

REGULAR MEETING MINUTES OF THE SUFFOLK CITY SCHOOL BOARD
Thursday, June 8, 2023 ~ 5:00 P.M.
Suffolk City Hall, 442 W. Washington Street, Suffolk, VA 23434

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

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

OPENING OF PUBLIC MEETING/WORK SESSION

➤ **Call to Order:**

Chair Riddick called the meeting to order at 5:02 p.m.

➤ **SPS 2022-2023 Climate and Culture Survey Results:**

Dr. Branch gave an overview of the presentation's agenda and explained the survey's construction. Dr. Gordon highlighted the results or perceptions from each group that was surveyed, including employees, and instructional staff (division-wide), parents and students. He also highlighted and explained the feedback received and indicated how this information would be used as a focus area for growth for the 2023-2024 school year. Members Slingluff, Dr. Brittingham, and Board Chair Riddick asked questions to which Dr. Gordon provided responses.

Board Chair Riddick thanked Dr. Gordon and his staff for the excellent presentation.

➤ **SPS Vision 2023:**

Dr. Gordon excitedly explained the vision for SPS which will be the focus for the next 12-15 months, including the summer months. He expounded on the following areas:

- Staff and Student Supports (Safety and Security Plan, SPS Pharmacy, S.T.A.R. Program)
- Instructional Planning (STEM Instructional Leads)
- SPS Facilities and Maintenance Overview
- The Premier School Division (Best Communities for Music Education, Nationally Recognized PLTW, STEM Century: The SPS Edition, Community Leadership)

Dr. Gordon emphasized that by exposing the students to top-notch STEM instruction, providing employees with discounted medical supplies, and improving/building the facilities (synthetic fields, new JFKMS, gym floors, Center for Performing and Productions Arts, and other maintenance) within the division, these will continue to move Suffolk Public Schools to becoming the Premier School Division.

Conversation ensued as Dr. Gordon provided answers to Board Member's questions.

MEETING RECESS

- Board Chair Riddick recessed the meeting.

RE-OPENING OF PUBLIC MEETING

- Meeting Called to Order:
Board Chair Riddick called to order the regular public meeting.
- Pledge of Allegiance:
Col. Fred Cherry Middle School Chorus led all in the Pledge of Allegiance.
- Musical Selection – CFCMS Chorus:
The 8th grade chorus from Col. Fred Cherry Middle School, under the direction of Ms. Sarah Schweit, performed at the meeting. Board Members were excited to hear the choir and were exceedingly impressed with the songs that were performed in a foreign language. Members expressed their pride in the students and in the music educators who are dedicated to the work they do with the students in Suffolk Public Schools.
- Recital of SPS Mission:
Board Member Jenkins read the Mission Statement of Suffolk Public Schools.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

- Approval of Agenda:
Member Dr. Brooks-Buck moved and Member Jenkins seconded the motion to approve the agenda.

Upon electronic 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 regarding decorum for those scheduled to speak. The following speakers shared their comments:
 - Dr. Deborah Wahlstrom (Ordinance 2022-23-94 Curriculum, and Closed Meeting) – Dr. Wahlstrom talked about tension between the Board, FOIA information requested but not received fully, her concerns with Closed Session meetings and how members would be treated in those meetings.

REPORTS BY THE SUPERINTENDENT

- Good News Report:
Anthonette Dickens, Communications and Community Engagement Officer, highlighted the following good news/events that occurred throughout the division:
 - Alumni Highlight: Where Are They Now? – Destiney Coles, former LHS student
 - STEM Fly-In Field Trip
 - Pilot Club of Suffolk Recognition Event
 - Southside VBODA Jazz Assessment
 - ACCESS College Social Media Winners: Deja Reese (NRHS), Emma Harsch (NRHS), Aniya Bligen (KFHS)

- Lakeland and Nansemond River High Schools Receive National Recognition for Commitment to Empowering Students
- Congressional Art Show Winners (NRHS): Dayna Watt-1st Place Overall, Madison Carr-3rd Place, Andy Mullins, Chief's Choice winner.
- K-12 Career Pathway for Computer Science
- Athletic College Signing Day (NRHS): Soccer-Nathalie Dupree (Mary Baldwin Univ.), Cheer - Maxwell Meaway and Deja Reese (Old Dominion Univ.), Football – Seth Murphy (Widener Univ.), Baseball – Austin Adkins (VA Wesleyan Univ.), Will Bennett (VA Peninsula Comm. College), Bryce Burchette (Methodist Univ.), Thomas Wolfe (Hampton Sydney College)
- STEM Extravaganza
- STEM Century: The SPS Edition (LHS student authors) – Raven Cooper, Alexis Perkins, Ramirsjæe Young, Alexis Griffith, James McFarland. Dr. Gordon presented gifts to these students for their participation.
- Awards & Recognitions: May Teacher Spotlight and Long Term Substitutes Spotlight. Dr. Gordon presented gifts to the long-term substitutes for their dedication and hard work with the students for the school year.

➤ Calendar of Special Events:

Dr. Gordon highlighted the events listed on SPS website for June/July.

CONSENT AGENDA

➤ Approval of the Consent Agenda:

Vice-Chair Howell moved and Member Dr. Brooks-Buck seconded the motion to approve the Consent Agenda.

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

Dr. Gordon introduced three (3) new administrators: Ronald Cabbler – Coordinator of Student Activities at SAO, Dr. Keisha Melvin – Coordinator of Advanced Instruction and World Languages at SAO, and Dr. Laguna Foster – Principal at KFMS. These employees thanked the Board for the opportunity to work with Suffolk Public Schools.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

➤ Approval of Ordinances 22/23-87 through 22/23-90 and Ordinances 22/23-92 through 22/23-97:

Member Dr. Brooks-Buck moved and Member Slingluff seconded the motion to consider Ordinances 22/23-87 through 22/23-90 and Ordinances 22/23-92 through 22/23-97 collectively.

Upon electronic vote, the vote was: Aye: 7 / Nay: 0 / Abstain: 0. The motion passed by vote of 7 to 0.

- Approval of Ordinances 22/23-87 through 22/23-90 and Ordinances 22/23-92 through 22/23-97:
Vice-Chair Howell moved and Member Dr. Brooks-Buck seconded the motion to approve Ordinances 22/23-87 through 22/23-90 and Ordinances 22/23-92 through 22/23-97 collectively.

Upon electronic vote, the vote was: Aye: 7 / Nay: 0 / Abstain: 0. The motion passed by vote of 7 to 0.

NEW BUSINESS

- Approval of 62 New Teacher Assistant Positions – Grant Funded
Dr. Gordon explained the primary objective and funding source for the hiring of 62 new teacher assistant positions which includes duty-free time for teachers.

Vice-Chair Howell moved and Member Dr. Brooks-Buck seconded the motion to hire 62 new Teacher Assistants for SPS, and to be paid by grant funding, as presented.

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

- Approval of Resolution 22/23-21: A Resolution of the School Board for the City of Suffolk, Virginia Approving Payment in the Sum of \$43,794.54 to Bischoff Martingayle, P.C. for Fees and Costs in the matter of Suffolk City School Board et. al. v. Deborah Wahlstrom
Attorney Waller stated that the resolution was to approve the fees and costs for the court case involving Suffolk City School Board versus Deborah Wahlstrom.

Vice-Chair Howell moved and Member Slingluff seconded the motion to approve Resolution 22/23-21 as presented.

Upon electronic, the vote was: Aye: 7 / Nay: 0 / Abstain: 0. The motion passed by vote of 7 to 0.

- Ordinances 22/23-98 through Ordinance 22/23-110 (information items only, no vote required)

PUBLIC SPEAKERS ON NON-AGENDA TOPICS

- Citizen Comments on Non-Agenda Items:
The Clerk read the statement regarding decorum for those scheduled to speak. The following speakers shared their comments:
 1. Gloria Griffin (Special Education Process Concerns) – Ms. Griffin indicated that SPS was lacking in communication regarding her grandson nor did he receive services. She claimed that no one returned her calls.
Board Chair Riddick asked Dr. Gordon to provide the Board with additional information regarding Ms. Griffin's comments.
 2. Sandie and Lamar Elliott cancelled due to a family emergency.
 3. Rod Thompson (A Hot Dog) – Mr. Thompson stated that the lunches provided to students are not up to par and that additional cafeteria staff is needed to correct this issue.
 4. Travis McKinney (Truths, Facts, and FOIA) – Mr. McKinney felt that FOIA responses from SPS are not appropriate. He also felt that a Board Member made disparaging remarks regarding Mrs. McKinney.

5. Aram Arakelyan (Issue with the Implementation of the 4x4 Block Schedule and How it will Affect IB Students) – Mr. Arakelyan felt that the new 4x4 block schedule does not allow IB students the time and flexibility to achieve college credits causing college candidates to be less competitive for scholarships.
6. Dr. Trevon Boone (Support of Suffolk Public Schools) – Dr. Boone stated that the divisiveness of the School Board is directly impacting the efforts of dedicated school employees. He suggested that the Board strive for change with an approach that fosters unity, collaboration, and unwavering support of the educators.
7. Michael Rouse (Suffolk Public Schools Support and Advocacy) – Mr. Rouse indicated that the success of Suffolk Public Schools was a determining factor for his family moving to the area. He highlighted the collaboration between his fraternal organization and SPS and how it fosters success throughout the school division. However, he was concerned with the direction schools are headed and offered suggestions for moving forward positively.

BUSINESS BY BOARD MEMBERS

- Comments and Reports by School Board Members:
 - Thanked Dr. Gordon and his team, the students, teachers, support staff, and parents for the hard work it took for a successful school year.
 - Congratulated the honor graduates and all seniors for making it to the end of this journey and look forward to seeing them walk the stage at graduation.
 - Enjoyed the various events attended (TOY / RTOY / Retirement / Support Staff Banquets / Senior Awards Night, and other ceremonies) that honored staff and students for their commitment, dedication, and hard work as a successful school year could not have been completed without everyone's participation.
 - Enjoyed attending VSBA training that will be helpful in executing board responsibilities.
 - Congratulated Col. Fred Cherry Middle School Choir for a fantastic performance.
 - Congratulated all scholarship winners highlighted in the Good News Report and those receiving scholarships throughout the division.
 - Thanked the speakers for coming forward and sharing their opinions.
 - Agreed that students must be kept at the center of all decisions.
 - Encouraged all to have a wonderful summer, continue reading, and making wise, smart decisions.

MOTION TO GO INTO A SECOND CLOSED MEETING

- Attorney Waller read the following motion:

A motion is needed to go into a closed meeting to discuss the following item and subject:

The discussion and/or consideration regarding disciplining members of the Suffolk City School Board for alleged violations of School Board norms and protocols, to wit:

1. School Board Policy Section 2-2.6:1(A)(1) by failing to speak courteously and listen to dissenting or different opinions, to help each other depersonalize disagreements, and to support the will of the Board;
2. School Board Policy Section 2-2.6:1(A)(2) by representing the School Board without the consent of the School Board and having made

statements on social media posts but failed to state that the statements were their own opinion and not that of the School Board;

3. School Board Policy Section 2-2.6:1(A)(4) by failing to maintain awareness of the different roles that School Board members play such as a board member, citizen, parent, etc.;
4. School Board Policy Section 2-2.6:1(A)(5) by not focusing on work as a School Board Member and interfering with the day to day operations of Suffolk Public Schools, which is the delegated responsibility of the school superintendent;
5. School Board Policy Section 2-2.6:1(8)(10)(4) by failing to indicate on social media posts that the Board Member was not communicating as an individual member of the School Board and that statements reflected the Board Member's own views and not necessarily the official position of the School Board or that of Suffolk Public Schools.

If a violation of School Board Policy is found to have occurred, the School Board will also discuss in the closed meeting whether Board Members should be issued a verbal warning for such violations as provided for by School Board Policy Section 2-2.6:1(C).

Which is authorized by Virginia Code Section 2.2-3711(A)(1) of the Code of Virginia as amended.

Member Slingluff moved and Member Dr. Brittingham seconded the motion to approve the motion to go into a second closed meeting as read by Mr. Waller.

Member Dr. Brooks-Buck indicated that the purpose of closed session was to discuss confidential information however, the confidentiality was breached on several occasions by livestreaming during a meeting, and the information was made public. Therefore, she felt that there was no need for a closed session meeting as none of the items to be discussed has anything to do with SPS business, student achievement, or daily operations; and contrary to the negative narrative being painted about the division, Suffolk Public Schools has performed exceptionally well.

Board Chair Riddick agreed that the issues brought forward had nothing to do with student achievement. Further indicating that the Board has had ample opportunity (over 45 days) to settle the matters presented. He also stated that the Board should be about the business of the schools and positively impacting Suffolk Public Schools, and if that is not a member's position then he/she should re-evaluate their reason for being on the Board.

Upon electronic vote, the vote was: Aye: 3 / Nay: 3 (Brooks-Buck, Byrum, Jenkins) / Abstain: 1 (Riddick). The motion failed by a tie vote of 3 to 3.

INFORMATION ITEMS

- Accident Review Report – May 2023
- Capital Projects Financial Statement
- Financial Report – May 31, 2023
- Citizens Advisory Committees Announcement
- Evaluations Notice: Superintendent, School Board Attorney, School Board Clerk

ADJOURNMENT

➤ Adjournment of Meeting:

Members Dr. Brittingham and Dr. Brooks-Buck moved and Member Jenkins seconded the motion to adjourn the meeting.

Upon electronic vote, the vote was: Aye: 7 / Nay: 0 / Abstain: 0. The motion passed by vote of 7 to 0.

- Board Chair Riddick adjourned the June 8, 2023 School Board Meeting at 8:49 p.m.



Tyron Riddick, *Board Chair*



Tarshia L. Gardner, *Board Clerk*