

## REGULAR MEETING OF THE SUFFOLK CITY SCHOOL BOARD

Thursday, September 9, 2021 ~ 5:00 P.M.

City Hall, 447 W. Washington Street, Suffolk, VA 23434

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this meeting was held while practicing social distancing.

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### Board Members Present:

Dr. Judith Brooks-Buck, *Chair*

Phyllis Byrum, *Vice Chair*

Karen Jenkins

Linda Johnson

Lorita Mayo

Tyron Riddick

Sherri Story

### Administrative Staff Present:

Dr. John B. Gordon III, *Superintendent*

Wendell M. Waller, *School Board Attorney*

Tarshia L. Gardner, *Clerk*

Keesha L. Hicks, *Deputy Clerk*

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### OPENING OF PUBLIC MEETING/WORK SESSION

The School Board Meeting/Work Session was called to order by Chair, Dr. Brooks-Buck. Dr. Buck welcomed everyone to the meeting.

### Collective Bargaining Follow-Up:

- Dr. Rodney Brown, Director of Human Resources, introduced Dr. Tony McNair (Director of Uniserve, and Mrs. Ethel Williams, Chair of the Education Association of Suffolk (EAS) who gave an overview about Collective Bargaining:
  - The EAS is in the early preliminary stages of Collective Bargaining and is looking forward to working with Suffolk Public Schools in bring forth this process and making it available to all employees.
  - Collective bargaining's bans were lifted on May 1, 2020 however, there are no agreements in the state of Virginia as of yet, only conversations are being held at this time.
  - In order for the collective bargaining process to begin, a resolution will be presented to the board for approval.
  - Members of the EAS are currently being educated as to what collective bargaining is and they will have a choice of bargaining agents.
  - The collective bargaining tool is designed to strengthen Suffolk Public Schools and allow its employee's voices to be heard which will benefit the students in the district.

There being no questions, Dr. McNair and Mrs. Williams thanked the Board for the opportunity to present their information.

### Strategic Plan – Part II

- Dr. Branch presented the following information to the Board:
  - Reiterated what the expectations are and how the Vision, Mission, and Core Values are developed as the process will begin in October. The Board will determine whether or not a new Vision, Mission, and Core Values are needed as the current plan ends in 2023.

- The Mission is the “WHY” and it guides day to day operations. The mission helps to bring the focus on what’s most important in the division and it should be simple and concise.
- The Vision is the focus of “WHAT” is done in Suffolk Public Schools. The vision is inspirational and motivational but also provides direction, mapping out where the division is headed. It looks at the beginning with the end in mind.
- Values are what’s important to us. It shows how we must behave daily in order to achieve our vision. It highlights our commitments.
- Dr. Branch highlighted some of the words that members indicated they would like to see in their strategic plan which will help shape their focus. Some of these words include: nurturing, commitment, family, learning, listening, involvement by stakeholders, excellence, partnerships, inspired, and service. These words are the driving force for what members want for their Mission, Vision, and Values.
- Dr. Branch encouraged the board to commit to looking at vocabulary to determine what is important to the board.

There being no questions. The meeting was recessed.

**The Board reconvened the Public Meeting.**

The meeting was called to order by Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck and she welcomed all to the meeting.

Vice-Chair Byrum lead all in the Pledge of Allegiance.

**APPROVAL OF AGENDA**

Vice-Chair Byrum moved, and Member Johnson seconded the motion to add a Resolution of the School Board for the City of Suffolk, Virginia requiring all students participating in high school and middle school athletics and extracurricular activities to receive a COVID-19 vaccination or be subject to weekly testing.

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

**PUBLIC SPEAKERS ON AGENDA TOPICS**

The Board Chair asked all to be sure to wear their mask while attending the meeting and it may be lowered when speaking.

The Clerk read the opening statement regarding decorum for those wanting to address the School Board.

- Denise Chapman – NO SHOW
- Terrance Parks – Virtual Learning Difficulties/Confusion:
  - Felt that more due diligence should have been done to inform parents about the virtual learning option which would have given them enough time to enroll students.
  - More should have been done to allow more children into the virtual learning which would have eliminated the current long waiting list.

- Suggested that more be done in the future to address such an important issue giving the parents every opportunity to keep their child(ren) virtual if they chose to do so.
- Dr. Deborah Wahlstrom – Purchase Cards/Elimination of Mid-Year & End of Year Exams/Collective Bargaining:
  - Purchase card reports indicate that items purchased are being hidden from the public.
  - Unclear what is being purchased from marketing vendors.
  - Keep asking for transparency but it seems to be difficult for SPS to do.
  - Eliminating exams is a rookie move to boost student achievement.
  - Do not believe that full set of legal options have been given to members regarding collective bargaining.
  - Rather than push through a controversial tool, take your time to learn about the process.
  - Whether to bargain or not is the Boards decision and not the Superintendent.
  - Believe that illegal conversations are being had and allowed by Dr. Gordon.

## **REPORTS BY THE SUPERINTENDENT**

Good News Reports: Ms. Ward, Community Engagement Officer, highlighted the following good news:

- a. SPS Alumni: Where Are They Now? (Christina Byrd)
- b. Your Voice is Power – Round 2 Finalist (Anya Foster)
- c. Custodial Collaboration (Neil Williams, Tremaine Boone, Annette Copeland, Chris Chamber, James Woodson, Eva Faulk, Darnel Boone, Theodore Vincent, Alma Newby, Samuel Cheeks, Abdul Jacobs, Anthony Scott, William Saunders)
- d. SPS Convocation 2021 (was L.I.T.: Leadership, Innovation, Teamwork; school spirit)

Dr. Gordon mentioned that there were 2300 employees in Chartway Arena and the spirit was wonderful. The opportunity to bring everyone together was appreciated by all. Board members expressed their excitement, and gratitude, which motivated employees for the new school year. They expressed how convocation was uplifting, creative, and energetic and was an excellent boost for all employees. Members mentioned how the positive spirit in the room could be felt by all and acknowledged Denise Russell for getting the donations for the gifts to be given away which was phenomenal and didn't cost the division any money.

The Board Chair acknowledged that citizen, Al Wade, was omitted from the list of speakers and gave him the opportunity to address the board. Mr. Wade spoke about his concerns with the role out of the virtual learning environment.

Calendar of Special Events: Dr. Gordon highlighted the events on the calendar.

Dr. Gordon mentioned that over 14,200 students were welcomed to Suffolk Public Schools and that the primary goal is to keep students and staff safe and the secondary role is to instruct them. However, there are some things that the division could not plan for but we are working through them. However, we need the City of Suffolk and the Administration to help

with following the protocol for student drop-off and pick-up. He encouraged all to be patient and make sure to remember that our buses are back on the road and to do all we can to protect our students and staff as they are returning to school. Dr. Gordon also addressed the concerns from one of the public speakers.

Dr. Gordon mentioned that he is extremely concerned by the constant violation of the Norms and Protocols by Board Member Sherri Story. He asked for a meeting with Board Member Story, Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck acting as a mediator to discuss and resolve some of the challenges. He mentioned that he wanted the matter recorded for the record of retaliation as these issues are brought forward.

Board Chair, Dr. Brooks-Buck agreed and also indicated that it would be wise to include Mr. Waller in the meeting with Board Member Story.

Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck indicated that members were informed of Covid protocols and that no visitors were to be in the school building unless invited and escorted by an administrator. She clarified that it means if anyone enters a building and is not escorted by an administrator, you will be escorted out of the building. No one is to roam the buildings freely at all.

## **CONSENT AGENDA**

Vice Chair Byrum moved, and Member Mayo seconded, the motion to approve the Consent Agenda.

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

Dr. Gordon introduced Mrs. Tanekia Ricks, the new Supervisor of Advanced Instruction and World Language. Dr. Gordon highlighted her degrees, her successes and that she was joining us from Franklin Public Schools. Mrs. Ricks expressed her gratitude for the opportunity and is looking forward to joining the SPS Team.

## **UNFINISHED BUSINESS**

### ➤ **CIP Requests to Submit to the City of Suffolk for 2023-2032**

Dr. Gordon asked for the Board's direction in the Capital Improvement Plan by ranking the order of priorities which will be presented to the City next week to be a part of their CIP and voted on in February. He explained that the Board had the flexibility to make changes to the order and to be able to start projects in 2022.

It was suggested to move JFK up on the priorities list to the number two position. Discussions/questions were had between board and staff members regarding the order of the priorities and the question became whether or not to keep the option already established, or to change the order.

The deadline to submit the CIP to the city is September 23<sup>rd</sup>. Board members recorded their order of preference. Ms. Gardner and Ms. Hicks worked to tally and rank the order for the CIP. However, additional time was requested by the Clerk to ensure accuracy.

Board Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck agreed and moved forward in the agenda stating they would revisit the item once the calculations were completed.

## **NEW BUSINESS**

➤ **VSBA Advocate for Education Award Nomination – Board Chair Judith Brooks-Buck, Ph.D.**

Member Johnson highlighted the career of Dr. Brooks-Buck.

Member Johnson moved, and Member Riddick seconded, the motion to nominate Dr. Judith Brooks-Buck for the VSBA Advocate for Education Award.

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

➤ **VSBA Certificate of Appreciation – Karen Jenkins (info item)**

The VSBA recognized Mrs. Jenkins for serving as a member of the 2021 VSBA Audit Committee. Board Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck read the certificate and thanked Mrs. Jenkins for her hard work and for serving and representing the Board in all she does.

➤ **SPS Health Dashboard Update (info item)**

Dr. Suzanne Rice gave the monthly update on Covid statistics in the City of Suffolk and Suffolk Public Schools. The City of Suffolk is currently coded “red”. Dr. Rice highlighted vaccination numbers for the city. She also highlighted the criteria as to what would be looked at in order to discuss whether or not it’s time to shut down a classroom or a building. Dr. Rice reviewed the first four layered mitigation strategies for SPS and commended SPS for doing a great job with adhering to the mask wearing and social distancing. She also explained the 14-day quarantine and the importance of the number of days.

➤ **2021-2022 Citizen Advisory Committees Membership List**

Vice-Chair Byrum moved, and Member Jenkins seconded, the motion to approve the Citizen Advisory Committees Membership List as presented.

Upon a roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 5 / Nay: 2 (Riddick/Story) / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed. 5 to 2.

➤ **School Board Clerk’s Compensation Changed from Stipend to Salary and Reported to VRS**

Vice-Chair Byrum moved, and Member Johnson seconded, the motion to approve the School Board Clerk be changed from stipend to salary and reported to the VRS.

Board members asked questions regarding whether this change is a merging of the positions or a the creation of a new position and Board Members voiced concern and caution regarding the Superintendent’s assistant and board clerk position becoming one as it may become a question of conflict of interest. Attorney Waller provided clarification of the two positions and to whom the administrative assistant and the clerk report to. He indicated that the Board would have the flexibility/option to remove the administrative assistant from the position, if there becomes a conflict of interest. Dr. Gordon explained how the admin has been the clerk for decades and if you change the positons, it would cost more money to the division to separate the positions if a separate salary is created for the clerk based on the position it would be a much higher cost.

Upon a roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 5 / Nay: 2 (Riddick/Story) / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed. 5 to 2.

➤ **Request for Approval of Waivers for Community Services Graduation Requirements and Midterm and Final Exams**

Vice-Chair Byrum moved, and Member Mayo seconded, the motion to approve the Waiver for Community Service Graduation Requirements and Midterm and Final Exams.

Member Story requested that the items be separated and that an amendment to the motion be made to take them one at a time. Vice-Chair Byrum agreed to amend her motion.

Vice-Chair Byrum moved, and Member Story seconded, the motion to approve the Waiver for Community Services Graduation.

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

**Request for Approval of Waivers for Midterm and Final Exams**

Vice-Chair Byrum moved, and Member Jenkins seconded, the motion to waive midterm and final exams.

Board Member Story indicated that it was a bad idea and asked if teachers were surveyed regarding eliminating these exams. She highlighted the fact that we are not following policy and these recommendations were not taken to the policy committee and not received a return from the committee. Waiving these exams would be a detriment to students as they calculate their grades. She recommended that the policy go to the policy committee and employees weigh in on this item. Urged the board to vote no and make it policy for next year.

Dr. Gordon indicated that this was a repeat of the waiver from last year and it is not a policy change. This issue will be reviewed in October by the policy committee. He indicated that project-based learning and project-based assessments are what is being taught in classrooms and universities. The elimination of these exams increases the weight of the nine-weeks grades. Also, students welcome the elimination of these assessments as they cause increased the level of anxiety for students. Dr. Gordon advised that SPS is not out of compliance as this item is a waiver and not a policy change.

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

➤ **Resolution 21/22-7 - A Resolution of the School Board for the City of Suffolk, Virginia requiring all students participating in high school and middle school athletics and extracurricular activities to receive a COVID-19 vaccination or be subject to weekly testing.**

Vice-Chair Byrum moved, and Member Johnson seconded, the motion to approve the resolution for all students participating in high school and middle school athletics and extracurricular activities to receive a COVID vaccination or be subject to weekly testing.

The Board Clerk read the resolution.

Members and Dr. Gordon asked and answered questions regarding this resolution.

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

## **UNFINISHED BUSINESS**

### ➤ **CIP Requests to Submit to the City of Suffolk for 2023-2032**

The Clerk indicated that the tallies have been computed but there were ties for various places on the list.

Attorney Waller informed the Chair that each ranking would need to be read aloud and a formal vote taken. Dr. Brooks-Buck read the results of each member.

Discussion and clarification were held between board members, Dr. Gordon and his team. Mrs. Forsman informed that the first year of funding would be the 22-23 year.

The final rank orders were read as follows by the Board Clerk:

Priority 1 / Major Systems Repair/Replacements/Hazardous Materials Management

Priority 2 / 2022-2023 / Operations

Priority 2 / 2022-2023 / JFKMS

Priority 3 / 2022-2023 / NSES

Priority 4 / 2023-2024 / CCAP

Priority 4 / 2023-2024 / FGMS

Priority 5 / 2024-2025 / EFES

Priority 5 / 2024-2025 / JYMS

Priority 6 / 2025-2026 / KSES & NPES

Priority 7 / 26-27 / NRHS

Vice Chair Byrum moved, and Member Mayo seconded, the motion to approve the Capital Improvement Plan with the years as stipulated.

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

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

The Clerk read the statement regarding decorum for those scheduled to speak.

- Jamie Dwyer – NO SHOW
- Angela Kilgore – Critical Race Theory (CRT):
  - CRT has been in SPS for last two years and she indicated that her daughter was a victim of its presentations. Her child reported to her that a teacher said that her parents didn't know anything if they voted a certain way.

The speaker was told to stay on topic by Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck as her comments were said to be straying away from her stated topic of discussion. The speaker continued sharing the following:

- It is the board's responsibility to make sure these things are not being presented in the schools.
- The Board has never mentioned what was best for students.

Board Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck asked the speaker again to remain on topic and speak about Critical Race Theory as had been requested. At this point, the speaker began to raise her voice and have loud outbursts, over-talking Dr. Brooks-Buck as she tried to regain control of the meeting. The speaker continued and was asked to leave the podium.

During this time, Member Story, with a raised voice, spoke in defense of the speaker and engaged in a heated disagreement with Board Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck while she continued trying to gain control of the meeting. Member Story and the citizen were defiant of the Chair's pleas for them to control themselves therefore, the citizen was removed from council chamber by police. Member Story continued in defiance of Dr. Brooks-Buck's action to remove the citizen. Once the Chair regained control of the meeting, she moved forward with the next speaker.

- Reed Smith – Issue with the Assistant Principal and Parent Pick-Up at HES:
  - Challenges with picking up child from HES.
  - Administrators were rude, and condescending when speaking with parents to the point where the parent was in tears.
  - A parent waited outside for an hour while his child was being put on the wrong bus.
  - Administrators stated that the parents are the problem and showed a complete lack of empathy for parents.
  - The officer assigned to communicate with parents was completely out of line as he threatened to arrest parents.
  - Parents felt that they were being used as the scape goats and their children were being held hostage.
  - Asked for support from the board to ensure that this situation does not happen again as behavior without accountability breeds poor habits.
  - Parent pick-up is a process problem not a covid problem.
  - Parent volunteered to coordinator/assist with parent pick-up.

## **BUSINESS BY BOARD MEMBERS**

Board Members highlighted the following:

- Thanked the parents, teachers, staff, administrators, and stakeholders for their hard work as they acknowledged that current times are difficult for all involved. Patience and kindness is needed as this is how we will all be able to live together in this world.
- Welcomed parents, guardians, students, faculty and staff to the new school year and thanked them for all that they do.
- Apologized for the incidents or disrespect shown at any school which occurred during this first week as they vowed to iron out the problems.
- Special acknowledgements was giving to the custodians, and early bird bus drivers as they are doing the very best they can do with what they have.
- Thanked Dr. Gordon and his team for working hard opening our schools and bringing it all together “Back and Better.”
- Acknowledged that all have to work together to correct concerns and have success as they continue to education students which is job number one.
- Special recognition of Christina Byrd as she was a former student of one of the Members. She expressed pride in Ms. Byrd's success.
- Stated that problems at Hillpoint Elementary School are not kinks but long-standing problems that will be addressed as the camera footage will be requested and reviewed.
- Stated that the board holds no one accountable and continually makes excuses.



- Expressed disappointment with passing of Citizen Advisory Committees as there were no citizens on these committees.
- Felt that repeated requests for audits are being ignored, audits should be listed on the website, and the process for adding information to the agenda does not follow policy.
- Stated that student achievement is not a priority of the board and they are not putting students first.
- Quoted “Despite our best intentions, we are responsible for 100% of the impact.” Apologized for not following the rules and allowing personal feelings to cloud judgement. Extremely important as young ones are watching.
- Member Riddick publicly apologized to the Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck and said he has no problem admitting when he is wrong.
- Asked each member to be mindful of their actions, words, and tone as they have an impact on the message they may want others to receive, especially the non-verbal cues.
- Requested to move meetings from City Hall to the schools due to the delicate situation of the country and the concern for personal safety during board meetings.
- Thanked parent from HES for wanting to be a part of the solution by offering to help with the pick-up process.
- Acknowledged that the Superintendent is in charge of the day-to-day operations and expressed confidence that he will address and correct problems and concerns while understanding that the weight of the division is on his shoulders.
- Commended the candidates vying for the seat representing the Sleepy Hole Borough for attending the meetings and educating themselves for the position as it is a very serious opportunity.
- Stated that even though we may have differences, all are in their positions and working diligently for the end result which is the improvement of the division.
- Thanked Dr. Branch for her dynamic performance and costume at convocation as the spirit in the arena was electrifying. All were motivated as this is what will get us through difficult times.
- Welcomed public comments.
- Ensured that customer service issues will be addressed by the Superintendent and that with time, things will get better as things are adjusted over the coming weeks.
- Informed that audits are available for anyone requesting them, and members received copies of audit materials once the audit was completed.
- Stated SPS has nothing to hide and that internal and external auditors are selected and paid for by the City.
- Indicated that employees cannot make illegal purchases with the purchasing cards.
- Stated that information regarding Driver was discussed at a previous meeting.
- Informed all that the School Board Retreat was for members to come together, learn to be better board members, and to learn what his/her role is as a member, participate in activities to foster teamwork, and to begin reviewing the strategic plan process.
- Emphasized that for the most part, everyone is doing a good job.

## **INFORMATION ITEMS**

The following items were provided as informational items only and Board Members asked no questions.

- Financial Report Final June 30, 2021
- Financial Report August 2021
- Accident Report August 2021

- SPS Condolences:
  1. Valerie Morrison – Teacher at BTWES – 4 Years of Service – Passed Away 08/25/2021
  2. Jody King – Bus Driver – 3 Years of Service – Passed Away 09/01/2021

**ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business or questions, Board Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck adjourned the September 9, 2021 School Board Meeting at 10:35 p.m.

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Dr. Judith Brooks-Buck, *Board Chair*

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Tarshia L. Gardner, *Board Clerk*