Minutes - Prince George's SECAC meeting 4/24/18

SECAC Board members in attendance: Sarah Wayland, treasurer, Jamie Anfenson-Comeau, secretary

Ms. Wayland opened the meeting at 6:36 p.m.

Ms. Wayland announced the Learning Disabilities Association conference April 28 at the Universities at Shady Grove Conference Center in Rockville. She also told attendees that Liz Burley, transition specialist with over 40 years in PGCPS, is retiring, and said SECAC would like to take up a collection to buy her a card.

Elissa Kaufman, PGCPS school psychologist, spoke on the subject of executive functioning, defined as "a set of mental processes that helps us connect past experience with present action." Executive function is used to perform such tasks as planning, organizing, strategizing and paying attention to and remembering details.

Ms. Kaufman said executive function difficulties include planning, organizing and managing time and space, impacts working memory, language, social skills and engagement with others.

She said it often runs in families, and that she and her children both have ADHD and executive functioning difficulties.

Ms. Kaufman said that with younger children, executive functioning difficulties may not be obvious, but that by third or fourth grade, it becomes more apparent.

Executive functioning is impacted by many different parts of the brain, not just the frontal lobe.

Ms. Kaufman said that at birth, infants have 1 trillion brain cells, and that by age six, the brain is 95 percent of its adult size.

In the earliest years, grey matter dedicated to language acquisition is particularly dense, but that around the ages of 11 or 12 the brain begins "pruning" neurons it's not using, such as language development, which is why Ms. Kaufman said it is important to introduce children to other languages at an early age.

White matter, which serves to build connections, continues to increase through adolescence until around age 45, and that new experiences help the brain to mold and change. The ability of the brain to do so is referred to as neuroplasticity. Brain connections can be built through exposure, experience and practice.

Executive functions include self-regulation, inhibition of impulses, sustaining attention, cognitive flexibility, emotional control working memory, planning, organization, self-monitoring and time management.

Ms. Kaufman said teachers or parents typically request an assessment of a child for executive functioning issues. The assessment includes speed of processing, planning (motor and conceptual) inhibition, decision making and problem solving, mental flexibility, memory and the ability to focus on a goal in spite of distractions. A number of different assessment tools are used in assessing executive function.

Ms. Kaufman said that assessments include classroom observation.

Self regulation and impulse control are very important foundations of executive function. The "Marshmellow Test" and cookie studies have shown the predictive power of delaying gratification.

Ms. Kaufman said that for learning self regulation and impulse control, it is often easier for children to relate to characters in stories and to learn to use the tools the characters use.

Ms. Kaufman said that for younger, understimulated children, practice motor sequences, use positive corrective feedback, post and review rules, eliminate environmental triggers by avoiding them or helping the child cope with it and provide frequent rewards, adding that young children need to know they're doing well and they need to hear it throughout the day.

Ms. Kaufman said that for younger, overstimulated children, teach yoga, mindfulness, meditation, breathing and calming exercises and find ways for them to release their energy and slow down.

Intervention strategies for helping children include telling them what is going to happen, how they can use their hands and bodies and letting them know when an activity is over.

Ms. Kaufman recommended social skills books for younger children.

For older children and teens, Ms. Kaufman said you may need to use strategies for younger children, depending on their developmental age. Ms. Kaufman said that many children with Autism Spectrum Disorder or Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder are developmentally behind their typically developing peers in terms of executive functioning.

She said biofeedback, such as deep breathing, guided imagery or progressive muscle relatation can help, especially when impulsivity stems from anxiety. She said there are apps available to help children with biofeedback.

Discuss medication with the child's pediatrician.

Increasing the power of rewards and consequences is another strategy.

She said diet and eating also has an impact on executive function.

Exercise and time outdoors helps build brain development.

To promote working memory in younger children, Kaufman said to pre-teach material, use verbal mediation and break up long tasks with frequent, short breaks. Use a timer as needed. Also ensure they have enough sleep.

She said that for a lot of families she works with, homework can be a very trying time. She recommended taking two-minute breaks every 10 minutes or so.

Working memory strategies for older children involve using active manipulation, technology, mnemonic strategies, visualization and storytelling.

She said individuals with executive function difficulties field planning and organizing really, really

difficult. She suggested the use of rewards, which can be intangibles, rather than food or money.

Ms. Kaufman said cognitive flexibility is the ability to shift between tasks, and that can sometimes be really, really hard for individuals with executive function difficulties. Changes in routine can also cause anxiety.

She said that puberty for a high functioning autistic child can also be really difficult. (or did you say that Sarah? My notes are unclear.)

Sometimes receiving a diagnosis can be difficult for the parent, because you may have in your mind an idea of how things are going to go for your child, but then discover that you have to find a different way.

Ms. Kaufman suggested a number of strategies, including using a timer for transitions, and helping older children differentiate between a “big deal” and a “little deal”. She recommended implementing changes slowly and gradually.

She said that often children with executive functioning difficulties exhibit poor emotional control, adding that when the brain is not always able to recognize and process social cues, they may not respond in an accepted manner.

Ms. Kaufman said to try a number of strategies to find out what works best for your child, and then stick with it.

She said that one tactic she uses in group sessions with older students is to have them think up solutions to each other's problems, which makes it less threatening.

Ms. Kaufman said that being an advocate for herself and her children allows her to better serve parents, especially those with concerns about collaboration between school and home.

She said that executive functioning can be a deficit in a variety of disabilities, but may also be a symptom of another condition, adding that brains are all different and function differently.

She said that oftentimes, children with executive functioning difficulties, when faced with a problem, get stuck on trying to figure out how to initiate; they don't know where to start, which can lead to frustration and anxiety.

She said that it is really important to help children identify what works for them and then teach them to self-advocate.

Having kids verbalize what they are going to do can also really help them organize their thoughts, Ms. Kaufman said.

She suggested a number of strategies for studying, including having them rewrite their notes, review their notes 10 minutes after class and practice estimating how long it takes to do tasks.

Sleep is also very important for executive functioning, and Ms. Kaufman said a lot of people underestimate how much sleep they need. She said that when you are tired, your brain really struggles with executive functioning.

She said that technology, such as computers, smartphones and tables, are a wonderful thing, and can help with learning, but have downsides too. In order to truly get restful sleep, the brain needs at least one hour after turning off all devices to truly get sleep.

Spending time outdoors and exercising can really help improve ADHD and executive functioning.

She said that grief, trauma and abuse can also have significant impacts on executive functioning, because of the risk of pushing their brains in