

Policy Council Minutes

Wednesday, October 22, 2025, 5:30 pm

Watervliet Center: 188 Lucinda Lane Watervliet

1. Welcome and Introductions

Policy Council Members in attendance: Sydney Whittker (Watervliet), Sara Parkhurst (Cass), Jen Moody (Berrien GSC), Sherry Bennet (Van Buren GSC), Deborah Thrasher (Decatur), Haylei Shepard (Niles), Destinee Wadkins (Dowagiac)

Policy Council Members voting via email: Mellody Buzalski (Cass GSC)

Policy Council Members via zoom: Madison Gil (South Haven), Antonia Ledesma (Gobles)

Guests in attendance: Chanda Hillman CEO; Laura Burtis CFO; Maureen Ovington Development Director; Melanie Bullock Workforce Development Manager; Trent Lamonds Family Advocate; Jodi Curan Family Advocate; Laura Brugh Family Advocate; Ana Moreno Family Advocate; Belinda Russell Family Advocate; Juanisha Young Family Advocate; Tiffany Perkins Family Advocate; Kahli Lorenz Program Parent; Laura Emborsky Decatur Classroom Program Director; Rhonda Pallas Watervliet Center Director; Elmira Morales Family Advocate; Sam Ohland Finance Manager; Ivette Bucio Communications & Engagement Coordinator

Quorum was met.

Kahli called meeting to order at 5:36pm

2. * Approve Minutes – August Meeting

- a. Sydney motioned; Jen seconded. Motion carried.
- b. * Vote for Officers
 - i. Chair - Haylei
 - ii. Vice Chair - Sara
 - iii. Secretary - Sydney
 - iv. Treasurer - TBD

Sydney motioned; Haylei seconded. Motion carried.

- c. * Directors Report – August/September –
 - i. Enrollment: Currently at 71%. Progress is being made, but staffing shortages continue to impact full enrollment.
 - ii. Due to grant funding, difficult budget cuts are being made.
- d. HR Dashboard
 - i. Shows trends in hiring and retention.
 - ii. Over the summer, we saw a higher number of staff departures than usual.
- e. Family Services Report
 - i. Nothing unusual to report.
 - ii. Some challenges with recruitment in certain areas.
 - iii. SNAP eligibility has increased significantly.

- f. Development Report
 - i. Congressman Walberg visited our Dowagiac SMC location.
 - ii. Met with an Art Van Foundation representative; meeting went very well.
 - iii. Met with the funder supporting the Development Directors position; they will continue to fund her role.
 - g. Education Report
 - i. Staff have been participating in professional development opportunities including:
 - 1. Authentic Leadership Certification through Harvard
 - 2. Conscious Discipline and High Scope training
 - 3. MHSA Coaches Learning Community
 - 4. Great Start to Quality rating, which helps reduce family tuition costs
- Sydney motioned; Sara seconded. Motion carried.
- 3. * Finance Report – August/September
 - a. September 2025
 - i. 33% of the budget remains.
 - ii. Expecting to end with approximately 11% in administrative costs.
 - iii. In-kind contributions are behind target.
 - iv. Donations by funding category are separate from operating funds.
 - v. The in-kind requirement is part of our grant; a waiver will be requested next month. If not approved, the agency may need to repay unmet funds.
- Deborah motioned; Sara seconded. Motion carried.
- 4. * Policy Council By-laws
 - a. Updated to reflect Flowers Early Learning.
 - b. Adjusted language on community member composition since GSC funding has ended.
- Deborah motioned; Sara seconded. Motion carried.
- 5. * Head Start Continuation Grant
 - a. Year 2 of the 5-year cycle – primarily financial updates.
 - i. Highlights: Transportation adjustments: some staff moved to program year schedule; others switched to a 35-hour work week.
 - ii. Training and Technical Assistance and Cost Allocation Plan reviewed.
- Sara motioned; Jen seconded. Motion carried.
- 6. * Bids for Food Transport Vans
 - a. OHS awarded us a supplemental grant for Nutrition Support.
 - b. Recommendation: 2025 Ford Transit 250 AWD for safety and reliability.
 - i. Total van budget: \$120,000
 - ii. Ford Transit cost: \$118, 102.20
- Jen motioned; Deborah seconded. Motion carried.
- 7. * Main Office HVAC System
 - a. Funded through the Operations Grant.
 - i. Replacing the air conditioning now and the furnace in the spring.
 - ii. Estimated cost to replace AC replacement: \$8,853.24
- Deborah motioned; Sydney seconded. Motion carried.

8. * Employee Referral

- a. Due to staffing shortages, the referral incentive will be temporarily increased to help attract more applicants.
- b. The increased incentive will run through January 31, 2026.

Sara motioned; Deborah seconded. Motion carried.

9. Education

- a. Trends in Volunteerism and In-Kind Contributions
 - i. In-kind contributions remain below target. Before COVID, the program exceeded its goal consistently; since then, hours have dropped by 77%.
 - ii. Simplifying communication about how volunteer hours support the grant may encourage more family participation.
 - iii. Niles will host “Donuts with Grown-Ups” on November 5 to increase engagement and volunteer hours.

10. Communications

- a. Day 22 of the Federal shutdown.
- b. February 1 grantees (like us) are not yet affected, but October 1 grantees are still operating without funding or notices of award.
- c. If the shutdown continues past November 1, 135 programs nationwide (including nine in Michigan) will be impacted.
- d. SNAP benefits may stop after November 1; WIC funding is expected to continue but not confirmed.

11. Report from Centers

- a. Cass: Parents had questions about moving to the new Dowagiac location.
- b. Niles: Successful family committee meeting; discussed playground improvements.
- c. Dowagiac: Reviewed Policy Council minutes; good turnout.

12. Report from Great Start Collaboratives

- a. Berrien: Jen will continue in the position through December 19; seeking a new role through Berrien RESA.
- b. Cass: Position will end in December.
- c. Van Buren: Commitment from ISD through June; planning a Holiday Event on December 9 in Lawrence.

13. Pleasure of the Floor

14. * Adjournment

Deborah motioned; Jen seconded. Motion carried.

Meeting adjourned 7:43pm

*Denotes approval needed

Next Meeting: Wednesday, November 19, at 5:30 pm at 603 McCleary St, Dowagiac