

SECOND MONTHLY MEETING MINUTES OF THE SUFFOLK CITY SCHOOL BOARD

Thursday, April 24, 2025 ~ 6:00 P.M.

King's Fork Middle School, 350 King's Fork Road, Suffolk, VA 23434

Board Members Present:

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

Board Member Attending Virtually:

Sean McGee, *Vice Chair*¹

Administrative Staff Present:

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

Administrative Staff Absent:

Tarshia Gardner, *Clerk*

OPENING OF MEETING

- Call to Order:
Board Chair Howell called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.
- Pledge of Allegiance:
Board Member Dr. Brittingham 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 Slingluff moved and Board Member Dr. Brittingham/Vice Chair McGee seconded the motion to approve the agenda with, 1.) The addition of the resolution to suspend our School Board Policy Section 1.5.1:2 entitled Education Equity Defined, Guiding Question, Equity Goals; Equity Measurements; Key Terms; and 2.) moving two citizens speaker to the Agenda Topics section of Citizen Comments, from the Non-Agenda section.

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

¹ By consensus Vice Chair McGee was permitted to attend the meeting through electronic communication means due to a personal matter and more specifically, a work assignment in Omaha, Nebraska. Vice Chair McGee's attendance through electronic means was approved pursuant to Virginia Code § 2.2-3708.3(B)(4).

PRESENTATION

➤ Recognition of Honor Graduates – Nansemond River High School

Dr. Shawn Green, Principal and his team, Stevie Green, Dean of Students, Kimberly Reid, Counseling Director, Shawanda Darden and Caitlyn Craft, School Counselors, presented 204 honor graduates from Nansemond River High School. The honor graduates have received over 430 college acceptance letters and over \$4.5 million in scholarships. Honor graduates introduced themselves, their parents, and stated their future plans.

Board Members congratulated honor graduates and commended them on their accomplishments.

There was a pause in the meeting to allow the graduates and their families the opportunity to exit the chamber and Board Chair Howell resumed the public meeting.

PUBLIC SPEAKERS ON AGENDA TOPICS

➤ Citizen Comments on Agenda Items:

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

1. Tonya Hughes – Re: The Relevance of DEI – Ms. Hughes shared that the directive from the VA Department of Education (VDOE) should have been shared with the public sooner. She also urged the board to reject the dangerous rollbacks of the diversity, equity and inclusion programs under President Trump’s administration.
2. Valerie Boykin – Re: Suffolk Public Schools DEI Policy – Spoke on behalf of the NAACP Suffolk Nansemond Branch. She felt miseducation, misinformation, and perhaps misguided priorities risk jeopardizing the civil rights and future opportunities of our young people and educators.

REPORTS BY THE SUPERINTENDENT

➤ Good News Report:

Anthonette Dickens, Communication and Community Engagement Officer, shared good news happening within the division utilizing a PowerPoint presentation.

Ms. Blythe, teacher for the Virginia Teachers for Tomorrow Class at Nansemond River High school, and her students were recognized for their accomplishments in the Educators Rising VA Leadership Conference.

Representatives from the AMADAS, Barton Ford and Starr Motors were honored for receiving the VSBA Business Honor Roll and for all they do to support the students of Suffolk Public Schools.

➤ Calendar of Special Events:

Dr. Gordon, Division Superintendent, summarized information from the calendar of special events. Dr. Gordon thanked speakers who addressed the Board regarding DEI. He assured everyone that he will continue to do everything possible to ensure the success of our students.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

- There was no Unfinished Business

NEW BUSINESS

- Fiscal Year End 2025 – Priorities for School Board to Rank and Approve (Info Item Only)
Board Chair Howell asked board members to review the information provided and to complete the priorities list and submit it to the Clerk by 5 p.m., Wednesday, May 7th in order to be ready for action on May 8th. Dr. Gordon provided addition information regarding the priorities listed.
- Appropriation of Additional State Funding for Fiscal Year 2024-2025: Staff Bonuses
Board Member Jenkins moved and Board Member Fields seconded the motion to approve the appropriation of additional state funding for fiscal year 2024-2025: Staff Bonuses.

Board Members engaged in discussion regarding bonuses, the coverage of federal taxes by the division, and the possibility of teachers and staff to have free lunches. Board Member Riddick asked that the Superintendent explore other incentives to retain staff, and the possibility of absorbing at least half of the taxes on the bonus.

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

- 2025-2026 Student Engagement Added to School Board Meetings Agenda Based on Availability
Board Member Riddick led the discussion regarding allowing students to perform at school board meetings. He recommended flexibility with scheduling based on two school board meetings monthly.

Board Member Riddick moved and Board Member Fields seconded the motion that the School Board have included on the meeting agenda an opportunity for students to present and showcase their abilities at our school board meetings while providing flexibility to staff regarding scheduling board meeting appearances (at least once per month).

Board Chair Howell clarified Mr. Riddick’s motion stating, Suffolk School Board allow students to showcase their learning at performances at a monthly meeting.

Additional conversation ensued between board meetings.

Board Member Riddick amended his motion to include a fixed position on the agenda, immediately after the approval of the agenda.

Board Chair Howell restated the motion, “Suffolk City School Board allows students to showcase learning at a performance at a monthly meeting in a fixed location following the agenda approval.” Board Member Riddick agreed to the restatement. Additional conversation ensued between board members.

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

- Discussion Regarding School Bus Incident Reported by WAVY News 10 on March 24, 2025
Vice Chair McGee led the discussion regarding this item. He stated that the discussion was to discuss preventative measures for the future and not placing blame on any individual driver but to ensure the public that the issue is being addressed and that children are safe with SPS. Dr. Rodney Brown, Chief of Administrative Services, informed the Board of practices that are being put in place for the 2025-2026 school year to ensure student safety. Dr. Gordon provided additional context/information.

Vice Chair McGee was thankful to have this open discussion.

- Resolution 24/25-26: A Resolution of the School Board for the City of Suffolk, Virginia Suspending Section 1-5.1:2 of the Policies of the Suffolk City School Board and Ratifying the Signing of the Title VI Certification by the School Superintendent
Board Member Slingluff moved and Board Member Dr. Brittingham seconded the motion to approve Resolution 24/25-26: A Resolution of the School Board for the City of Suffolk, Virginia Suspending Section 1-5.1:2.

Board Members indicated their non-support/support of Resolution 24/25-26, suspension of the diversity, equity, and inclusion policy. Conversation ensued between board members and Dr. Gordon and Attorney Waller.

Board Chair Howell restated the motion: Board Member Slingluff moved and Board Member Dr. Brittingham seconded the motion to approve Resolution 24/25-26: A Resolution of the School Board for the City of Suffolk, Virginia Suspending Section 1-5.1:2.

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

PUBLIC SPEAKERS ON NON-AGENDA TOPICS

- There were no Non-Agenda Topics speakers.

BUSINESS BY BOARD MEMBERS

- Comments and Report by School Board Members:
Board Members recognized, highlighted, and/or requested the following:
 - Excited about teacher bonuses, touring the SECEP facility at JFKMS, and the Food Festival by the Food and Nutrition Services Department.
 - Congratulated honor graduates, teachers, and staff.
 - Sadden and deeply disturbed by the direction of state leaders and the state of the country.
 - Encouraged everyone to vote, and constituents to pay attention to meetings and to participate in dialogue.
 - Requested information from the VDOE regarding their requirement of cultural competence training.
 - Thanked employees for reaching out to board members regarding unused snow days.
 - Thanked speakers, Ms. Blythe and her students, and the board for open dialogue.
 - Disappointment in the interruptions by board members during spring break regarding a called meeting, and behind-the-scene meetings transparency.
 - Thankful for ability to attend meeting virtually.

- Requested Dr. Gordon to share his priorities with the board to collaborate.

INFORMATION ITEMS

- Bonus Payment for Certain Staff
There were no comments regarding this item.

ADJOURNMENT

- Adjournment of Meeting:
There being no further business, Board Chair Howell adjourned the Second School Board Monthly Meeting of April 24, 2025 at 8:33 p.m.

Heather Howell, *School Board Chair*

Tarshia L. Gardner, *Board Clerk*