Nobody told me that. There are so many acronyms. Just a little sidebar. I have acronyms in my head all day. I talked to my kids the other day and they were like, really? What? And I said, I'm sorry. I, you know, it's just how we talk these days. And so, but we want to make sure that we are doing the work and we are putting in the work.

[01:00:23] My email inbox is open. If you ever want to meet, if you want to talk, if you see me running around, you know, just, you know, and you have an idea, a suggestion, please let me know. I'm speaking as chair. I'm speaking as a mother, as a person. I welcome the feedback. I welcome the commentary. I welcome the help.

[01:00:41] I can't do this by myself. I don't want to do this by myself. I think that we are always better when we do it together. And I just want to take this moment while I have this microphone to also affirm that MSAC's work is, yes, for minority students and minoritized groups, but my purpose as a person, as a mother in this county, is to let you know that this work is about every student.

[01:01:06] Every student. If I'm in the building advocating, I'm advocating for every student. Every child is on their mind because I don't want any child to experience what I experienced growing up some of the instances that my children have experienced anymore it is about every student and our advocacy is for every student yes our focus are these groups but it is for every student the door is open the tables are empty we and if we're filled up I will find you a seat we will make room and we will find you a seat join us partner with us collaborate with us we need your help I am here to support you and to collaborate and work with you in any possible way that I can.

[01:01:45] I welcome the engagement. I welcome the opportunity. I have had so much fun, yes and no, learning so much. I have felt overwhelmed by it, but I have learned so much already in these last few months. I am excited by what I see. I'm excited by what I've experienced, and I have hope for the first time in a bit.

[01:02:05] I have hope about where we're going and what we can do. So I thank you for your time. I look forward to seeing you all down the line. Thank you for having me. So thank you, Erin. We certainly enjoyed your impassioned advocacy to be a part of MSAC and be involved with MSAC.

[01:02:27] So are you willing to take questions from the committee if anybody has any? Yes. All right, I'll open it up for questions. Anybody want to further engage or dig a little deeper? I was saying something. Go ahead. Not a question, just a follow-up to what she said.

[01:02:44] I am an MSAC delegate, but as a parent, just attending those meetings have been empowering, not just as a minority parent, but as a parent in general. So if you guys have people at your schools that feel like they don't have access to certain things, or they have questions that they can't get answered, I can

honestly say just being a parent in that room and having access to that information has been tremendously helpful just as a new parent to lcps trying to navigate

[01:03:19] the school system and navigate those resources so just to piggyback off of everything she said i'm glad she's our chair um but um and i can definitely see that change in what we're doing our meetings are a lot more purposeful we're getting the information but we're also like bringing in that information from our schools to share with each other, to be able to take back to our schools and share that information with the other parents who may not have that access.

[01:03:48] So thank you, Erin. Thank you, Raquel. I appreciate you. Thank you. I'm going to jump on the bandwagon and say one of the things that really sticks out that you said to me was that you didn't know you could talk to the principal. And I wish I could have seen the looks on the faces of the principals in the room and you probably if I had been able to see Neelam exactly straight across I I want to know what your reaction is to that and that because I think the ability to tell parents please go see your principal if you have a problem they're there to help you or any of the administrators or just your classroom teacher anyone that you know is your counselor that they're available for you

[01:04:26] is so important and to know that a parent doesn't know that it's really important that we let our parents know that so i don't know if any of our principals want to speak to that but i really wish if if you want to just encourage that or just speak to your shock or is it something you experience that parents say yeah i didn't know i could ask absolutely um that is why i prioritize going to msac with my delegates my equity lead and other parents and teachers to make sure that our families are aware that administration is always willing to hear concerns and to encourage

[01:05:03] everyone to reach out to principals and administration because we do care my colleagues and I are here for students and want to make sure that we are responding in real time and to make adjustments in real time we don't want to you know hear about something and not do something about it we are actively working and that is you know something that we prioritize at Goshen making sure that we're at SEAC, MSAC, and making sure that we have relief contacts and speaking openly with our families so that we can make those changes to support every child every day. So I appreciate

[01:05:41] all the work that you're doing. Thank you. I was, my mouth was open because I want all my families to know that I'm accessible, but it's also hearing that it's an opportunity for me to reach out, to make it clear in newsletters, communicating with parents that I am available.

[01:06:01] So something as simple as in my week ahead, just make it clear that I am available. So thank you for sharing that. Thank you so much for being here. Any other questions or comments for MSEC? Go ahead, Haley. I was just wondering, thank you very much for speaking and giving the information.

[01:06:20] I know our school does not have an MSEC representative. I'm the LEAF representative at our school. And every month I really value the information I get and can bring back. but I know we're missing a portion of the information because we don't have an MSAC representative.

[01:06:37] Do you know how many of the schools don't have a representative or if there are any areas that could use the help? I mean, it's, like I said, so valuable. Thank you. I will be honest. I am not going to keep that a secret. We have 80 delegates across 108 schools on paper.

[01:06:58] The reality of that number is probably close to 50, perhaps 60. It is, I know it is difficult to get people to sign up to do this, busy lives, busy children's lives, and then being willing to step into a role that

requires you to wade into some of this deep water and this heavy topics.

[01:07:21] And so we are pushing, and we are always pursuing filling a role, a delegate slot, and filling that role in every year. And if you know that your school does not have a delegate, by all means, let your principal or your PTSO, PTA, PTO leader, let them know that they can reach out to me, and we will fill the slot.

[01:07:48] if they have someone in mind um we are open to filling the slot we are taking suggestions our door is open we are we the only requirement we have is that you are willing to support the work and the mission of MSAC and you are willing to show up when we need you to show up to participate and and to advocate for your school and the students in your school and again it can be difficult but we are we are making a push um to fill those slots and i can't give out any more

[01:08:22] trade secrets than that so but we are we are working on it and we're we're um my i i'm confident that we will get there we just need people to know that we need you and we're i have said whatever little bit of time you're willing to give and you can dedicate will help us immensely so if you know your school doesn't have a delegate and if any of you know your schools don't have a delegate please reach out to me msacchair at lcps.org um we will i will send you the registration form and any information you need to share with your schools to get a delegate in your school

[01:09:02] i'm i'll take any and all help that we can get i like that message of inclusive inclusivity been a long day sorry so thank you so much for being here again i'm sure you are reachable if anybody has further questions yes and that you will be extending that invitation out to all of your msac meetings throughout the school year and again thank you for being here thank you all right we're going to move to item 502 adl compliant playgrounds and we have our director of management

[01:09:38] and coordination brian stocks here it's your turn for the podium can you hear me okay hello i'm brian Stocks, Director of Management and Coordination for the Department of Support Services, and one of the responsibilities of our office is to build playgrounds when new schools are

[01:10:17] under new construction and or when playgrounds reach the end of their life cycle and are due for replacement, or if there's funding available through the community, whether it's proffers or funds raised at the schools. I was actually here tonight to listen.

[01:10:33] I'm not exactly sure and wasn't briefed on what the presentation or the discussion was previously about. We have committed in the spring of 2002 to build every playground at Loudoun County Public Schools with Loudoun County Public Schools funding inclusive rather than just ADA compliant, which includes a port-in-place servicing and using the U.S. Access Board guidelines.

[01:10:58] We build them to standards where all kids can play together on one playground pad and not be excluded or secluded. So I was here to really answer questions and provide additional information, but we are well on our way to building all and replacing all existing playgrounds as they reach end of life with inclusive playgrounds.

[01:11:20] So my apologies, Brian. I just found out that you are a last-minute replacement as well, so let's put Brian right on the spot is what we're doing here tonight. Okay. My apologies to make it sound like you were coming to present. and the person who asked for this to be on the agenda tonight has stepped out of the room, and I don't know if that is permanently.

[01:11:37] Tom was sitting at that table over there. Is his stuff gone? It appears that way. Okay. So we're just, I appreciate the background information on Playgrounds, and I guess I'll go, we'll go 12 years ago when I first started on the board and even farther back when I was a parent, and we used to rely on parents to raise funds for our Playgrounds, correct?

[01:12:01] Correct. I believe it was 2011. I'm going to help you through this. There you go. I believe it was 2011. Don't quote me on that. I should have done a little bit more research. Our first inclusive playground was added in 2011, and it was done. It was the first time that when we were building new schools, we were building Sicklin Creek Elementary.

[01:12:21] I was not involved with the playground program at that time. I was in support services in another role, but being in school board meetings and observing the process of the bid for the building and then the construction, We allotted \$75,000 for a general playground, that's your 5 to 12 year old ADA accessible playground that most schools have here at Loudoun County.

[01:12:42] What had happened prior to that was playgrounds were constructed through PTA, PTO, or outside organization raised funds, and then we would help facilitate the construction of it using those funds. Beginning around that time frame, 2010-11, we started setting aside funding in new school construction for inclusive playground or for playgrounds in general and said that all elementary schools and then high schools that have the early childhood program would receive a playground as the schools are constructed with that came the community offering to raise funding while the

[01:13:22] school was under construction to match the 75 to put our first inclusive playground at Sicklin Creek. We have since carried that model through, and then in 2022, we began, we made a statement and said, we're going to build only inclusive playgrounds. So now when a playground is replaced due to end of life through the cap or the capital asset preservation program or new construction, it's already funded. It's already budgeted in and built into the project to be an inclusive playground. We have 15 inclusive playgrounds currently.

[01:13:58] We have a long way to go to replace everything, but we have in our school board policy that we wanted a playground. This was about five or seven years ago. We put in the school board policy that we wanted an inclusive playground in every planning district. We've reached that goal and we've exceeded it now and we're continuing to to any school that that meets the criteria of age condition and safety that's due to be replaced gets an inclusive playground and they really are nice if you've been able to go out and check them out so two questions when you say inclusive that also means that

[01:14:35] getting to the playground from the school building there's also a path for students are in wheelchairs or yeah or need assistance correct actually every playground in LCPS is ADA compliant, which means it has a pathway. It also has a ramp. And then what a lot of people see, and it is not maybe the most easily traversed surface, is the engineered wood fiber. It actually qualifies you for ADA compliance. There's some upkeep. We have to take care of it. We have to rake it and make it so that it's passable. But every playground is ADA compliant. So there's a pathway to a ramp onto. But what we found and what we're learning

[01:15:15] about inclusive playgrounds is that doesn't mean the child can play with their friends on the playground. So the U.S. Access Board provides criteria where if you have an elevated climber device, you have to have something ground level too. So you'll see these sensory panels, the music things, other pieces of equipment, as well as we began adding actually pieces of equipment that are specifically designed for

children with mobility devices so they can participate with their device on a piece of play equipment on a playground. So we begin, we have begun designing

[01:15:49] those into our playgrounds as well. That's great. So this is really going to be out there and should have been proposed to you as a question earlier, but my apologies because why not? How long until all of our playgrounds? So do you know how long, how many years will it take to, because obviously you're not going to go dig up a brand new playground, right?

[01:16:10] But how long do you know approximately how many years it will take before all of our schools' playgrounds are inclusive in the replacement cycle? It depends. We've really actually kind of ramped up our efforts, and when we have proffer funding from the community or we have community-raised funding, we really, well, the proffer funding we're doing inclusive playgrounds because we have control of that money.

[01:16:31] It becomes LCPS-funded. What we're not doing right now is requiring PTAs, PTOs, and outside raise funds to install an inclusive playground. If they're doing it with the funding that they raise, we still facilitate the installation of the playground, but we are encouraging them to consider inclusive playgrounds.

[01:16:51] That includes the port in place servicing and the ground level units and the ramps to get up onto pieces of equipment that may be elevated. But just looking at our cap, we're doing about three to four replacement playgrounds a summer. And we have about 60 to 65 school sites to go.

[01:17:09] We have close to 100, if not exceeding 100, playground pads. Because as most of you will know, many of our elementary schools have multiple playground pads. But a goal of getting every single elementary school and all of the early childhood program sites replaced or with at least one inclusive playground will take a number of years.

[01:17:29] We're doing it through the CAP and through the life cycle management of the existing playgrounds. And like you said, we would rather work towards installing a new playground should there be space than tearing out a playground that we just installed within the last three to five years.

[01:17:46] Playgrounds tend to hold up and have a pretty decent life cycle, but we're working towards that. And any time we find any extra funding available, we try to install an inclusive playground. Okay. I'm going to be one more. I'm good.

[01:18:02] You may never speak to me again. I like talking about the inclusive playgrounds. It's a very proud thing for our department. - Can you speak to the fact that they're open to the community while they're on school property, when school's not in session, just speak to maybe the usage and even how that affects the life cycle, but that it's a good thing, right?

[01:18:22] - That was actually one of the considerations when we were drafting policy a number of years ago and considering the community and that was where the language one in each planning period or planning district came from because what we want is we want to have all children accessibility to those. So we didn't want, we knew based on when our schools were constructed, which playgrounds would age out quicker. So we had to think a little bit more strategically and say, if we want to put them in every part of the county so kids can get to them with a short trip from their parents, then we need to spread them out and not just focus on

[01:18:59] the oldest schools in the certain geographic location because they would end up they would have ended up with all of the inclusive playgrounds in the county so we had to kind of weigh that balance and get that distribution out but our playgrounds are open to the public after school hours or before school hours during the daylight to the entire community great thank you for reiterating that I'm going to open it up to anybody else that wants to pummel Brian with questions because I've been completely unfair go ahead Tiffany thank you thank you so much for all this information tonight this is really helpful uh I am the liaison for SEAC and we have had a

[01:19:39] concern raised that um when the funds were put through the cap for these playgrounds to be implemented in every single planning district Broad Road High School was one that they had asked a question about and whether or not I don't know if it was at the time of planning there was early childhood there or special ed program or if you're even able to tell me if that exists today or if that's just a question for Mr. Spage.

[01:20:04] So Broad Run High School was just done this past summer. So any playground that's being replaced is inclusive, whether it has a program at the site or not. So it was selected based on its age, condition, and safety, and we're not looking back, we're not putting standard playgrounds in if we're controlling the funding.

[01:20:26] So that's why Broad Run earned an inclusive playground rather than a general two to five, because those playgrounds are different in those programs. They're age-appropriate 2 to 5, where our standard elementary school playground is 5 to 12. And there are multiple schools that have both 2 to 5 and 5 to 12 if they were outside funded.

[01:20:46] And we're encouraging those to also be inclusive. An example would be Sully Elementary, where the community built the entire playground, if anyone's familiar, and it was 2 to 5, 5 to 12, and we replaced it last year in 2022.

[01:21:02] And we said we can't just take out the two to five and the five to 12 and put back a standard five to 12 because the community had done that years prior and we want to put something in as nice as what we were taking out. Because we see that it's reaching end of life but the community sees the size of the playground and the pieces of equipment, not necessarily the condition.

[01:21:26] So we wanted to make sure and we actually brought that to the board because that was an exception where it was basically two playgrounds on one site. So we provided the school board with an update and said, we're going to do this a little differently than we do one for one because we just think it's the right thing to do between the two playgrounds.

[01:21:42] So that's why Broad Run ended up with an inclusive playground, which they may not have the program anymore. Thank you. Thank you. That is very helpful. My second question is, do you know if there will be any kind of prioritization in future planning for specific schools that do house the early childhood and the special ed programs or is it strictly based on age? We've been basing it strictly on condition and really focused on the safety and our facilities team is outstanding. When we do annual inspections through an outside contractor each year of every playground pad and there's a laundry list

[01:22:21] of items that our facilities operations team can fix and repair, and then when we see things that need, where we deem it needs to be replaced, it rises to the priority list. So currently, we are prioritizing

based on condition. We could definitely work with student services and talk to them about, you know, higher need areas.

[01:22:42] The only challenge we see and we've thought about with that could be programs do move frequently. So trying to find the pocket of children that would need it the most, by the time we get it implemented, it might have moved.

[01:22:58] So we could be a little, that could be a little challenging. But it's definitely something to consider and to take into consideration. Thank you. Saw another hand go up. Was it Michelle? Yes. Actually, my community is in the process of building and renovating our existing playground.

[01:23:17] But I wanted to know from the CIP list where we stood to kind of make that determination where the funding should be placed. So the three to four, depending on funding availability, the three to four playgrounds that will be scheduled to be replaced this upcoming summer have not been determined yet because the inspections are being done in the winter.

[01:23:39] And what we do, we don't like to take and prioritize the list and then potentially reach out to the school administrators and give that prioritized list because something could have happened since last year's inspections where something else is in more need and it would give you guys a false hope of getting the replacement.

[01:24:00] However, if you reach out to myself or my office, we can talk to you about where your playground is the things that we see and you know potentially give you an idea for projection of where it would be on on the list all right thank you yep any other questions you go yeah i was just wondering what's the expected lifespan of a playground so that varies um it varies a lot by manufacturer and the age in which it was constructed we still have um pieces of equipment climbing pieces of equipment I wouldn't necessarily classify it as a playground but your your typical

[01:24:40] monkey bars and the and the single bar that are still out there and and I don't know when those were installed but they hold up their their steel structures and they don't break down quickly we had a um a run of a particular product in the early to mid 2000s that we found deteriorated extremely quickly and we've been replacing those so we don't necessarily know a typical life cycle for a piece of playground equipment and not a lot of manufacturers will give you that information

[01:25:13] they have I would say a well-built well-constructed playground's gonna give you you know 15 to 20 years but we've definitely seen them deteriorate a lot quicker than that and then some last a lot longer than that.

[01:25:34] - Arjun? - First off, I wanna thank you for bringing this issue to the equity committee. I see playgrounds as the extension of a classroom for a lot of these younger students, and I think it's very important to make sure they're accessible. I did want some more clarification on what specific features are included in these inclusive playgrounds, because I know there's a lot of invisible disabilities out there.

[01:25:57] - Sure, and that's challenging to meet everyone's need and everyone's disability. What we try to do is work with student services for sensory things that the kids can play with that are sensory devices, musical equipment, they're accessible, they can play on, they can touch and play with.

[01:26:17] There is a school board policy that determines what a general playground gets, and then the U.S. Access Board provides us our guidelines on for how that formula works to make it an inclusive

playground it's beyond just the port in place surfacing that's for sure I don't have that list of equipment but when we work with the principals of the schools we go through that process of making sure we have that ratio of elevated pieces of equipment ground pieces of equipment ramps to access equipment and and spacing for a child to navigate the playground going between

[01:26:55] the equipment and there is an array of items out there available to be selected to be installed on a playground, which is why you'll see our playgrounds aren't cookie cutter playgrounds to say that we built three inclusive playgrounds this past summer and none of the three look identical. They're all different because the schools, the principal and the administration and the staff and the teams at the schools helped us design those. When you're notified you're getting your playground replaced, everything from the color to the pieces of equipment are part of the process of designing that playground with our contractor and our

[01:27:31] in-house team so as a follow-up to that thank you for your response um like are these individual like are these inclusive playgrounds the majority of the pieces on these playgrounds are designed to be inclusive correct it's not just one or two pieces of equipment don't quote me on this but i believe the u.s access boards ratio is one to one so if you do have a elevated piece of equipment that a child with a physical disability could not potentially climb on, you need to have something that's also at a level that they can play with and play on with their friends on the same pad and on the same piece of equipment.

[01:28:10] So it's not just, we don't just put one piece of equipment in and check the box that we've made it inclusive. We're really trying to make sure that all the children can play together. All right, wonderful, thank you. Any other questions for Brian? Anybody else want to put Brian on the spot?

[01:28:27] All right. Thank you so much for being here and answering all of our questions. And last minute being here, answering questions. Oh, a day's notice. You had a whole day's notice? I printed some things and didn't read anything. It's all right. We very much appreciate you being here.

[01:28:45] And of course, if we have any follow-up questions, we'll reach out. Absolutely. And I enjoy talking playgrounds, so thank you for having me. Well, I mean, playgrounds are fun. Who wouldn't want to talk about playgrounds? But thank you so much, and really, for taking the questions on the spot like that. We appreciate it. absolutely thank you all right all right so item six community discussion is there any go back on any of our information items tonight that anybody wants to further discuss all right seeing none we'll move to seven announcements so I have really two fairly large announcements to make

[01:29:24] December 7th is the last meeting of this because this committee appointment runs the calendar year so December 7th is the last meeting of this committee and I just want to make sure that everybody comes and we have a quorum so that we can close out the work of this year and also remind you the second part of that is to remind you that your your appointment and term is up in December so if it is if serving on this committee in the new year starting in January is something you want to do you need to reach out to the party that nominated you and do that and make sure that they renominate you and that process needs to

[01:30:02] go to Leticia so that she gets that information and can start facilitating the list for next year so if you were appointed by the superintendent you would want to reach out to the superintendent's office and say I would like to be appointed again if you were appointed by one of our special interest groups you would reach out to them and then of course our students that is done through a different process and

that'll come out through the office of equity and I have a longer you have a longer title now thank you for saying that and to make sure that that you read that we'll reach out to our student groups and any of our

[01:30:41] other groups that self-nominate that process will happen and of course the trickiest part of course are the school board nominations because as you know next week is election week and almost all of the seats are up for election and so we'll have to wait and see how that pans out and how that board wants to handle it and that probably really won't happen until January so it will not be me is all I can promise you and so that we need to I'll leave that in Leticia's hands to communicate and work with the incoming board members so hopefully does anybody have I don't know if anybody else has an

[01:31:19] announcement those are our announcements but we'll move to item eight new business does anybody have any new business? I talked to some of the members at my school and I'm sure some of the principals can speak to this some but Link Connect is the lunch program that we're using this year and we have some of our students who have incurred at this point in the school year \$200 in school debt that they have for lunches and I was told that if that number you know hopefully

[01:31:55] doesn't increase but that number might be increasing up by the end of the year and our school is going to have to pay back the debt that is not paid by the students um that that money is being paid back by the school if the students don't pay it back at the end of the year since they can't turn down school lunches um for students and that's what was told from our school i would have to look at i don't want to put any of the principals on the spot i'm not okay my concern was that there would be certain schools that would have to pay more money than

[01:32:30] other schools if that is in fact the case with that and I was concerned you know with numbers but I know the state law is fairly recent in every student receives a school luncheon isn't turned down but if we could you know have those numbers maybe next year or see what is going on with that and make sure that it's applied equitably across the district for that so certain schools aren't targeted more than others.

[01:32:56] I thank you for raising the issue and it also sounds like perhaps we need to make sure that students who cannot pay for their lunch are filling out the paperwork if they qualify for free and reduced meals. So I think there's a twofold here and so I'll work with Leticia to either bring that information this time or to work to bring it, if we can't bring it in December, to make sure that we get the information out there and find out what the impact that it's having because I'm not familiar so I don't know and I appreciate you bringing it.

[01:33:29] That is certainly something we should be looking into to be proactive about it. I don't know if any of the principals can speak to it or not. I don't want to put you on the spot if you're not really aware of what, if it's not happening at your school. So if it's not happening across the board, I think it's twofold is what is the new rule And then, of course, are the students who qualify for free and reduced meals signed up for them so that we're not incurring an expense that is unnecessary and that students are eating, of course, would be the main focus.

[01:33:57] Michelle? I do know that administrators can complete the paperwork for students who qualify if there's a need. So we do have the option to do so. Okay. Thank you. So I think we'll ask for more information on this. And if we can bring it back in December, we will.

[01:34:13] If not, we'll push it. but i certainly think it's something that um the school division needs to address so thank you haley for bringing that to our attention is there any other new business or anything else robin hi robin scott um msec rep for kenneth colbert um parent and i have friends in lcps with trans children their children that are being targeted by their very existence and their identity and I'm specifically asking for those families at Woodgrove what is LCPS and the

[01:34:49] people in this building and the people in this committee going to do to remain committed to policy 8040. So thank you for the question I can tell you that right now 8040 is in committee review based on the executive order from from the governor exec it's not an executive order based on the new policy out of the VDOE and so that is in currently in student services and so it is I know unfortunately I missed the last student services community I do serve on it I encourage people to come to that meeting or at least go back and watch it so that you can see the process the board is

[01:35:27] going through to compare 80/40 to the new recommendations and that I'm I'm confident the policy will be addressed line by line at this point. So thank you for bringing that forward as well.

[01:35:43] Is there any other new business? Okay, Erica. Hi, everyone. As some of you know who have been on the committee, as long as I have been on the committee, I am very proud to be the representative for the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington.

[01:36:02] And I just wanted to take a moment, as all of you know, by either just being awake and paying attention to radios or television or news. It's been a very difficult time since October 7th.

[01:36:18] And I just wanted to take a quick moment and say that since October 7th, anti-Semitic comments and Islamophobia have skyrocketed. And there are statistics that show that just in the time from October 7th to now, anti-Semitic events, comments, threats, violence has increased about 400 percent, and that's just

[01:36:50] since October 7th. I know that we talk about making sure that all of our students are seen regardless of what their gender identity is, what their religion is, what their skin color is, what they prefer to have for breakfast. It does not matter. Every child should feel safe, And I know too many children at my synagogue who are young and afraid because they hear things on the news and they think something might happen when they go to school.

[01:37:22] Or teenagers who are angry because they hear jokes that people might make or they hear about comments on the news and it just makes them very angry. So we can't all snap our fingers and make these kinds of situations go away.

[01:37:45] I think if we could, the world would be an immensely better place. But what we can do, and it is a very simple thing, and it's not just specific religious groups. It's not just Jewish families. It's not just Muslim families.

[01:38:02] It's not just the religious leaders in those groups. You all as parents or teachers or administrators, anyone who works with or who is around children or adults, the idea of someone making anti-Semitic comments in a joking manner, which is unbelievably common, and we just kind of people just slough it off like it's no big deal.

[01:38:32] Please understand that where we are right now, those kind of comments that people might just brush off as that's no big deal it's not really offensive it is and it's building so talk to your kids especially

high school kids ask them every once in a while if they have jewish friends because they might not or they might how are so and so how is so and so doing or ask if they've heard anything have students made comments were there arguments in a government class that seemed

[01:39:09] inappropriate. Just take a moment to let them know that it's something that's important to you without taking, and I'm not saying to take one side or the other, because the whole issue is very complicated. But no one, regardless of what the other group is, no one in their homes or in their community should tolerate any kind of hate speech, even if it's just what they think is an innocent joke so please be mindful please be aware and also please if you are trying to learn about

[01:39:47] things that are going on make sure you um you look at multiple sources and you don't just see something on Facebook and blast it out to everybody because we all know social media just because it's on there doesn't mean it's true so be mindful and remember that we're we're all part of the human community no matter where we come from or who we are or what we practice and we need to treat each other that way thank you thank you well said any other new business or

[01:40:27] final comment all right seeing oh i swivel and i come back to my hand up neil i'm sorry i was just going to um put in a plug for our students so we've had a very active muslim student association for years and this fall we started a Jewish student association and they the two groups the leaders of both the groups have gotten together in just the last couple of weeks and they're going to have a friends giving together on the 14th or 15th of November and they're inviting their

[01:41:03] families and bringing in food and so you know not every Muslim and not every Jewish student is a of these two organizations but we are going to announce it so I think a lot of times kids are better at building bridges then then sometimes the adults are so I'm really proud of the fact that the two communities are going to do that at our school thank you for sharing that what a nice way to end tonight so seeing no further business we are adjourned and have a really great month and we will see you for our last meeting on December 7th thank you



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