

# REGULAR MEETING MINUTES OF THE SUFFOLK CITY SCHOOL BOARD

Thursday, June 12, 2025 ~ 5:00 P.M.

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

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## **Board Members Present:**

Heather Howell, *Chair*  
Sean McGee, *Vice Chair*  
Dr. Dawn Marie Brittingham  
Valerie Fields  
Karen Jenkins  
Tyron Riddick  
Kimberly Slingluff

## **Administrative Staff Present:**

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

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

### ➤ Call to Order:

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

### ➤ Cherry Bekaert Audit Discussion

The Cherry Bekaert team, Brandi Westbrook, Ken Woodring, and John Collier attended the meeting virtually and discussed the services and the types of engagement the company offers. Using PowerPoint presentation, they highlighted different types of high-level financial oversight (e.g. Advisory Internal Control Assessment, Audit, Assurance, Forensic and Accounting Investigation) and explained the differences between each. They also explained that the role of the stakeholder (i.e. the School Board) would be to determine the type of service to be requested, and to review and approve the scope of work which would initiate the engagement between SPS and Cherry Bekaert, who would provide reports by analyzing data and documents. Board Members asked questions regarding Internal Control review, Forensic Accounting investigation, purchase card assessments, the absence of fraud appearing in annual audits, third-party information and concerns with allocations of money in departments. They also discussed costs associated with a Forensic Audit versus a review of processes, and the possibility of an audit for both Suffolk Public Schools and the City of Suffolk. Cherry Bekaert explained that fees could be scaled up or down based on the Board's requests. Mr. Collier also added that the Board's next steps were to determine engagement services, the availability of stakeholders, and a timeline. Cherry Bekaert would then provide a fee quote, an estimated timeline for results, and schedule a follow-up meeting.

### ➤ SPS 2025 Climate Survey

Using PowerPoint presentation, Shawn Dickerson, Coordinator of Data and Research, explained the construction and participation of the Climate Survey. Dr. Gordon, Division Superintendent, discussed areas of growth and areas needing improvement in the categories of division-wide employee perceptions, division-wide instructional staff perceptions, parent perceptions, and student perceptions. Dr. Gordon highlighted areas of growth including protected instructional time, morale, discipline, students feeling safe at school, teachers and students caring about each other, students treating teachers with respect, students treating each other with respect, and middle school students providing input about school related activities.

He also highlighted the areas that will remain a focus for improvements for the coming school year including transportation, cafeteria, and elementary support in student making adequate progress. He concluded the presentation by explaining his plan of action for the coming school year, that will include: (1) professional learning plan revisions; (2) resolving concerns in a timely manner; (3) use of AI for route creation; (4) revisiting cafeteria menu options that will include packaging and food presentation; (5) communication of discipline process and confidentiality; (6) celebrations and activities to increase morale; (7) usage of staff to protect instructional time; (8) strategic use of instructional supports for assisting students in making academic progress; and (9) continued audit of division-wide safety protocols and procedures for fidelity.

Board Members asked questions pertaining to the following: (1) parent participation in the survey; (2) collaboration volunteering; (3) ways the Board can assist Dr. Gordon in moving forward; (3) surveying all grades; (4) the difference between percentages and percentage points; (5) the need to take a quarterly look at how initiatives are being rolled out; (6) summer meals for students; and (7) breakdown of results in high versus middle for different perspectives.

### **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. The discussion and/or consideration of the acquisition of real property for a public purpose, where the discussion in an open meeting would adversely affect the bargaining position or negotiating strategy of the public body, and more specifically, the acquisition of property that adjoins John F. Kennedy Middle School, which is subject to auction by the City of Suffolk for payment of delinquent real estate taxes.
2. To discuss the performance of an appointee of the school board and more specifically as it relates to a series of communications between the school board appointee and a member of the School Board.

Which is authorized by the Virginia Freedom of Information Act, found at Virginia Code Section 2.2-3711 (A)(1) and (A)(3).

Vice Chair McGee moved and Board Member Slingluff seconded the motion to go into the closed meeting as read by Attorney Waller.

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

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: 7 / Nay: 0 / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed by vote of 7 to 0.

- 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 Riddick read the mission of SPS.

## **ACTION ON CLOSED MEETING ITEMS**

- Employee Appeal Number 24/25-2

Board Member Riddick moved and Board Member Fields seconded the motion authorizing Suffolk Public Schools to bid on property identified on city tax map as Parcel 35\*161 consisting of 4.84 acres, adjacent to John F. Kennedy Middle School that is being auctioned by the City of Suffolk for non-payment of real estate taxes.

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:

Board Member Fields moved and Board Member Jenkins seconded the motion to approve the agenda with moving the Good News Report directly following the “Approval of the Agenda.”

Board members discussed this matter as they did not all agree with the motion.

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

Board Member Dr. Brittingham moved and Board Member Riddick seconded the motion to approve the agenda as written.

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

## **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. Enoch Copeland – Re: Micromanagement of the School System. Mr. Copeland expressed the viewpoint that the Board’s role was to make policy and not to interfere with the day-to-day activities of the Superintendent causing chaos and confusion.
2. Elizabeth Morningstar – Re: Forensic Audit. Ms. Morningstar expressed the viewpoint that there were inconsistencies in comments made by the Superintendent and that a forensic audit must be performed.
3. Dr. Bradley-Gray – Re: Fiscal Year End Spending Update 2025. Could not attend the meeting due to illness.
4. Lorita Mayo – Re: Ordinances to be Considered at Thursday’s Meeting. Mrs. Mayo expressed the viewpoint that student safety is not a political matter but a moral duty, policies should be free of personal disagreements, political issues, and strong language that is unnecessarily punitive and invoke mistrust, and the Superintendent must be empowered to communicate with students and families openly and honestly.
5. Dr. Judith Brooks-Buck – Re: Minutes from the May 8, 2025 Meeting. Dr. Brooks-Buck expressed the viewpoint that board members were not being good stewards of money by insisting on an audit examining funds from years ago, and that 72 out of 2300 employees (including board members) having purchasing cards is not unusual.

## **CONSENT AGENDA**

### ➤ Approval of the Consent Agenda:

Board Member Dr. Brittingham moved and Board Member Slingluff seconded the motion to approve the Consent Agenda as presented.

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

## UNFINISHED BUSINESS

- Ordinance 24/25-88: Ordinance 24/25-88: An Ordinance Amending Chapter 2, Article 1, Section 2-1.4 entitled "Policy effective date; suspension of policies" of the Policies of the Suffolk City School Board – Second Reading

Board Member Dr. Brittingham moved and Vice Chair McGee seconded the motion to approve Ordinance 24/25-88 as presented.

Discussion ensued between board members regarding the vote needed (two-thirds vote versus majority (at least five members needed)) to suspend a policy.

Board Member Dr. Brittingham amended her motion and Vice Chair McGee seconded the motion to send Ordinance 24/25-86 back to the Policy Review Committee to consider the wording regarding two-thirds/majority vote to a majority vote.

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

- Ordinance 24/25-89: An Ordinance Adding Chapter 7, Article 7, Section 7-7.1 entitled "Statement of Policy; Definitions; Examples of Prohibited Activities; Curriculum discussions allowed; Role of the school superintendent; Disclaimer Requirement; Consequences of Violation; Protection of Employee Rights; Exemption of School Board Members" of the Policies of the Suffolk City School Board - Second Reading

Board Member Dr. Brittingham moved and Board Member Slingluff seconded the motion to approve Ordinance 24/25-89 as presented.

Board Members discussed their concerns with this proposed policy because it specifically targeted the division Superintendent and not the other board employees. Dr. Gordon clarified information stated by a board member and shared his concerns with the policy.

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 4 / Nay: 3 (Fields, Jenkins, Riddick) / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed by vote of 4 to 3.

- Ordinance 24/25-90: An Ordinance Amending Chapter 2, Article 2, Section 2-2.7 Entitled "School Board Standing Committees; Foundations; Special Committees" of the Policies of the Suffolk City School Board -Second Reading

Board Member Slingluff moved and Vice Chair McGee seconded the motion to approve Ordinance 24/25-90 as presented.

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

After the vote, Board Chair Howell asked Attorney Waller if anything additional was needed to make this support committee permanent? Attorney Waller clarified that approval of Ordinance 24/25-90 established this committee as a "Standing Committee" of the School Board and members should be appointed to serve on this committee by using the same process for making appointments to all other standing committees at the Organizational Meeting in January of each year.

- Ordinance 24/25-91: An Ordinance Repealing Chapter 2, Article 2, Section 2-2.6:1 "School Board Norms; Protocols; Violations" and Adopting a New Chapter 2, Article 2, Section 2-2.6:1 Entitled "Aspirational Statements; School Board Norms; Protocols; and Consequences for Violations" of the Policies of the Suffolk City School Board - Second Reading  
Board Member Slingluff moved and Board Member Dr. Brittingham seconded the motion to approve Ordinance 24/25-90 as presented.

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

## **NEW BUSINESS**

- Payment of Bills and Payroll May 2025  
Board Member Riddick moved and Board Member Jenkins seconded the motion to approve the payment of bills and payroll for May 2025 as submitted.

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.

- Citizen Advisory Committees Approval  
Board Members considered this topic during the Second Closed Meeting and voted on this item under “Action on the Second Closed Meeting Items.)
- Resolution 24/25-32: A Resolution Approving the Terms and Conditions of A Release and Termination of a Road Grant Easement Agreement Between the Suffolk City School Board and Atlantic Cost Pipeline, LLC.  
Board Member Slingluff moved and Board Member Dr. Brittingham seconded the motion to approve Resolution 24/25-32 as submitted.

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

- Resolution 24/25-33: A Resolution Of The School Board For The City Of Suffolk, Virginia Approving An Award To Baker Family Housing, LLC., Pursuant To A Written Invitation For Bid Issued By Suffolk Public Schools  
Vice Chair McGee moved and Board Member Dr. Brittingham seconded the motion to approve Resolution 24/25-33.

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

- Employee Evaluation Discussion: Instruments, Procedure and Timeline (Info Item Only)  
Board Chair Howell led the discussion regarding the Superintendent’s evaluation instrument and its approved indicators, justification comments, and the timeline for evaluations. She explained the process for submitting evaluations stating that the evaluation for the Superintendent and the School Board Attorney is to be submitted to Ms. Gardner and evaluations for the Clerk to be submitted to Mrs. Forsman. She added that results will be provided to employees three days prior to the closed meeting when the evaluation results will be discussed. Board Members, Dr. Gordon, and Attorney Waller discussed the following: (1) indicators approved by the Virginia Department of Education versus indicators agreed and approved by the Board and Superintendent; (2) possibly changing the Superintendent’s

evaluation to reflect additional/different indicators; (3) the collection/processing of the data; and (4) the need to develop a policy to outline the process for evaluations. Mrs. Howell also shared if any member required hard copies of the evaluation evidence, to inform the Clerk immediately so that one can be provided.

No action was required on this item.

## **REPORTS BY THE SUPERINTENDENT**

### ➤ Good News Report

Anthonette Dickens, Communications & Community Engagement Officer, highlighted good news happening within our division. Dr. Gordon and the Board congratulated Mrs. Dickens and her team for their national recognition for district communication from the National School Public Relations Association. They won the following six awards: (1) Merit Award, (3) Awards of Honorable Mention, and (2) Awards of Excellence.

### ➤ Calendar of Special Events

Dr. Gordon highlighted the events listed on the Calendar of Special Events happening throughout the division.

## **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.

1. Dawn Matthews – Re: Follow-up: Late Bus. Ms. Matthews indicated that nothing has changed with the issue of the late bus and requested feedback from board members.
2. Olivia Hudson – Re: NRHS Marching Band Program – Ms. Hudson expressed a lack of standardized guidance on how parent-led programs are expected to operate. She recommended the creation of a document outlining standard operating procedures (SOP) for all parent-led organizations that will establish support consistency, equity, and collaboration district-wide.
3. Travis McKinney – Re: Revisit May 8<sup>th</sup>. Mr. McKinney was not present at the meeting.

## **BUSINESS BY BOARD MEMBERS**

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

Board Members enjoyed the School Board Retreat, graduation ceremonies, and the various end of year events. They also congratulated the Communications & Community Engagement Department for their awards, individuals recognized in the Good News Report, thanked speakers for addressing the Board, and requested follow-up by the administration regarding the issues raised, and thanked students from John Yeates Middle School for their letters expressing their thoughts about their school. Board Members encouraged forward momentum and being about the business of student achievement, collaboration, and leading with integrity, compassion, and clarity. They also highlighted the growing scholarship amount being received by the 2025 graduates, encouraged public participation in assisting the division with student achievement, and the need to address any misconceptions regarding Suffolk Public Schools.

## **MOTION TO GO INTO A SECOND CLOSED MEETING**

- Attorney Wendell Waller read the following motion:

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

The discussion and/or consideration of appointees to serve on citizen advisory committees for the Suffolk City School Board.

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

Board Member Jenkins moved and Board Member Dr. Brittingham seconded the motion to go into a second 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**

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Board Member Dr. Brittingham moved and Board Member Slingluff seconded the motion to approve the Certification of 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.

### **ACTION ON CLOSED MEETING ITEMS**

➤ Citizen Advisory Committee

The Board Clerk read aloud the list of School Board recommended appointments and members for the Citizen Advisory Committees.

Board Member Slingluff moved and Board Member Dr. Brittingham seconded the motion to approve the appointments and membership to the Citizen Advisory Committees as read by the Clerk.

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

### **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 June 12, 2025 School Board Meeting at 11:11 p.m.

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Heather Howell, *School Board Chair*

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Tarshia L. Gardner, Clerk