

REGULAR MEETING MINUTES OF THE SUFFOLK CITY SCHOOL BOARD

Thursday, April 10, 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*

Dr. Dawn Marie Brittingham

Valerie Fields

Karen Jenkins

Tyron Riddick¹

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*

OPENING OF PUBLIC MEETING/WORK SESSION

➤ Call to Order:

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

➤ Cherry Bekaert Auditors

Laura Harden, Representative with Cherry Bekaert Auditors, gave an overview regarding their audit of Suffolk Public Schools' accounts that is included with the City of Suffolk's audit. She explained that the audit is based on auditing standards and rules and the scope of an audit is determined by the needs of the client. SPS audit includes internal controls (e.g., consisting of a review of procedures, risk assessments, testing of controls, and sampling of payroll and disbursements), compliance with state procurement guidelines, review Conflict of Interest Forms, and reconcile state funding with disbursements. She also indicated that single audits are done of major programs to ensure compliance with federal guidelines for expenditure of federal funds. Ms. Harden emphasized that auditors never take anyone's word when performing audits, but results are based on documentation and all records are reconciled with the City of Suffolk's accounts.

Conversation ensued between Ms. Harden, board members, Dr. Gordon, and staff regarding results from audits, collaboration between the city and schools, verified information, timeline of reporting, the process and procedures of audits performed, and deeper dive/forensic audits. Ms. Harden explained that in order for certain audits to be performed, the Board must express exactly what they are looking for. Requests must be specific in nature to determine whether a forensic audit or an audit of controls is to be performed. Board members suggested having a town hall meeting to hear constituents concerns regarding finances and audits of Suffolk Public Schools. They agreed to continue this discussion at the May 7th school board work session.

¹ Board Member Riddick arrived to the meeting at 5:28 p.m.

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. Record Review 2024/25-10 RR regarding the assignment of a student to Turlington Woods School, where the discussion in an open meeting would involve disclosure of information contained in the student's scholastic record.
2. Record Review 2024/25-12 RR regarding the assignment of a student to Turlington Woods School, where the discussion in an open meeting would involve disclosure of information contained in the student's scholastic record.

Which is authorized by the Virginia Freedom of Information Act, found at Virginia Code Section 2.2-3711 (A)(2).

Board Member Jenkins moved and Vice Chair McGee 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 April 10, 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 Dr. Brittingham 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.

RE-OPENING OF PUBLIC MEETING

- Meeting Called to Order:
Board Chair Howell called to order the regular public business meeting at 6:58 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 Riddick read the mission of SPS.

ACTION ON CLOSED MEETING ITEMS

- Student Record Review Number 2024/25-10RR
Board Member Dr. Brittingham moved and Board Member Slingluff seconded the motion to uphold the discipline for Student Record Review Number 2024/25-10RR.

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

- Student Record Review Number 2024/25-12RR
Board Member Dr. Brittingham moved and Board Member Slingluff seconded the motion to remove the discipline for Student Record Review Number 2024/25-12RR.

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 Riddick moved and Board Member Dr. Brittingham seconded the motion to approve the agenda with the addition of two items added to New Business and they include: (1) Student Involvement at School Board Meetings (Info/Action); and (2) Discussion by the School Board and presentation from the Superintendent regarding the letter from President Trump regarding DEI requirement or lose federal funding (Info/Action) without objection.

Board Member Slingluff further amended the motion to add a discussion regarding the incident at King's Fork Middle School without objection.

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

- There were no Speakers on Agenda Topics.

CONSENT AGENDA

- Approval of the Consent Agenda:

Board Member Dr. Brittingham moved and Board Member Riddick seconded the motion to approve the Consent Agenda with the removal of Bills and Payroll and adding it 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.

At this time, Dr. Gordon introduced the new principal for Forest Glen Middle School, Dr. Patrick Doyle. Dr. Doyle has vast leadership experience and was excited to join the SPS family.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

- There was no Unfinished Business

NEW BUSINESS

- Local Plan and Budget for Career and Technical Education (CTE) – 2025-2026

Dr. Gordon provided an overview of the report.

Board Member Riddick moved and Board Members Slingluff/Dr. Brittingham seconded the motion to approve the Local Plan and Budget for Career and Technical Education 2025-2026.

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

- Special Education Annual Report

Dr. Casaundra McNair, Director of Special Education, by use of a PowerPoint presentation, provided information regarding the Annual Plan/Part B Flow-Through Application. She explained the statement of Assurances, the total number of students with disabilities, the breakdown of students per category, and additional components, including the Maintenance of Effort. Dr. McNair also explained the annual spending plan which includes some special education teachers, teacher assistants, job coaches, and bus assistants. She also shared the application submission deadline of May 9, 2025.

Board Member Riddick moved and Board Member Dr. Brittingham seconded the motion to approve the Special Education Annual Report.

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

- STEM Academy Update (Info Item Only)

Dr. Okema Branch, Chief Academic Officer, Dr. Katelyn Leitner, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, and Rachel Hirsch Brooks, STEM and Science Specialist, provided a STEM Academy at BTWES update to the Board. Dr. Branch provided background information on

the inception of the program including a partnership with Old Dominion University. She stated that the program will launch with the 2025-2026 school year for students in grades K-5 with an enrollment of 20 students per grade, totaling 120 students.

Ms. Brooks provided information regarding key components of the program's promising practice, which includes design thinking, comprehensive alignment, an interdisciplinary approach, and a student-centered curriculum. Information nights were held on January 16 & 28, 2025.

Dr. Leitner discussed the enrollment and application process for the STEM Academy. She explained the Lotterease System. The system opened February 3 and closed February 28, 2025. There were over 300 students who applied for the academy. Dr. Leitner highlighted the next steps in the program which included hiring instructional designers.

Conversation ensued between board members and staff regarding non-SPS students and the costs for students outside of the division. Parents of non-SPS students must provide transportation and pay tuition for the program. Board members were excited about the academy.

➤ SPS 2023-2028 Strategic Plan (Info Item Only)

Board Chair Howell led the discussion regarding the strategic plan. She stated that her participation in the VSBA webinars regarding empowering your board for student achievement, which focused on establishing goals, monitoring progress, and community engagement, inspired her to start a dialogue with board members. This was especially important to her as there are new members on the board who are not aware of the strategic plan and its process. Mrs. Howell indicated that she would like for the board to possibly consider a retreat to improve goals by adding measurability or specificity to them and to ensure members are familiar with the goals. Board Members discussed their preference for a school board retreat to be held in June or July to close out the current year, to discuss and/or build a framework for the Strategic Plan, and implement goals for the coming year.

➤ Section 1-6.2:1. (Transgender Policy) Definitions; Discrimination, Harassment and Bullying Prohibited; Student Privacy and Confidentiality Required; Use of Name and Gender Pronouns; Legal Name and Sex at Birth Required on School Records; Dress and Grooming Codes; Student Participation in Activities Determined by Sex, Overnight Travel; Access to Restrooms, Locker Rooms and Intimate Spaces; Professional Development and Training; Superintendent to Develop Regulations and/or Guidelines.

Board Chair Howell led the discussion regarding the transgender policy. She indicated that the Policy Review Committee was seeking dialogue from the full board for input that could be shared at the April 24th meeting to produce a more inclusive policy for first reading at the May meeting. Policy Committee Chair Slingluff, asked board members to send their feedback regarding the policy to her, Vice Chair McGee or Board Member Jenkins. Board Members received a copy of the current policy and the Governor's policy via email from Attorney Waller for their review and consideration. Board Members and Dr. Gordon discussed the current policy in place within the school division and if there were or have been any challenges with implementation of the policy.

➤ Appropriation of Additional State Funding Fiscal 2024-2025 (Info Item Only)

Dr. Gordon provided an update from the General Assembly regarding their budget proposal and the ability to provide bonuses to staff by June. He highlighted information contained in a letter to the City of Suffolk regarding our current budget (\$248,588,927) and respectfully

requested that City Council appropriate the additional state funding for fiscal year 2024/2025 to the school division in the amount of \$1,528,662. This would bring our new appropriation to the school division to (\$250,117,589). The letter was submitted in time for Council's approval so that the division could meet the June date for issuing contracts.

➤ Student Involvement at School Board Meetings

Board Member Riddick led the discussion regarding the Return on Investment in our students. He indicated that by allowing students to showcase and celebrate their skills and talents at school board meetings we can show support for our students. He was concerned that students are no longer a part of the school board meetings and he suggested bringing students back to perform at the meetings. Board Chair Howell explained why the item was removed from the agenda. She also explained that student engagement and performances are already being included in the 2025-2026 school year meetings.

Board Member Riddick moved to have a presentation of student engagement at school board meetings pending availability of the students beginning with the 2025-2026 school year as a part of the regular meeting agenda, and that this be written into policy to support this measure.

Board Chair Howell asked Attorney Waller for clarification as the motion stated could possibly be a violation of current policy that says that board members can add items to the agenda on the night of the meeting, but cannot call for a vote if the motion impacts students and staff. Mr. Waller shared that it could very well be a violation because the motion pertains to students and it also impacts staff and that the policy indicates that a vote cannot take place on the same night. Therefore, he recommended adding student engagement to next meeting agenda for discussion and vote.

This item will be tabled to the next school board meeting.

Discussion was had regarding drafting policy for student engagement at meetings. Mr. Riddick clarified that at this time, he supported moving forward with a vote at the next meeting without sending the information to the Policy Review Committee. He further stated that after approval of this item at the next board meeting, he would make another motion to send the information to the PRC to draft a policy for this engagement.

The Clerk asked for clarification regarding the item being placed on the agenda for the first or second meeting. Board Chair Howell preferred the second meeting, as the first monthly meeting was intended to be a focus on business. Board Member Riddick's preference was to include student engagement at both meetings however, he suggested the decision to be made according to students' availability which will allow for flexibility in scheduling performance.

➤ Discussion Regarding Letter from President Trump Regarding DEI and Possible Loss of Funding

Board Member Riddick led the discussion regarding this item. He asked if the division does not comply, what is the impact? Dr. Gordon provided context to the details of the letter indicating the potential impact could be that the division could lose federal funds. He also added that one of the initial concerns was to seek clarification regarding the M to M program and if that program was violated the directive given by USDOE. It was determined that compliance would not conflict with signing the letter. Dr. Gordon also reminded the Board that the situation was fluid as information was regularly being received. However, he indicated that the expectation as noted in correspondence from the new State Superintendent of Education, was compliance, signing, and submitting the letter before the deadline of April 23,

2025 was expected. Dr. Gordon also stated that the division could not absorb the loss of funding (\$9.6 million) that was associated with not signing the letter. He shared that due to fiscal responsibility, he would sign the document. Additional conversation ensued between board members, Dr. Gordon and Attorney Waller.

➤ Discussion Regarding the Incident at King’s Fork Middle School

Dr. Gordon provided a brief update regarding the incident at King’s Fork Middle School. He stated that the communication reported by the school was factual and was a little different from what was reported by the police department. He also addressed concerns regarding the difference in the timeline of communication to parents. Due to those conversations, additional language will be used at the end of all communication published and sent to parents from Suffolk Public Schools when there is a school incident. The added language will notify parents that additional information would be forthcoming. He also added that people must be patient to allow the investigation to occur so that, complete factual reports and information can be disseminated to the public. Conversation ensued between the board and Dr. Gordon.

➤ Payment of Bills and Payroll March 31, 2025

Board Member Riddick moved and Board Member Fields seconded the motion to approve the Payment of Bills and Payroll for March 31, 2025.

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.

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.

- Dawn Jones – Re: Budget. Mrs. Jones supported a forensic audit to ensure tax dollars are well spent.
- Jerry Jones – Re: School Board Budget. Mr. Jones supported a forensic audit.

BUSINESS BY BOARD MEMBERS

➤ Comments and Reports by School Board Members:

Board Members expressed their thankfulness for employees, the opportunity to serve, for collaboration for making Suffolk Public Schools successful, for collaboration and robust conversation. They appreciated those who attended the ceremony honoring Dr. Brooks-Buck and Mrs. Byrum, and enjoyed attending various athletic events, and staff who presented at the meeting. Board Member Riddick requested the Superintendent to reach out to RRMM to ascertain the cost for an indoor pool at JFKMS or EFES, and to explore the option of utilizing at-age-students in the workforce as bus aides.

INFORMATION ITEMS

- Board Chair Howell encouraged board member to review the informational items listed on the agenda.

ADJOURNMENT

➤ Adjournment of Meeting:

There being no further business, Board Chair Howell adjourned the April 10, 2025 School Board Meeting at 9:20 p.m.

Heather Howell, *School Board Chair*

Tarshia L. Gardner, Clerk