

Policy Council Minutes

Wednesday, January 21, 2026, 5:30 pm

Zoom

1. Welcome and Introductions

- a. **Policy Council Members in Attendance:** Sherry Bennet (VB GSC), Haylei Shepard (Niles), Amelia Espinosa (Bangor), Ali Harman (SMC), Jenilee Moody (Community Member), Kadeejah Lee-Rodgers (Benton Harbor), Jennifer Russell (Watervliet), Deborah Thrasher (Decatur), Khyra Kimble (Millburg), Annie O'Connell (New Buffalo), Micah McCree-Davis (Benton Harbor)
- b. **Guests in Attendance:** Chanda Hillman CEO; Laura Burtis CFO; Maureen Ovington; Jodi Curran Family Advocate; Gloria Walter Family Services Director; Juanisha Young Family Advocate; Laura Brugh Family Advocate; Rut Vargas Enrollment and Recruitment Assistant; Elmira Morales Family Advocate; Holly Pomranka Family Services Manager; Trent Lamonds Family Advocate; Mandy Orlando HS Education Director; Sarah Savage Family Advocate; Tiffany Costner Family Advocate; Evelia Alcaraz Family Advocate; Ana Moreno Family Advocate; Tiffany Perkins Family Advocate; Ivette Bucio Communications and Engagement Coordinator

Quorum was met.

Haylei Shepard called meeting to order at 5:50 pm.

2. * Vote in Community Members

- a. Jen Moody
 - b. Sherry Bennett
- Deborah motioned; Amelia seconded. Motion carried.

3. * Approve Minutes – November Meeting

Deborah motioned; Alli seconded. Motion carried.

4. * Directors Report – November/December

- i. Classrooms are 96% open; however, enrollment remains below target.
 - ii. Attendance declined due to illness.
 - iii. Federal budget progress continues. If funding is not received by February 1, we may be required to shut down.
 - iv. OHS is experiencing a backlog; funding may still arrive by January 30.
 - v. A line of credit supports operations through February 6. Alternative solutions are being explored if funds are delayed.
- b. HR Dashboard – Turnover and vacancy rates remain the same, with continued progress.
 - c. Family Services Report – No significant drops noted.
 - d. Development Report – The foundation that supports our Development Director position has increased its funding for the year.
 - e. Education Report – Teachers continue to assess students across the four developmental domains. Overall results are positive. Early Head Start (EHS)

children scored within the 0–2 range, and Head Start (HS) children scored a 4, indicating kindergarten readiness.

- f. Health Services Report –
 - i. Programs remain on track with health requirements, including WCEs, dental exams, and immunizations.
 - ii. Walking Wednesdays have been implemented for staff.
 - iii. “What’s for Dinner” events continue with Robin.
Deborah motioned; Sherry seconded. Motion carried.
5. * Finance Report – November/December
 - a. 92% of the program year has been completed.
 - b. No overall budget concerns were reported.
 - c. Administrative costs are 10.85% (allowable up to 15%).
 - d. CACFP reimbursement has been received through December.
 - e. In-kind has been reported through October; the annual goal has not yet been met (waiver submitted).
 - i. HS: \$735,947.34 | EHS: \$276,555.41
Jen motioned; Deborah seconded. Motion carried.
6. * Board/PC/Finance Meeting Calendar
 - a. Jen motioned; Alli seconded. Motion carried.
7. * 2026-2027 Program Options
 - a. Cost-cutting measures were reviewed.
 - b. The Spinks lease has ended to allow reallocation of resources.
 - c. The Cass modular will now be a classroom.
 - d. Licensing for McCleary is still in progress.
Deborah motioned; Sherry seconded. Motion carried.
8. * 2026-2027 Program Calendar
 - a. The calendar remains similar to the previous year.
 - b. Snow days may require creative scheduling; however, all requirements will be met.
Amelia motioned; Deborah seconded. Motion carried.
9. * 305.3 EHS → EHS and HS → HS Transitions
 - a. Updates were made to reflect mental health and disability support, with additional review for children requesting classroom transitions to ensure appropriate support is provided for all parties involved.
Alli motioned; Deborah seconded. Motion carried.
10. * 148.1 Conference Expectations
 - a. A new policy was introduced to clarify expectations and includes a required sign-off acknowledging understanding.
Alli motioned; Sherry seconded. Motion carried.
11. * Health and Mental Health Advisory Committee Minutes
 - a. Policy Council is required to have access to and review the minutes. Members are invited to attend meetings where community health providers and organizations discuss health-related updates and issues.
Deborah motioned; Alli seconded. Motion carried.
12. * 312.9 Selection and Enrollment Policy
 - a. This policy is reviewed annually. Suggested updates were discussed, including adding points back for siblings.
Jen motioned; Deborah seconded. Motion carried.

13. * 702.3 Fundraising and Grand Writing Authorization Policy
 - a. Updates were made to reflect CFR standards revised in October. Language was added to require follow-up after approved fundraising events. Center Directors are required to sign prior to submission to the Development Director.
Deborah motioned; Alli seconded. Motion carried.
14. * Development Director Job Description
 - a. Updates were made to the Development Director job title and description to better reflect future-focused work and long-term sustainability.
Sherry moved; Deborah seconded. Motion carried.
15. * 2026-2027 Fundraising Priorities
 - a. Priorities were reviewed to ensure focus on organizational needs. Categories were not added; tuition and capacity amounts were updated to help guide the Development Directors work.
Deborah Motioned; Alli seconded. Motion carried.
16. * 810.1 Program Interruption and Restart Contingency Plan
 - a. This policy was developed to ensure organizational protection and provide clear guidance to the Director Team on required actions and timelines. The plan was also reviewed by legal counsel to ensure compliance with Department of Labor requirements.
Deborah motioned; Alli seconded. Motion carried.
17. * Line of Credit
 - a. The annual renewal of the line of credit through Mercantile Bank was reviewed. The line has not been used and is intended for emergency situations. If fully utilized, interest costs would be paid from the Board account. The line of credit is \$500,000 with a \$500 annual fee.
Alli motioned; Amelia seconded. Motion carried.
18. * Finance Policies and Procedures
 - a. Updates were made to improve clarity and readability. The primary change involved 401(k) procedures, removing the employer contribution percentage to allow greater flexibility rather than a fixed cap.
Deborah motioned; Amelia seconded. Motion carried.
19. * 401k Audit
 - a. Auditors issued a clean and unmodified result, the highest possible rating. Meaning, financial reporting is accurate and there are no issues requiring corrective action.
Jen motioned; Sherry seconded. Motion carried.
20. * DEC Awning
 - a. The awning covering the walkway connecting three modular classrooms is currently tarped and requires replacement due to safety concerns. The total cost is \$17,490. The proposed vendor is the original installer and the only company in Benton Harbor that provides this service.
Sherry moved; Alli seconded. Motion carried.
21. Education
 - a. FA1 Preparation
 - i. February 17–19
 - ii. Reviews and audits ensure strong stewardship of funds and compliance across five key systems. Federal Reviewers will spend all three days with Finance and ERSEA teams, visit centers, and observe more than half of the 44 classrooms. HR

will be involved throughout.

iii. On February 18, the Federal Reviewers will meet with Policy Council for 30 minutes in person at HSO or via Zoom (Sherry & Jen volunteered).

22. Communications

a. Contingency Planning

i. Regardless of funding status, a staff meeting will be held on January 30 to provide updates, next steps, and ongoing monitoring. If funding delays occur, communications will be sent to the Board and Policy Council, followed by families and the broader community.

ii. NHTSA Parents Unite

1. Provides families with information and advocacy resources.

23. Report from Centers

24. Pleasure of the Floor – Update from Sherry (GSC) – GSC continues early literacy training and offers alternatives to screen time, which has been popular with families. Rx Kids, a prenatal support program, is being explored for expansion into Van Buren and Cass Counties. The program provides eligible families with \$1,500 during pregnancy and \$500 per month for the first six months after birth.

25. * Adjournment

a. Deborah motioned; Jen seconded. Motion carried
Meeting adjourned at 7:18pm.

*Denotes approval needed

Next Meeting: Wednesday, March 25, 2026 at 5:30 pm, 4821 North St, Benton Harbor