

REGULAR MEETING MINUTES OF THE SUFFOLK CITY SCHOOL BOARD

Thursday, May 8, 2025 ~ 5:00 P.M.

Suffolk City Hall, 442 W. Washington Street, Suffolk, VA 23434

Board Members Present:

Heather Howell, *Chair*
Sean McGee, *Vice Chair*
Valerie Fields
Karen Jenkins
Tyron Riddick¹
Kimberly Slingluff

Board Member Attending Virtually:

Dr. Dawn Marie Brittingham²

Administrative Staff Present:

Dr. John B. Gordon III, *Superintendent*
Wendell M. Waller, *Esquire, School Board Attorney*
Tarshia L. Gardner, *Clerk*
Keesha Johnson, *Deputy Clerk*

OPENING OF PUBLIC MEETING/WORK SESSION

➤ Call to Order:

Board Chair Howell called the meeting to order at 5:00 p.m.

➤ Discussion Regarding Forensic Audit vs Internal Control Consultation

Board Chair Howell began this discussion indicating that an audit would not exceed \$4000 in cost. Additional conversation between board members, Dr. Gordon and Mrs. Forsman regarding the following: (1) questions submitted to Cherry Bekaert Auditors; (2) what would be the ultimate goal if the auditors were to return for a subsequent board meeting; (3) if a Request for Proposals (RFP) is issued, would other companies be afforded an opportunity to submit a proposal; and (4) if there is a forensic audit would this address board member questions or concerns. Board Members agreed to: (1) clarify or specifically state what they are expecting to learn from a forensic audit; (2) hold a town hall to solicit input/concerns from constituents; (3) advertise outside of traditional methods in order to reach a broader audience for input regarding the need for a financial audit; and (4) ensure that board members are not on a “witch-hunt” regarding a forensic audit because there are other matters of focus for the school board.

There being no further discussion, Board Chair Howell concluded the work session.

MOTION TO GO INTO A CLOSED MEETING

➤ Attorney Wendell Waller read the following motion:

A motion is needed to go into a closed meeting to discuss the following items and subjects pursuant to the Virginia Freedom of Information Act found at Virginia Code Section 2.2-3711:

¹ Board Member Riddick arrived to the meeting at 5:02 p.m.

² Board Member Dr. Brittingham attended the meeting through electronic communication means due to a personal matter from an undisclosed location out of the country.

1. The discussion and/or consideration of the findings of fact and recommendation from a hearing officer regarding the superintendent's recommendation to terminate the employment of a classroom teacher and whether the School Board will accept or reject the recommendation or schedule a further hearing as provided for by Virginia Code Sections 22.1-311 and 22.1-313; and
2. The school superintendent's recommendation for the hiring of a building principal.

Which is authorized by the Virginia Freedom of Information Act, found at Virginia Code Section 2.2-3711 (A)(1).

Board Member Riddick moved and Board Member Jenkins seconded the motion to go into the closed meeting as read by Attorney Waller.

Upon roll-call vote, the vote was: Aye: 7 / Nay: 0 / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed by vote of 7 to 0.

Board Chair Howell reminded Board Members that personal devices are not allowed in closed meeting, but SPS issued laptops are permitted in the closed meeting area.

RECONVENE IN PUBLIC MEETING

- Meeting Called to Order:
Board Chair Howell reconvened the public meeting.

CERTIFICATION OF CLOSED MEETING

- Attorney Wendell Waller read the following certification:
A Resolution of Certification of the Closed Meeting of May 8, 2025 Pursuant to Section 2.2-3712 of the Code of Virginia (1950), As Amended

WHEREAS, the School Board of the City of Suffolk convened a closed meeting on this date pursuant to an affirmative recorded vote and in accordance with the provisions of the Virginia Freedom of Information Act; and

WHEREAS, Section 2.2-3712 of the Code of Virginia (1950), as amended, requires a certification by the School Board that such closed meeting was conducted in conformity with Virginia law.

NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the School Board of the City of Suffolk hereby certifies that, to the best of each member's knowledge, (i) only business matters lawfully exempted from open meeting requirements by Virginia law were discussed in the closed meeting to which this resolution of certification applies, and (ii) only such public business matters as were identified in the motion convening the closed meeting were heard, discussed or considered by the School Board of the City of Suffolk.

Board Member Riddick moved and Board Member Jenkins seconded the motion to approve the Certification of the Closed Meeting as read by Attorney Waller.

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 6 / Nay: 0 / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed by vote of 6 to 0.³

MEETING RECESS

- Meeting Recess:
Board Chair Howell recessed the meeting at 6:48 p.m.

RE-OPENING OF PUBLIC MEETING

- Meeting Called to Order:
Board Chair Howell called to order the regular public business meeting at 7:00 p.m.
- Pledge of Allegiance:
Vice Chair McGee led all in the Pledge of Allegiance.
- Moment of Silence:
A moment of silence was observed by all in attendance.
- The Mission of Suffolk Public Schools:
Board Member Jenkins read the mission of SPS.

ACTION ON CLOSED MEETING ITEMS

- Employee Appeal Number 24/25-2
Vice Chair McGee moved and Board Member Riddick seconded the motion rejecting the recommendation of the Hearing Officer.

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 7 / Nay: 0 / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed by vote of 7 to 0.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

- Approval of Agenda:
Vice Chair McGee moved and Board Member Slengluff seconded the motion to approve the agenda with the addition of a discussion regarding Bank Days added to New Business.

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 7 / Nay: 0 / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed by vote of 7 to 0.

PRESENTATION

- Recognition of Honor Graduates from King's Fork High School:
Mr. Derrick Bryant, Principal, introduced his team, Dr. Tonya Spruill, Assistant Principal, Cassandra Requizo, School Counseling Director, and Guidance Counselors Ms. Alicia Hurdle, Ms. Denise Singleton, and Dr. Renea Coley. He stated that the 2025 graduating seniors total 392 with 135 of them being honor graduates who have earned over \$10.2 million in scholarships. Each honor graduate in attendance introduced themselves, their parents, and

³ Board Member Dr. Brittingham did not vote as she was not present for the closed meeting, due to her virtual attendance at the meeting.

announced their future plans. Board members congratulated the honor graduates and expressed pride in their accomplishments.

PUBLIC SPEAKERS ON AGENDA TOPICS

➤ Citizen Comments on Agenda Items:

The Clerk read the statement of decorum for speakers who sign up to address the Board.

1. Shirley Taylor Weaver - Re: Transgender Topic. Ms. Taylor Weaver did not agree with transgender identity. She felt that gender is a fact not a feeling and that teachers should not have to decide whether to call a student by a boy or girl's name.
2. James Peele - Re: School Board Budget. Mr. Peele felt that spending increases should not be based on proposed future costs. He expressed concern about purchasing cards, ranking of school students in academic classes, and supported a forensic audit.
3. Deborah Chappell - Re: SPS School Board Fiscal Responsibility. Ms. Williams-Chappell supported a forensic audit, and expressed concern with the spending done by the School Administration Offices, the recently retired LHS athletic director and the athletic department, including the other two high schools. She stated that Chesapeake School Board Members are paid \$73,000, and SPS directors are paid \$278,246. She suggested that not having a director and that salary should go to the school board who only receives \$15,000.
4. Russell Chappell - Re: SPS School Board Fiscal Responsibility. Mr. Chappell agreed with the concerns expressed by the previous speaker and stated that a serious concern needed to be paid to SPS budget and how money is spent by and on administration. He felt that the division is heavy with administrators.
5. Amber Snodgrass - Re: Forensic Audit & Transgender Policy. Ms. Snodgrass supported a forensic audit to rebuild public trust, reveal waste and inefficiency in the budget, the embezzlement that happened at Lakeland High School, improper classification of expenses under different accounts, and teacher fundraising. She also supported amending the transgender policy.
6. Janet McKinney - Re: Forensic Audit. Ms. McKinney supported a forensic audit due to a lack of transparency, and to put the rumors of embezzlement at Lakeland High School regarding thousands of dollars from the athletic department to rest.

CONSENT AGENDA

➤ Approval of the Consent Agenda:

Board Member Jenkins moved and Vice Chair McGee seconded the motion to approve the Consent Agenda.

Board Chair Howell explained that Bills & Payroll were not a part of the agenda due to the timing of spring break conflicting with completion of the bills and payroll for the month.

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 7 / Nay: 0 / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed by vote of 7 to 0.

At this time, Dr. Gordon introduced the new Coordinator of Student Services, Rickey Eley (acting principal at LHS), and the new principal for Lakeland High School, Amber Brown. Both were excited and eager about their new positions with Suffolk Public Schools.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

➤ Approval of Fiscal Year End 2025 Priorities for School Board, Pending Year End Funding Amounts

Board Chair Howell led the discussion indicating that the Board made their decisions from a list of priorities that were submitted to Dr. Gordon and his team. According to the tally received, Board Chair Howell read the following list of priorities:

1. Bonus for employee retention
2. Replacing security cameras
3. Repair Oakland Elementary School's courtyard
4. Repair sink holes
5. Replace copiers
6. Replace telephones
7. Replace desks and furniture
8. Paint the interior of King's Fork High School
9. Additional 575 radios
10. Paint the metal roofs at Lakeland & Nansemond River High Schools

She reminded the board that if they voted to approve the list as read that any remaining funds will be applied in the order as read. Board Members discussed the order as some did not agree with the list as read. They discussed old vs. new furniture for JFKMS and possibly shifting around priorities. Board Members also asked questions regarding Resolution 24/25-27 (item 6 in New Business) and if that resolution addresses the Board's priorities. Board Members, Dr. Gordon and Mrs. Forsman discussed the process of requesting from the city and allocating funds not spent at the end of the current fiscal year (June 30th). The Board was also informed of potential funds available and what can be purchased with those remaining funds. Additionally, Board Chair Howell provided clarification regarding state funding for bonuses for SOQ positions. Additional conversation was had by board members.

Board Member Riddick moved to table this item to the second board meeting on May 22, 2025 to allow for additional conversation and time to rank priorities. Board Chair Howell provided clarification regarding the structure of the second school board meeting. There was additional conversation between the Board, Dr. Gordon, Attorney Waller and Mrs. Forsman.

Board Member Riddick moved and Board Member Jenkins seconded the motion to approve the bonuses as recommended for employees and to table the remaining rank order priority list until the second school board meeting on May 22, 2025.

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 7 / Nay: 0 / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed by vote of 7 to 0.

NEW BUSINESS

➤ Vote to Approve the Cost of Cherry Bekaert Attending a Subsequent (June 12, 2025) School Board Meeting Work Session

Vice Chair McGee moved and Board Member Riddick seconded the motion to approve the cost for Cherry Bekaert to attend the June 12, 2025 School Board Meeting.

Board Chair Howell indicated that the cost for virtual attendance would be \$2,500 for three hours (one hour-work session, remaining time for advanced research based on questions that will be submitted prior to the June 12 board meeting and follow up after the work session.) In-person costs would include travel and accommodations, not to exceed a total of \$4,000.

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 5 / Nay: 2 (Fields, Jenkins) / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed by vote of 5 to 2.

➤ Vote on Date for School Board Town Hall

Board Chair Howell indicated that the discussion/vote would be tabled until after receiving further information/guidance from Cherry Bekaert. Conversation among board members was had regarding setting versus not setting a date for a town hall. There was no motion therefore, no action was taken at this time.

➤ VDOE Authorization of Signature in Absence of Division Superintendent Extension

Board Member Riddick moved and Board Member Jenkins, (et.al) seconded the motion to approve the VDOE Authorization of Signature for Dr. Okema Branch and Dr. Rodney Brown to act in the absence of the division superintendent.

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 7 / Nay: 0 / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed by vote of 7 to 0.

➤ Resolution 24/25-24: A Resolution Approving the Terms and Conditions of a Deed of Easement Between the School Board of the City of Suffolk and the City of Suffolk, Virginia

Board Member Dr. Brittingham moved and Vice Chair McGee seconded the motion to approve Resolution 24/25-24 approving the terms and conditions of the Deed of Easement (at the Operations facility).

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 7 / Nay: 0 / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed by vote of 7 to 0.

➤ SUBJECT TO CITY COUNCIL APPROVAL: DRAFT Resolution 24/25-29: A Resolution Of the School Board For the City of Suffolk, Virginia Adopting a Budget for Suffolk Public Schools for Fiscal Year 2025-2026 Totaling \$243,413,773 which includes Local Funding from the City of Suffolk in the amount of \$81,191,901. Any additional state funding will go through City Appropriation and School Board approval as Amendment #1 2025-2026, contracts will have the statement "subject to state and local appropriations" on them so that they can be released before 10 month staff are out for the Summer.

Board Member Riddick moved and Board Member Jenkins seconded the motion to approve Resolution 24/25-29.

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 6 / Nay: 1 (Dr. Brittingham) / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed by vote of 6 to 1.

➤ Resolution 24/25-27: A Resolution of the School Board for the City of Suffolk, Virginia Granting the School Superintendent the Authority to Obligate by Encumbrance Any Remaining Appropriated Funds Before the End of the Current Fiscal Year [June 30, 2025] for Certain Designated Repairs and/or Purchasing Needs of Suffolk Public Schools as Approved by the School Board

Attorney Waller provided clarification that the resolution based on previous action by the board will need to be modified if adopted at tonight's meeting. He indicated that the first "*Be It Therefore Resolved*" states "*purchases as approved by the School Board.*" However, the board did not approve any purchases at tonight's meeting.

Board Member Slingluff moved and Board Member Dr. Brittingham seconded the motion to table Resolution 24/25-27 to the next school board meeting on May 22, 2025.

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 7 / Nay: 0 / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed by vote of 7 to 0.

- Resolution 24/25-28: A Resolution Of The School Board For The City Of Suffolk, Virginia Amending The 2024-2025 School Calendar For Suffolk Public Schools That Was Previously Approved By The School Board At Its Public Meeting Held On February 8, 2024 To Include May 23, 2025 As A Non-Work Day For School Employees And A Non-Instructional Day For Students Enrolled In Suffolk Public Schools

Board Member Jenkins moved and Vice Chair McGee seconded the motion to approve Resolution 24/25-28.

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 7 / Nay: 0 / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed by vote of 7 to 0.

- Special School Board Committee (Citizen Advisory Committees Review) Report

Board Member Jenkins provided information from meetings of this Special Committee. She indicated that a key concern was low attendance across committees. This Special Committee recommends utilizing all forms of communication platforms to promote and advertise individual committee meetings moving forward. The Committee also agreed that a survey should be developed and distributed to all committee chairs and members to ascertain concerns and needs and to gather input which will be helpful in developing strategies and processes that will make Citizen Advisory Committees more efficient and productive. The Committee also agreed that ongoing training is needed and could be done on Saturdays. Based on the efficiency of the Title I Parent Advisory Committee, under the leadership of Mr. Melvin Bradshaw, it was agreed that he would conduct training for all other committee chair persons.

Board Member Jenkins encouraged citizens to sign up for the Citizen Advisory Committees. Board Chair Howell clarified the dates for accepting letters of interest/resume for citizen advisory committees beginning May 9, 2025 until June 9, 2025 by 5 p.m. According to policy, citizens will be appointed to committees at the June school board meeting.

Attorney Waller clarified that the Board needed to revise the policy to grant permission for this Special Committee to continue operating as a committee. The original policy included a sunset provision which expired April 27, 2025 which, as of that date, removed this special committee from existence. There was additional conversation amongst board members.

Board Member Dr. Brittingham moved and Board Member Jenkins seconded the motion to send the policy back to the Policy Review Committee (PRC) to extend the timeframe and work of the School Board Special Review Committee beyond the sunset date to continue supporting the Citizen Advisory Committees. Additional conversation ensued among board members and Attorney Waller regarding suspension of the policy which grants the Special Committee's operation.

During the roll call vote, Board Member Riddick was not ready to cast his vote and wanted to continue dialogue with Attorney Waller. Board Chair Howell clarified that the vote had begun and he needed to vote yes, no, or abstain, and to explain any abstention vote. Board Member Riddick "abstained" due to having parliamentary questions.

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 6 / Nay: 0 / Abstain: 1 (Riddick). The motion Passed by vote of 6 to 0 to 1.

➤ Discussion About Dates For School Board Retreat In June

Board Chair Howell lead the discussion regarding a school board retreat in June. Board Members recommended having a retreat in June for board members only to discuss strategic plan goals and the basic structure of strategic goals, and to receive additional team building practices through the company contracted during Board Member Riddick's chairmanship. The retreat in June would not include the superintendent or his staff to be present. However, a retreat would also be held in October to receive reports and finalized SOL scores and data from Dr. Gordon and his staff. Board Members agreed to collaborate with Board Chair Howell via email to determine a retreat date for June.

➤ Ordinance 2024/25-86: An Ordinance Amending Chapter 1, Article 6, Section 1-6.2:1 (Effective July 1, 2025) entitled "Purpose Stated; Definitions; Discrimination, Harassment and Bullying Prohibited; Counseling Services; Use of Name and Gender Pronouns; Access to Student Records; Dress and Grooming Codes; Extracurricular Activities & Overnight Travel; Student Participation in Activities Determined by Sex; Access to Restrooms & Locker Rooms" of the Policies of the Suffolk City School Board - First Reading

Board Chair Howell reminded members that questions and discussion should occur during the first read of policies. This process would prevent the delay in taking action during the second reading of the policy at the subsequent meeting. There being no comments, concerns, or discussion at this time, she suggested that concerns not already addressed by the PRC, to be sent to committee chair Slingluff before the May 12th meeting as Ordinance 2024/25-86 will be an action item at the next school board meeting. No action was required at this time.

➤ Discussion Regarding Bank Days

Vice Chair McGee led the discussion regarding bank days. He indicated that teachers suggested that the last day of school (June 6th) to be teacher/staff only day, which will allow students to get out a day early (June 5th), pending the completion of all testing. This would allow teachers time to disassemble their classrooms for the summer. Conversation ensued among board members. Dr. Gordon indicated his high level of caution with the request due to the number of days remaining in order for the division to satisfy VDOE requirements (5.44) versus remaining days at individual schools being fewer, due to various issues at schools which caused a day(s) out (i.e., electrical issues at JFKMS and CES, power outage at SWES, and gas line issues at NPES.) He explained the disadvantage of approaching the end of the school year with minimal banked days as emergency situations could arise causing loss of days and the Virginia Department of Education could potential change something which will cause a recalculation of days. He also indicated that some students are still testing and trying to complete assignments up to the last day and this early release would negatively impact those students, parents, child care needs, and teacher/staff attendance. He agreed with wanting to show teachers appreciation, but was cautious about using days reserved. Vice Chair McGee thanked Dr. Gordon for that information and wanted to revisit the possibility at a later time.

PUBLIC SPEAKERS ON NON-AGENDA TOPICS

➤ Citizen Comments on Non-Agenda Items:

The Clerk read the statement of decorum for speakers who sign up to address the Board.

- Barry Doughty – Re: Closing of Volunteer Program. Mr. Doughty expressed concern regarding the volunteer program with Phi Beta Sigma had been suspended due to DEI. He suggested reinstating the program.

- Trevon Boone – Re: The National Pan-Hellenic Council Suffolk. Mr. Boone shared information regarding the Council and its goal of uplifting/empowering communities, and supporting Suffolk Public Schools through unity, collaboration, and service.

BUSINESS BY BOARD MEMBERS

➤ Comments and Reports by School Board Members:

Board Members shared congratulatory comments and remarks to the honor graduates from KFHS and the administrators, teachers, support staff, parents, and support communities which aide our students. They thanked the Board for discussion/collaboration, the non-agenda speakers for supporting students, teachers for all that they do and for their positive leadership, and constituents for their support. They highlighted participation in various events like ACCESS College Day at Norfolk State University, and the Gospel Choir at King’s Fork High School (May 14th, 6:30-8:30pm). They also expressed disappointment and frustration regarding the suspension of the diversity, equity, and inclusion policy. This suspension halted various key community organizations, including historic black Greek organizations, from partnering with the division and providing support to all students. They encouraged everyone to show appreciation to all teachers as it is Teacher’s Appreciation Week.

Vice Chair McGee requested a copy of the MOU from Non-Agenda Speakers Dowdy and Boone.

INFORMATION ITEMS

- ### ➤
- There were no questions or discussions regarding the information items listed.

ADJOURNMENT

➤ Adjournment of Meeting:

There being no further business, Board Chair Howell adjourned the May 8, 2025 School Board Meeting at 9:46 p.m.

Heather Howell, *School Board Chair*

Tarshia L. Gardner, Clerk