

**MINUTES
STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION
MEETING**

April 17, 2026
The Freedom Institute of Collier County
2706 Horseshoe Dr. S.
Naples, FL 34104

Chair Ryan Petty called the meeting to order at 9 a.m. and welcomed members and guests to the State Board of Education meeting. The following members were present: Vice Chair MaryLynn Magar, Layla Collins, Daniel Foganholi, Erika Fritz-Ochs, and Luis Fuste. Dr. Grazie Christie attended by phone. Chair Petty recognized Bill Kramer to deliver the invocation and asked everyone to remain standing for the Pledge of Allegiance.

Welcome

Chair Petty recognized Tom Grady, co-founder and board chairman of the Freedom Institute, to welcome the board. Mr. Grady highlighted the significance of The Freedom Institute and its role in supporting education. He acknowledged the contribution of Governor DeSantis and the legislature in empowering parental choices in education, particularly through supporting charter schools. He emphasized the board's commitment to reversing improper denials of charter applications, reinforcing the importance of educational choice.

COMMISSIONER'S REPORT

Chair Petty recognized Anastasios Kamoutsas, Commissioner of the Department of Education, to present his report. Commissioner Kamoutsas shared that it is a privilege to be at The Freedom Institute, co-founded by Tom Grady, Ted Dekko, and Chris Marker, where personalized learning models are provided for each student's unique needs. The institute prepares students for their post-graduate paths through high school and college courses, under the leadership of CEO Christopher Marker. Additionally, April is recognized as the Month of the Military Family in Florida, honoring those in the U.S. Armed Forces and their families, who often face challenges but display resilience and leadership in education.

Commissioner Kamoutsas shared that Florida has implemented policies to support military-connected students through programs such as the Purple Star School of Distinction, initiated in 2021, which currently recognizes 451 schools serving military families. The Purple Star District program, established in 2024, honors six school districts for their commitment to these families. Additionally, the Florida Collegiate Purple Star Campus program, launched in 2023, has awarded this distinction to 19 colleges that support military families, as the state aims for all 28 college institutions to receive this recognition. The initiative underscores Florida's appreciation for military families and their contributions.

Commissioner Kamoutsas shared that April is designated as Florida College System Month, celebrating the contributions of the state's 28 colleges. The Florida college system offers affordable education and prepares students for high-demand careers, contributing to Florida's top rankings in higher education and workforce success. With over 686,000 enrollees, these institutions serve as the main entry points to higher education in Florida, helping students earn more than 137,000 degrees and certifications in the '24-'25 school year. Additionally, Florida recently hosted the 2nd Annual National Summit on School Safety to share best practices and enhance campus protection strategies.

Commissioner Kamoutsas thanked Chair Petty for his vision and leadership in promoting student safety, which facilitated collaboration among participants from Florida and beyond for significant work. He shared that Florida leads in school safety policy and hosted a summit to showcase advancements and reforms from the 2026 legislative session. A key outcome was the passage of House Bill 757, which expands the School Guardian Program to state colleges and universities, in addition to the existing 53 participating school districts.

Commissioner Kamoutsas shared that Senate Bill 1296 introduces significant reforms aimed at enhancing transparency and accountability within teacher unions, which have been criticized for acting more as political activists than as advocates for educators. The bill requires unions to demonstrate genuine support from teachers before negotiating salaries and benefits. It also establishes a faster process for teacher pay increases, addressing delays in fund distribution. Despite an allocation of \$1.36 billion for teacher pay this year, several districts have yet to implement salary increases, leading to ongoing frustrations. If enacted, the bill will expedite these increases, ensuring timely compensation for educators.

Commissioner Kamoutsas shared that House Bill 1279 introduces policy updates that enhance opportunities for students and teachers in Florida, including expanded bonuses for educators of successful students in advanced courses, aligning these with Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs. The bill also improves parents' rights regarding services for students with individualized education plans. Additionally, House Bill 851 mandates professional development for teaching students with autism, while House Bill 453 allows students with disabilities to meet physical education requirements through participation in Special Olympics. Senate Bill 538 supports athletic programs by providing flexibility and improved compensation for coaches. These legislative efforts reflect Florida's commitment to student achievement and educational opportunities.

Commissioner Kamoutsas shared that Florida's Sunshine State Scholars Program recently recognized outstanding 11th-grade students in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), with over 100 participants and 10 students receiving scholarships. Additionally, the board is also considering adding Florida's Advanced Courses and Tests (FACT) to accelerate student learning, allowing high school and college credits through successful completion of these courses, established by House Bill 1537 in 2023, to ensure high-quality, non-divisive education.

Commissioner Kamoutsas shared that the first FACT course, college algebra, was piloted this year with over 32 schools participating and will be implemented statewide next year. Approximately 14,000 high school students completed college algebra through dual-enrollment last year, but some faced barriers like transportation. The FACT course expands access to college-level math alongside dual-enrollment and AP programs. A new pilot for FACT U.S. History will start this fall, inviting districts and charter schools to participate. Further updates on the FACT courses will be provided as the school year begins.

Commissioner Kamoutsas shared that Florida affirms its commitment to constitutional protections for voluntary prayer and religious expression in public schools. Updated guidance from the U.S. Department of Education emphasizes that students and school personnel can exercise their rights to religious expression, including individual prayer. A process for filing complaints regarding non-compliance with this guidance has been established, ensuring that these protections are upheld.

Commissioner Kamoutsas recognized Erik Aspegren, a sophomore at Freedom Institute, who has excelled in a flexible learning environment, participating in diverse educational programs.

Commissioner Kamoutsas recognized Erin Layton, a senior at Freedom Institute, who excels in both academics and athletics, maintaining a 4.0 GPA, and whose achievements underscore the advantages of a flexible learning environment.

Commissioner Kamoutsas recognized Josue Briones, an outstanding student at Florida SouthWestern State College and a former United States Marine, exemplifies discipline and resilience. He serves as a mentor, demonstrating commitment to personal and academic growth.

Vice Chair Magar requested an update on the Financial Emergency Board appointed at the April 2, 2026, meeting.

Chair Petty called for a motion to approve the commissioner's report. Mr. Fuste made the motion with a second by Mr. Foganholi. The motion passed unanimously.

Minutes

Chair Petty called for a motion to approve the minutes from the January 21 and February 20, 2026, meetings. Vice Chair Magar made the motion with a second by Mr. Foganholi. The motion passed unanimously.

Updates

K-12 Public Schools – Superintendent Ricciardelli on behalf of the Florida Association of District School Superintendents

Chair Petty recognized Dr. Leslie Ricciardelli, Superintendent of Collier County School District, to provide an update on behalf of FADSS. Superintendent Ricciardelli shared that Collier County serves nearly 48,000 students with 32 elementary schools, 10 middle schools, 9 traditional high schools, 9 charter schools, 1 K-12 school, and 1 alternative school. Additionally, we operate 3 technical colleges. The Collier County School Board has adopted a fiscally conservative strategy, saved capital, and utilized impact fees to build 3 schools without debt. The district, serving a diverse population, has achieved an A rating for eight consecutive years and ranked sixth in Florida in 2025, with many schools receiving A or B grades despite a significant number of English language learners. Employing around 6,900 individuals, including 3,200 teachers with a competitive starting salary of \$57,000 and an average of \$73,570.

College System – President Allbritten on behalf of the Council of Presidents (COP)

Chair Petty recognized Dr. Jeffrey Allbritten, President of Florida Southwestern State College, to provide an update on behalf of the COP. President Allbritten expressed pride in the institution and highlighted achievements during his term as Chair of the Council of Presidents. He shared that Florida Southwestern State College (FSW) is the first college in Florida to receive full accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission, achieving the milestone in November. The Florida College System (FCS) has experienced enrollment growth and increased completions, meeting employer demands. Florida is celebrated for its excellence in higher education and workforce education, achieving goals ahead of schedule. The FCS fosters economic mobility by linking education to job market needs. To sustain momentum, ongoing investment is essential. He expressed his appreciation to Governor DeSantis, Commissioner Kamoutsas, and the State Board of Education for their support.

Update on Hendry County School District's Turnaround Option Plan

Chair Petty recognized Dr. Paul Burns, Senior Chancellor, for an overview of Hendry County School District's Turnaround Plan. Sr. Chancellor Burns shared that in September 2025, Hendry County presented their Turnaround Option Plan 1 for the Digital Academy of Florida to the State Board due to the school's consecutive D grade at the end of the 2024-2025 school year. The district chose district-managed turnaround for the 2025-2026 school year, which the State Board approved with conditions. Subsequently, in November 2025, the board approved Turnaround Option Plan 2, detailing the implementation of the conditions set in September. The Bureau of School Improvement (BSI) is conducting monthly virtual visits to the Digital Academy of Florida to observe instructional practices and monitor the implementation of improvement plans. Team members provided feedback to the school and district teams based on these observations. As a result of their efforts and analysis of progress-monitoring data, the Digital Academy is making instructional improvements, and the team will continue to offer support and resources to the superintendent and his district team.

Chair Petty recognized Mike Swindle, Superintendent of Hendry County, for an overview of Hendry County's progress. Superintendent Swindle shared that the rural area in southwest Florida is known for its strong agricultural community. He shared that Ms. Rosa Perez has been appointed as the principal dedicated to the Digital Academy of Florida. Principal Perez conducts nearly daily virtual walk-throughs and is proficient in using data effectively to drive growth and improvement, making her an invaluable asset to the academy. The progress-monitoring data indicate significant positive growth over the past year, with an 11 percent gain in English Language Arts (ELA) and a 4 percent gain in math. ELA performance reached 47 percent, near the state average of 49 percent, while math stands at 34 percent. The district's partnership with the Digital Academy of Florida has yielded positive results, while early interventions for absenteeism and regular classroom visits provide essential support. He shared that the Digital Academy of Florida is committed to improvement and aspires to be a high-achieving school in Hendry County.

Action Items

Chair Petty modified the agenda by moving "Approval of Specific Florida College System Institution General Education Course Lists" to the first Action Item.

Approval of Specific Florida College System Institution General Education Course Lists

Chair Petty recognized Kathy Hebda, Chancellor, for an overview of the Specific Florida College System Institution General Education Course Lists. Chancellor Hebda shared that on March 26, 2026, the Board of Governors decided to remove lower-division sociology courses from the State University System's General Education List, citing conflicts with Florida Statutes that prohibit identity politics and distortion of historical events. This decision aligns with the state's efforts to maintain a coordinated higher education system following the passage of Senate Bill 266 in 2023. Currently, 24 colleges still wish to include these sociology courses in their general education offerings, which could disadvantage students transferring from Florida College System institutions to state universities.

Chair Petty recognized Commissioner Kamoutsas for a recommendation for the board. Commissioner Kamoutsas recommended removing sociology courses from the general education lists.

Chair Petty called for a two-part motion to eliminate lower-division sociology courses as a general education option and to delegate to the Commissioner the authority to approve the revised institution lists upon receipt of Specific Florida College System Institution General Education Course Lists. Ms. Collins made the motion with a second by Vice Chair Magar.

Chair Petty recognized Amy Perwien in support.

The motion passed unanimously.

Approval of Amendment to Rule 6A-1.0019, Threat Management

Chair Petty recognized Dr. Paul Burns, Senior Chancellor, for an overview of the amendment to 6A-1.0019. Sr. Chancellor Burns shared that in 2023, the Office of Safe Schools initiated a statewide behavioral threat management process, developing a Florida-specific instrument and a threat management portal for use by schools and districts. The proposed rule amendment incorporates stakeholder and staff feedback to enhance school safety, informed by insights gained during the portal's rollout. The amendment is designed to support districts as they prioritize safety in all schools. The threat management process is being updated to require an interim student support management plan for any student referred to the full school-based threat management team, a requirement that was previously optional. Additionally, the language emphasizes collaboration between the threat management team and the ESE team when a student is identified with an IEP or a 504 plan. The rule amendment clarifies training requirements for members of the threat management process, including school-based teams, district teams, and Florida model trainers.

Chair Petty called for a motion to approve the amendment to rule 6A-1.0019, Threat Management. Mr. Fuste made the motion with a second by Mr. Foganholi.

Chair Petty recognized Cynthia Odierna, Damaris Allen in opposition.

The motion passed unanimously.

Approval of New Specialized Associate in Arts Transfer (SAAT) Degree Program(s) in the Florida College System, "Lake-Sumter State College - Civil, Electrical, & Mechanical Engineering"

Chair Petty recognized John Temple President of Lake Sumter State College for an overview of New Specialized Associate in Arts Transfer (SAAT) Degree Program(s) in the Florida College System, "Lake-Sumter State College - Civil, Electrical, & Mechanical Engineering". President Temple shared that Lake Sumter State College is seeking approval for three specialized Associate in Arts transfer degrees in Civil Engineering, Electrical Engineering, and Mechanical Engineering, to be implemented in the '26-'27 academic year. These programs address the need for extensive lower-division coursework and align with Florida's SAAT model, enabling transfer pathways that exceed 60 credits. The civil and electrical engineering degrees will require 60 to 89 credit hours, while the mechanical engineering degree will be structured between 60 and 92 credit hours, covering essential mathematics and science. The demand for engineering talent in Workforce Region 12 is significant, with an annual average of 478 civil, 367 electrical, and 475 mechanical engineering jobs. These programs aim to improve transfer efficiency, reduce credit loss, and strengthen the engineering talent pipeline for Florida, contributing to higher STEM bachelor degree attainment.

Chair Petty called for a motion to approve New Specialized Associate in Arts Transfer (SAAT) Degree Program(s) in the Florida College System, "Lake-Sumter State College - Civil, Electrical, & Mechanical Engineering". Mr. Foganholi made the motion with a second by Mr. Fuste.

The motion passed unanimously.

Approval of New Specialized Associate in Arts Transfer (SAAT) Degree Program(s) in the Florida College System, "Seminole State College - Biology, Civil Engineering, Electrical Engineering & Mechanical Engineering"

Chair Petty recognized Dr. Loretta Ovueraye, Vice President for Academic Affairs of Seminole State College, for an overview. Vice President Ovueraye shared that approval is requested for four Specialized Associates in Arts for Transfer Degrees in Biology, Civil Engineering, Electrical Engineering, and Mechanical Engineering. These degrees facilitate student transfers to universities. Additionally, it addresses local employment needs in biology and engineering fields, reflecting a commitment to intentional support and student success through thoughtful design and collaboration.

Chair Petty called for a motion to approve the New Specialized Associate in Arts Transfer (SAAT) Degree Program(s) in the Florida College System, "Seminole State College - Biology, Civil Engineering, Electrical Engineering & Mechanical Engineering". Vice Chair Magar made the motion with a second by Ms. Collins.

The motion passed unanimously.

Approval of Amendment to Rule 6A-10.024, Articulation Between and Among Universities, Florida Colleges, and School Districts

Chair Petty recognized Chancellor Hebda for an overview of amendment to 6A-10.024. Chancellor Hebda shared that this rule includes Florida advanced courses and tests as acceleration options for students, supported by a pilot program in college algebra involving over 800 students. Teacher training has been provided in collaboration with various educational bodies to ensure the effective implementation of the pilot.

Chair Petty called for a motion to approve the amendment to rule 6A-10.024. Mr. Fuste made the motion with a second by Mr. Foganholi.

Chair Petty recognized Damaris Allen in support.

The motion passed unanimously.

Approval of the 2026-27 Dual Enrollment Course-High School Subject Area Equivalency List

Chancellor Hebda shared that this item focuses on updating the dual-enrollment course high school subject area equivalency list, which clarifies the high school credit earned through college courses for dual-enrollment students, specifying requirements for graduation versus elective credits in a comprehensive manner.

Chair Petty called for a motion to approve the 2026-27 Dual Enrollment Course-High School Subject Area Equivalency List. Ms. Collins made the motion with a second by Vice Chair Magar. The motion passed unanimously.

Consent Items

Chair Petty called for a motion to approve consent items 11-21. Vice Chair Magar made the motion with a second by Ms. Collins.

Chair Petty recognized Marge Cox for comment on #15 Approval of Amendment to Rule 6A-1.09401, Student Performance Standards and Cynthia Marino-Clark for comment on #17 Approval of Amendment to Rule. 6A-5.0411, Calculations of Student Learning Growth for Use in School Personnel Evaluations in support.

The motion passed unanimously.

Member Comments

Mr. Fuste expressed his shock regarding administrative overhead in the school's growth and emphasized the need to focus on learning. Ms. Fritz-Ochs recognized the updates shared by the Commissioner and staff, celebrating April as the Month of Military Family and College System Month. Florida is leading in support for military-connected families through initiatives like the Purple Star program. She also shared her excitement about the upcoming National Summit on School Safety, which aims to strengthen the Guardian Program and ensure a secure learning environment for students. Mr. Foganholi thanked Glades County for a great visit and the Liberty Institute and the Naples community for the welcome, and shared that the School Safety Summit reflected Florida's leadership alongside national figures. He expressed his appreciation for the Commissioner's passion and for the Teacher of the Year. Finally, congratulations to our outstanding students and their achievements. Ms. Collins expressed her gratitude to the college systems and staff for their efforts, highlighting the recognition of military families and the importance of student safety. She also emphasized Autism Awareness Month, noting how public attitudes impact students on the spectrum. Vice Chair Magar congratulated Karen Moore, named Trustee of the Year, and expressed gratitude to the Freedom Institute and Tom Grady for the invitation. Chair Petty expressed his gratitude and congratulated Karen Moore, Trustee of the Year, as named by the American Association of Community Colleges, for her service in Florida. He thanked the Freedom Institute and Tom Grady for their invitation and emphasized parental involvement in education and his support for all schools and educational options, affirming that every child can learn

Chair Petty announced that the next meeting would be on May 14, 2026, in Miami, FL.

ADJOURNMENT

Having no further business, Chair Petty adjourned the meeting of the State Board of Education at 12:00 p.m.