

# REGULAR MEETING MINUTES OF THE SUFFOLK CITY SCHOOL BOARD

Thursday, September 12, 2024 ~ 5:00 P.M.

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

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## **Board Members Present:**

Karen Jenkins, *Chair*  
Heather Howell, *Vice Chair*  
Dr. Dawn Marie Brittingham  
Dr. Judith Brooks-Buck  
Phyllis Byrum  
Tyron Riddick  
Kimberly Slingluff

## **Administrative Staff Present:**

Dr. John B. Gordon III, *Superintendent*  
Wendell M. Waller, Esq., *School Board Attorney*  
Tarshia L. Gardner, *Clerk*

## **Administrative Staff Absent:**

Keesha Johnson, *Deputy Clerk*

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## **OPENING OF PUBLIC MEETING/WORK SESSION**

### ➤ Call to Order:

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

### ➤ Cell Phone Policy Discussion

Dr. Gordon, Division Superintendent, provided information regarding the current cell phone policy and cell phone practices from the various school divisions in Region II. He stated that any new policy would mainly affect students at the high school level because cell phones are not allowed in the classrooms at the elementary and middle school level. He suggested that a public hearing to be held in October as parents' input is extremely important in order to craft the policy. Dr. Gordon recommended the policy to be presented to the board at the November School Board Meeting for action. This would allow the division a month to prepare parents and students for the new policy that would become effective January 2025.

Board Members asked questions about training for teachers in responding to non-compliance and consequences if the policy is violated, cell phone use on busses, cell phone use in classrooms relative to instruction, and storage of cell phones in classrooms. It was agreed that communication will be the key to success with the new policy as everyone (teachers, students, and parents) must be held accountable in the implementation of the policy.

### ➤ Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) Discussion

Dr. Gordon referenced information on the approved Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) and explained the process for board members to determine the order of projects for submission to the City of Suffolk. He explained that the fewer changes made would help the city to stay on track with projects. He also reminded the Board that the CIP is a one-year working document, even though it is outlined for 10 years.

Board Members asked questions and discussed housing Kilby Shores Elementary and Forest Glen Middle Schools on the same campus, locations for the School Administrative Offices, concerns with mobile units at schools, facilities study, and issues with rezoning. Additional

conversation ensued regarding CIP options. Board Members requested a cost comparison of renovation versus construction of Elephant’s Fork Elementary School and information from the Facilities Study from 2021.

➤ School Board Engagement Discussion

Dr. Gordon shared feedback from Board Members during the School Board Retreat. He suggested the following recommendations for school board engagement:

- Participating in summer bus tours of school facilities
- Board Members greeting students at the bus ramp during the first week of school
- Board Members participating in All District Reads
- Board Members explaining their role as a School Board Member to secondary schools Government/Civic classes (scheduled appearance through the building principal)
- Attending extra-curricular activities and events throughout the division

It was suggested that a policy be created for School Board Engagement or that it be included in the Norms and Protocol to ensure accountability for member’s participation. Discussion ensued regarding consequences for members non-participation in engagement activities.

**MEETING RECESS**

- Board Chair Jenkins recessed the meeting at 6:57 p.m. for a 30-minute recess.

**RE-OPENING OF PUBLIC MEETING**

➤ Meeting Called to Order:

Board Chair Jenkins called to order the regular public meeting at 7:30 p.m.

➤ Pledge of Allegiance:

DECA students from Nansemond River High School 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 Slingluff read the mission of SPS.

**APPROVAL OF AGENDA**

➤ Approval of Agenda:

Board Member Dr. Brittingham moved and Board Member Riddick seconded the motion to approve the agenda by allowing “Non-Agenda Speakers” to address the Board directly after “Agenda Speakers” and remove the topic “SPS School Board Candidate Forum” by the superintendent from the agenda.

Board Members expressed concerns regarding Dr. Gordon speaking in reference to the “SPS School Board Candidate Forum.” They felt that his comments were not appropriate, that his comments would be in violation of the Hatch Act, and that he had no right to discuss the forum. Dr. Gordon expressed his concern with board members violating his First Amendment Rights. He explained that his comments were not disparaging of any school board candidate and that all of the board members had the opportunity to contact him (superintendent) to

ascertain/discuss his comments before the meeting. Attorney Waller explained that allowing Dr. Gordon to speak would not violate the Hatch Act. Additional discussion ensued which resulted in Board Member Dr. Brittingham amending her motion and Board Member Riddick seconded: Approving the Agenda by allowing “Non-Agenda Speakers” to speak after “Agenda Speakers”.

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

## **PUBLIC SPEAKERS ON AGENDA TOPICS**

### ➤ Citizen Comments on Agenda Items:

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

Diana Yanez (Executive Order 33 (Cell Phone-Free Education Policy)). Ms. Yanez did not agree with this mandate and felt that it was important for students to have their cell phones on their person in case of emergencies.

Kirstyn O’Neill (Citizen Advisory Committee (SEAC)). Ms. O’Neill stated that (1) the process for filling the Citizen Advisory Committees took too long; (2) there are issues with membership turnover; (3) a biannual roundtable should be considered; (4) advertisement should have been better; and (5) the Board should consider all applicants who expressed interest in the committees after the deadline.

## **PUBLIC SPEAKERS ON NON-AGENDA TOPICS**

### ➤ Citizen Comments on Non-Agenda Items:

The Clerk read the statement of decorum for the speaker who signed up to address the Board.

Travis McKinney (Suffolk School Board Forum). Mr. McKinney expressed his concerns with purchases made by the school division from Amazon and other businesses. Mr. McKinney also stated that the Hatch Act applied to the school superintendent and Suffolk Public Schools.

Fritz Whitfield (School Board Member Relations). Mr. Whitfield expressed gratitude to the Board for their service. He encouraged them to work together, to remain dedicated and ensure support for all students, and to treat each other with respect.

Ross Boone (School Board Member Relations). Mr. Boone encouraged the Board to tell their story collectively and to make the story real for the general public, to work on the appalling relationships between board members privately, behind closed doors, and in a professional and respectful manner. He also stated that the Board is a group, and you will either all swim together or drown together.

## **REPORTS BY THE SUPERINTENDENT**

### ➤ Good News Report:

Anthonette Dickens, Communications and Community Engagement Officer, shared information from the Good News Report.

Mrs. Credle, Marketing Teacher at Nansemond River High School was recognized for being named the 2024 VAME Region 4 Teacher of the Year and Nominated VAME Region 4 Director. She was presented with a certificate and gift for her accomplishment.

James Robinson, reporter for the Suffolk News Herald was recognized as the Virginia School Boards Association (VSBA) News Media Honor Roll Recipient for Suffolk Public Schools. He was presented with a Certificate of Honor from the VSBA.

Mrs. Dickens also read a letter received from United States Senator Tim Kaine who commended Suffolk Public Schools for being recognized as one of the “Best Communities for Music Education.”

➤ SPS School Board Candidate Forum:

Dr. Gordon corrected misinformation that was stated at the SPS School Board Candidate Forum which included: a decrease in student enrollment and attendance at SPS, student waivers, a Board Member encouraging parents to remove their child(ren) from SPS and placing him/her in private schools, forensic audits/perfect audits, and disparaging remarks against the principal at Lakeland High School. He encouraged board members to stop disrespecting Suffolk Public Schools and its employees. He also added that the division would never receive support from the community with continued disparaging remarks about school division.

➤ Calendar of Special Events:

Dr. Gordon highlighted information from the calendar of special events.

## **CONSENT AGENDA**

➤ Approval of the Consent Agenda:

Board Member Dr. Brittingham moved and Board Member Slingluff seconded the motion to approve the Consent Agenda with the removal of Bills and Payroll from the Consent Agenda and 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.

## **UNFINISHED BUSINESS**

➤ Citizen Advisory Committees Board Appointees and Membership 2024-2025

Discussion was had regarding the processes for filling the Citizen Advisory Committees. Board Member Riddick recommended that the Board follow the process approved at the November 14, 2019 School Board Meeting which allowed each member one appointee to each committee and the remaining vacancies be filled by applicants who expressed interest in serving on the committee. Additional discussion ensued with some board members expressing their disagreement with that process.

Board Member Riddick moved and Board Member Dr. Brittingham seconded the motion to approve the School Board Appointees whether letters of interest were submitted or not, and to approve any citizen who submitted letters of interest before or after the deadline to serve on the committees.

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

➤ National Organizational Affiliation for the 2024-2025 School Year

Vice Chair Howell presented information regarding the Consortium of State School Boards Association (COSSBA). She shared information about the organization which was founded in 2021 with annual dues for fiscal year totaling \$12,891. She also shared their vision, advocacy priorities, member states, sample sponsor partnerships, events, and the benefits of membership. Vice Chair Howell added that school boards who are members of the Virginia School Boards Association (VSBA), automatically become members in COSSBA national organization.

Board Member Dr. Brooks-Buck presented information from her comparison of three national organizations, COSSBA, the National School Boards Association (NSBA), Noah Webster Educational Foundation. However, her information extensively covered NSBA and the Noah Webster Educational Foundation. Board Member Dr. Brooks-Buck shared information regarding the organization's vision/mission goals, affiliations, partnerships and endorsements, legislative priorities, and member benefits.

Board Members shared their thoughts and/or concerns regarding the various national organizations.

Vice Chair Howell moved and Board Member Slingluff seconded the motion to maintain and build relationships with COSSBA as it is already a part of the Board's annual VSBA membership.

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 4 / Nay: 3 (Dr. Brittingham, Dr. Brooks-Buck, Byrum) / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed by vote of 4 to 3.

➤ Ordinances:

Board Member Slingluff moved and Board Member Dr. Brooks-Buck seconded the motion to approve all ordinances collectively, (*Ordinance 2024/25-15 through 2024/25-17; Ordinance 2024/25-20 through 2024/25-24; Ordinance 2024/25-26; Ordinance 2024/25-28 through 2024/25-30; Ordinance 2024/25-32 through 2024/25-36; Ordinance 2024/25-44, Ordinance 2024/25-45, and Ordinance 2024/25-47*), except Ordinance 2024/25-25, Ordinance 2024/25-27, and Ordinance 2024/25-46.

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

➤ Ordinance 2024/25-25: An Ordinance Amending Chapter 4, Article 6, Section 4-6.1 entitled "Statement of Policy; contractual authority of school superintendent; contracts not requiring sealed bids or competitive negotiation" of the Policies of the Suffolk City School Board - Second Reading

Board Members discussed their concerns with this policy and the need to have a report from the Superintendent regarding purchases made above the \$100,000 threshold before voting on this item.

Board Member Slingluff moved and Board Member Dr. Brittingham seconded the motion to table the vote for Ordinance 2024/25-25: An Ordinance Amending Chapter 4, Article 6, Section 4-6.1 entitled "Statement of Policy; contractual authority of school superintendent;

contracts not requiring sealed bids or competitive negotiation” of the Policies of the Suffolk City School Board - Second Reading, until a later meeting to receive a report from the Superintendent detailing purchases made above the current \$100,000 threshold that he has had to make during his tenure, denoting any purchases that were delayed during its current year.

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 4 / Nay: 3 (Dr. Brooks-Buck, Byrum, Jenkins) / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed by vote of 4 to 3.

- Ordinance 2024/25-27: An Ordinance Adding Chapter 4, Article 13, Section 4-13.1:1 entitled “When buildings unsuitable for present use; viewpoints from community; other uses considered” of the Policies of the Suffolk City School Board - Second Reading  
Board members expressed concern with the wording of the policy. Additional discussion ensued between board members.

Board Member Slingluff moved and Board Member Dr. Brittingham seconded the motion to send Ordinance 2024/25-27: An Ordinance Adding Chapter 4, Article 13, Section 4-13.1:1 entitled “When buildings unsuitable for present use; viewpoints from community; other uses considered” of the Policies of the Suffolk City School Board, back to the Policy Review Committee to amend the first paragraph, last sentence, to change the wording to “the School Board shall or will receive a report containing the following factors...”

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 5 / Nay: 2 (Dr. Brooks-Buck, Byrum) / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed by vote of 5 to 2.

- Ordinance 2024/25-46: An Ordinance Amending Chapter 9, Article 26, Section 9-26.1 entitled “Statement of Policy; limited use of physical restraint” of the Policies of the Suffolk City School Board - First Reading  
Board Members discussed their concerns with the language used in the policy.

Board Member Dr. Brittingham moved and Board Member Slingluff seconded the motion to send Ordinance 2024/25-46: An Ordinance Amending Chapter 9, Article 26, Section 9-26.1 entitled “Statement of Policy; limited use of physical restraint” of the Policies of the Suffolk City School Board, back to the Policy Review Committee to fix the language in Section B and for review and comments by the Local Advisory Committee for Special Education (SEAC).

Additional discussion ensued and ended with Dr. Brittingham amending her motion.

Board Member Dr. Brittingham moved and Board Member Slingluff seconded the amended motion to table Ordinance 2024/25-46: An Ordinance Amending Chapter 9, Article 26, Section 9-26.1 entitled “Statement of Policy; limited use of physical restraint” of the Policies of the Suffolk City School Board, until the SEAC Committee has had an opportunity to review the policy and make recommendations to the Policy Review Committee.

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

## **NEW BUSINESS**

- Capital Improvement 2026-2035 Submittal to City of Suffolk  
Dr. Gordon read the order of priorities for the ongoing CIP for 2026-2035 calculated during the Board’s work session. He also explained the process for tallying the information received

from each board member. He read the following CIP priorities that will be submitted to the City:

1. John F. Kennedy Middle School (tallies = five #1, two #2)
2. Northern Shores Elementary School (tallies = five #1, two #2)
3. The College and Career Academy at Pruden (tallies = three #3, one #3a, one #4, one #5, one #9)
4. Elephant's Fork Elementary School (tallies = five #4, one #3, one #3b)
5. Kilby Shores Elementary School (tallies = four #5, two #5a, one #4)
6. Forest Glen Middle School (tallies = three #1, two #5, two #5b)
7. Nansemond Parkway Elementary School (tallies = three #7, two #6, one #6a, one #9)
8. Nansemond River High School (tallies = four #8, three #7)
9. John Yeates Middle School (tallies = three #9, two #8, one #7, one #6b)
10. School Administrative Offices (tallies = two #9, one #8, one #6, one #4a, one #4b, one #3a)<sup>1</sup>

Board Member Dr. Brooks-Buck moved and Vice Chair Howell seconded the motion to approve the Capital Improvement Plan for 2026-2035 for submission to the City of Suffolk.

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

- Resolution 2024/25-8: A Resolution of the School Board for the City Of Suffolk, Virginia Approving the 2020-2024 Triennial Assessment Regarding Suffolk Public Schools Implementation of the Wellness Policy

Board Member Byrum moved and Board Member Dr. Brooks-Buck seconded the motion to approve Resolution 2024/25-8: A Resolution of the School Board for the City Of Suffolk, Virginia Approving the 2020-2024 Triennial Assessment Regarding Suffolk Public Schools Implementation of the Wellness Policy.

Board Members discussed information that was shared with them at various town hall meetings regarding students eating a large amount of “junk food” and that students were accessing foods and beverages which were outside of the standards and nutritional guidelines for items being offered by the school division. Dr. Gordon and Mrs. Forsman explained to the Board that all items sold by the school division are approved and meet the FDA nutritional standards.

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

- Payment of Bills and Payroll (August 2024)

Vice Chair Howell moved and Board Member Dr. Brooks-Buck seconded the motion to approve Payment of Bills and Payroll (August 2024).

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<sup>1</sup> Due to Board Member Riddick's impromptu meeting with the Chair and School Board Attorney, he forgot to submit his priorities order to the Clerk. Therefore, his order was not read aloud by the Superintendent however, the Clerk clarified that his priorities were included in the final tally. The Clerk explained that his order did not change the overall order of the majority of the Board. Board Member Riddick requested for his explanation and the tallies (as listed above) to be included in the minutes.

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

## **BUSINESS BY BOARD MEMBERS**

### ➤ Comments and Reports by School Board Members:

Board Members were excited about the start of the new school year and congratulated/thanked students, parents, staff, businesses, and community stakeholders for a great start and continued support. They also congratulated individuals who were recognized for their accomplishments during the Good News Report, and participants in the iTeach program. They thanked Dr. Gordon and his staff for all that they do, and the public speakers for their time, consideration, and words of encouragement and advice. They encouraged everyone to join their child's PTA and to participate in a contest offered by Cooper Hurley Law Firm that will donate \$10,000 to school.

Board Members highlighted upcoming events such as town halls, a fall festival, and a bidding forum. Board Members also made mention of a tutoring/homework help center which will begin assisting students in the core content subjects in October. They also enjoyed attending the School Board Retreat and the Adopt a Classroom ceremony by Norfolk State University's men's basketball team at NRHS.

Board Members expressed their concern with the payment of Bills and Payroll, inoperable walkie-talkies in schools, parent's concerns about their child's schedule, and traffic issues in front of FBES. They encouraged all to speak truth and not lies, and stop spreading misinformation and false narratives.

## **INFORMATION ITEMS**

- Accident Report – August 2024
- Financial Report June 30, 2024
- Financial Report August 2024
- VSBA Take Your Legislator to School Month:  
Tuesday, November 12, 2024, 10 a.m. – 12 p.m. at Kilby Shores Elementary School
- The Financial Report: Capital Projects is currently unavailable and will be included on the October 10, 2024 School Board Meeting Agenda.

## **ADJOURNMENT**

### ➤ Adjournment of Meeting:

There being no further business, Board Chair Jenkins adjourned the September 12, 2024 School Board Meeting at 10:43 p.m.

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Karen Jenkins, *School Board Chair*

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Tarshia L. Gardner, *Board Clerk*