

REGULAR MEETING OF THE SUFFOLK CITY SCHOOL BOARD
Thursday, November 4, 2021 ~ 5:00 P.M.
Col. Fred Cherry Middle School, 7401 Burbage Drive, Suffolk, VA 23435

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

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*

OPENING OF PUBLIC MEETING/WORK SESSION

➤ **Call to Order:**

The School Board Meeting/Work Session was called to order by Chair, Dr. Brooks-Buck. Dr. Buck welcomed everyone to the meeting. ¹ All in attendance were reminded to wear their mask.

➤ **SPS Strategic Plan Work Session:**

Dr. Okema Branch, Chief Academic Officer, presented information to the board regarding the Strategic Plan Goal Writing process and S.W.O.T. Analysis. She explained what is done by SPS is driven by division goals and that the S.W.O.T. Analysis will assist members to look reflectively at where they would like the division to be. She explained the meaning of S.W.O.T (Strengths (internal) - what we are doing well, Weaknesses (internal) - what we can improve upon, Opportunities (external) - what we have or need to be successful, and Threats (external) - things that harm or could potentially harm us). Board Members were able to share their perception of the division using this analysis as Dr. Branch recorded the exchange of ideas expressed by the Board. The session ended with the opportunity for Members to ask questions.

➤ **Legislative Committee Report:**

Board Member Mayo presented information from a recent meeting of the Legislative Committee held on October 28, 2021. She informed the Board of nine Legislative Amendments that are before the VSBA Delegate Assembly to determine issues that will be lobbied on in Richmond and Washington. These include: 1. Fair Assessment of Limited English Proficient Students; 2. Education Technology Funding; 3. Local School Board's Constitutional Authority; 4. Increased Student Access for Internships/Apprenticeships; 5. School Board Authority and Governance; 6. Student Health, Wellness, and Safety; 7. Twenty-First Century Communications for School Boards; 8. School Facility

¹ Several members had not arrived due to traffic however, the meeting began as a quorum was present.

Construction Funds and Financing; and 9. School Facilities Funding. Members asked questions as they will be voting later in the agenda on the amendments presented.

➤ **Bullying and Cyberbullying Survey:**

Mrs. Devers and Dr. King presented information regarding bullying and cyberbullying as this was a major concern for Board Members. They shared data from a survey conducted with students in grades 3-12. A total of 5,156 students participated in the survey. Although a relatively low number of students reported being bullied or cyber bullied, about half believe that bullying is an issue on social media and at school. Mrs. Devers and Dr. King explained that SPS is implementing strong anti-bullying procedures and guidelines that clearly define bullying, how to report it, and consequences for bullying. These initiatives will be used to remind students of the importance of reporting bullying and if they see something, say something. Dr. Gordon was impressed as students are stepping up and supporting one another and that Suffolk Public Schools is doing everything possible to eliminate bullying in the division. Board Members were given the opportunity to ask questions of Dr. Gordon and his team.

There being no further questions, the meeting was recessed.

RE-OPENING OF PUBLIC MEETING

➤ **Call to Order:**

The meeting was called to order by the Board Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck. She welcomed all to the meeting and reminded attendees to wear their mask. Newly Elected School Board Member Heather Howell was introduced and welcomed to the board by Board Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck.

➤ **Pledge of Allegiance:**

Board Member Johnson lead all in the Pledge of Allegiance.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Vice-Chair Byrum moved, and Member Mayo seconded the motion to approve the agenda with one additional item, an Ordinance Amending Chapter 8, Article 31, Section 8-31.6, Entitled "Semester Grades for High School."

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

PUBLIC SPEAKERS ON AGENDA TOPICS

➤ The Clerk read the opening statement regarding decorum for those who signed up to speak.

- Margaret Rankin – (Mid Terms & Finals Survey Results) She did not agree with the policy because it paints a one-sided view, and that students should not be excused from challenges until more evidence is presented to support the change.
- Angela Kilgore – (Resolution for Appeal) She did not agree with the resolution and questioned how many tax dollars will be spent on the appeal and lawyer fees. She felt that the focus should be on student safety because protection and quality education is most important to the constituents.

- Deborah Wahlstrom – (Bullying & Cyberbullying Survey, October 14, 2021 School Board Meeting Minutes) She did not agree with the bullying presentation and indicated that it was inaccurate. She felt that bullying cannot be resolved by using PBIS, Restorative Justice, or SEL/CRT integrated into academic and instruction. She felt that her concerns regarding student achievement were negated by Dr. Gordon.

REPORTS BY THE SUPERINTENDENT

- Good News Report: Ms. Ward, Community Engagement Officer, highlighted good news events happening throughout the division. She encouraged all to “Stay humble and remain hungry” and with educational achievements, the rewards are greater than the challenge.
 - WTKR Student Athlete of the Week: Asia Powell
 - Partnership Between SPS and Discovery Education
 - NSES Harvest Festival
 - KFHS Marching Band
 - LHS Theatre Festival
 - SPS Staff Continuing Education Recognition
 - Elementary Art Teacher of the Year – Angie Salerno
 - Teacher Spotlight
- Calendar of Special Events: Dr. Gordon highlighted events on the calendar emphasizing that approximately 30 people will be attending the Bring Your Legislator to School event.

CONSENT AGENDA

- Approval of the Consent Agenda

Vice Chair Byrum moved, and Member Jenkins seconded, the motion to accept the Consent Agenda.

Member Story requested the October 14, 2021 minutes be removed from the Consent Agenda.

The motion was amended to allow for approval of the Consent Agenda with the removal of minutes regarding the October 14, 2021 meeting of the School Board.

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

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

- Midterm/Final Survey Results (info item):
Dr. Lawson-Davenport presented information from a survey of teachers regarding exams. She explained that the survey was anonymous and voluntary for teachers and data was captured from across the division. She addressed the misconception that students will not be tested by stating that students will be tested (multiple quizzes then test) and those assessments (common assessments/unit tests, etc.) will drive instruction. Dr. Lawson-Davenport emphasized the importance of students receiving feedback from their learning which is not given after final exams. She clarified that the elimination of midterms and finals is not going to be substituted by another test but the focus will be redirected away

from one central test at the end of the semester to multiple assessments throughout the nine weeks or the semester so students can be assessed as they learn.

Members asked questions. Dr. Lawson-Davenport and Dr. Gordon provided answers. Some Members did not agree with this policy.

- Ordinance 21/22-22 – Amending Chapter 8, Article 31, Section 8-31.6, Entitled “Semester Grades for High School” of the Policies of the Suffolk City School Board

Vice Chair Byrum moved, and Member Johnson seconded, the motion to approve Article 31, Section 8-31.6, Semester Grades for High School.

During discussion on the motion, Board Members expressed their opinion as to moving forward and changing with the times to ensure that our students are and will remain competitive. Other Members did not agree with the policy change and felt rushed to decide to eliminate midterm and final exams.

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

- Ordinance 21/22-21 through Ordinance 21/22-38

Vice-Chair Byrum moved, and Member Mayo seconded, the motion to approve Ordinances 21/22-21 through 21/22-38.

Member Riddick requested an amendment to the motion and asked that Ordinance 21/22-21 and Ordinance 21/22-35 be set aside to be voted on separately.

Member Story also requested an amendment to the motion and asked that Ordinance 21/22-36 be set aside to be voted on separately. Both amendments were accepted.

The amended motion was to approve Ordinances 21/22-21 through 21/22-38 with the exclusion of Ordinance 21/22-21, Ordinance 21/22-35, and Ordinance 21/22-36.

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

- Ordinance 21/22-21: Amending Chapter 5, Article 4, Section 5-4.2, Entitled “Maximum Safety and Efficiency Required: Review of Bus Routes; Traffic Control Plan Required; Superintendent to Develop Regulations” of the Policies of the Suffolk City School Board

Vice-Chair Byrum moved, and Member Johnson seconded, the motion to approve Ordinances 21/22-21.

Board Member Riddick expressed the desire to add to the ordinance that students sit no more than two students per seat when being transported on a school bus and felt that he had been misled to believe that this was in fact already taking place. Board Member Riddick expressed concerns about the rise in Covid infections. Member Riddick understood why the policy was altered to reflect current reading however, he was insistent that students not sit more than two per seat. Clarification was provided that with many drivers

out, students were doubled up on buses so that students could get home in a timely manner, and to stay on schedule as much as possible. Member Riddick indicated that the problem on the buses is not an attendance issue, but is due to bad routing.

Member Riddick amended the motion, and Member Story seconded, the amended motion to include that students are limited during the time of Covid -19 to sit no more than two students to a seat.

Member Story agreed with the amended motion and suggested finding alternate ways to transport students to/from school such as using Ubers, and asking the public for input. Dr. Gordon stated that it is illegal to use Ubers to transport student however, he provided insight as to why it is challenging keeping two students to a seat and getting students home in a timely manner. He also indicated that incentives are being provided for new drivers so that Suffolk Public Schools is competitive with other divisions. He stated that the entire country is experiencing bus driver shortages. Bonuses are being given to drivers who come to work daily, and that being fully staffed is the only solution to this problem.

Member Johnson moved, and Member Mayo seconded, the motion to table this (Ordinance, Motions, and discussion) until December 9th.

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

- Ordinance 21/22-35: Amending Chapter 10, Article 3, Section 10-3.5, Entitled “Virginia Freedom of Information Act; Penalties for Violation of the Act; School FOIA Officer; Training Required” of the Policies of the Suffolk City School Board

Vice Chair Byrum moved, and Member Mayo seconded, the motion that we approve Ordinance 21/22-35 Entitled Virginia Freedom of Information Act; Penalties for Violation of the Act, School FOIA Officer; Training Required.

Member Riddick suggested amending the motion to require training every year versus every two years and to extend it to include Board Members, Board Clerk, Superintendent, Board Attorney, as well as any persons acting in the capacity of a FOIA Officer.

Attorney Waller provided clarification regarding state code requirements for FOIA training. Conversation ensued regarding FOIA training.

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

- Ordinance 21/22-36: Amending Chapter 10, Article 18, Section 10-18.2, Entitled “Public Safety and parent and Student Rights; Interviews by School Resources Officer; Interviews of Students by Law Enforcement Authorities at School About School Related Incidents; Law Enforcement Interviews about Non-School Related Matters Conducted Away from School; Service of Process at School; Development of Programs; Report to Law Enforcement Officials” of the Policies of the Suffolk City School Board

Vice Chair Byrum moved, and Member Johnson seconded, the motion to approve Ordinance 21/22-36: Amending Chapter 10, Article 18, Section 10-18.2, Entitled “Public

Safety and parent and Student Rights; Interviews by School Resources Officer; Interviews of Students by Law Enforcement Authorities at School About School Related Incidents; Law Enforcement Interviews about Non-School Related Matters Conducted Away from School; Service of Process at School; Development of Programs; Report to Law Enforcement Officials”

Member Story expressed concern regarding the language of the policy and felt that parents should be notified if their child is going to be questioned/interviewed at school.

Clarification was provided regarding what changed in the policy. What Member Story expressed was not the policy change being voted upon. The language in the policy has long been in place and had not been submitted for changes. Attention was directed to the actual changes in the policy located on a subsequent page.

Dr. Gordon stated that the suggested change in policy now aligns with the MOU between Suffolk Public Schools and the Suffolk City Police Department, and allows flexibility with interviews, it does not pit parents against the division, and that students have the right to terminate an interview at any time.

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

NEW BUSINESS

➤ School Board Minutes: October 14, 2021 – Monthly School Board Meeting

Member Story did not agree with using asterisks to highlight certain statements in the minutes and felt that it was used to bring special attention to the information. She suggested that the asterisks be removed. She questioned why specific comments were recorded while other comments were not. Member Story expressed her displeasure with the inclusion of bullets and asterisks in the minutes and explained that those differences are inconsistent and does not show equality between Board Members. She stated that the minutes are an example of a conflict of interest as the Clerk serves not only the Board but is also the Assistant to the Superintendent.

Vice Chair Byrum moved, and Member Jenkins seconded, the motion to approve the School Board Minutes as recorded October 14, 2021.

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

➤ Proposed Courses 2022-2023

Vice Chair Byrum moved, and Member Mayo seconded the motion to approve the courses as recommended.

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

- **Resolution Number 21/22-8: A Resolution of the School Board for the City of Suffolk, Virginia Authorizing the Prosecution of an Appeal to the Supreme Court of Virginia in the Case of Deborah Wahlstrom V. Suffolk City School Board, ET. ALS.**

Vice Chair Byrum moved, and Member Johnson seconded the motion to accept the Resolution as read.

Member Story asked several questions regarding the case and felt that the Board is going to court unnecessarily. Answers to her questions were provided by the School Board Attorney however, other Members agreed that the Board has the right to defend itself just as others do who have been attacked.

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

- **Legislative Committee Report:**

- **Amendment #1 – Fair Assessment of Limited English Proficient Students**

Vice Chair Byrum moved, and Member Johnson seconded the motion to accept Fair Assessment of Limited English Proficient Students.

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

- **Amendment #2 – Education Technology Funding**

Member Johnson moved, and Member Riddick seconded the motion to accept that (Education Technology Funding).

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

- **Amendment #3 – Local School Board’s Constitutional Authority**

Vice Chair Byrum moved, and Member Jenkins seconded the motion to approve that (Local School Board’s Constitutional Authority).

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

- **Amendment #4 – Increased Student Access for Internships/Apprenticeships**

Vice Chair Byrum moved, and Member Johnson seconded the motion to approve that (Increased Student Access for Internships/Apprenticeships).

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

- **Amendment #5 – School Board Authority and Governance**

Vice Chair Byrum moved, and Member Johnson seconded the motion to approve that (School Board Authority and Governance).

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

- **Amendment #6 – Student Health, Wellness, and Safety**

Vice Chair Byrum moved, and Member Jenkins seconded the motion to approve that (Student Health, Wellness, and Safety).

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

- **Amendment #7 – Twenty-First Century Communications for School Boards**

Vice Chair Byrum moved, and Member Jenkins seconded the motion to approve (Twenty-First Century Communications for School Boards).

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

- **Amendment #8 – School Facility Construction Funds and Financing**

Vice Chair Byrum moved, and Member Johnson seconded the motion to approve (School Facility Construction Funds and Financing).

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

- **Amendment #9 – School Facilities Funding**

Vice Chair Byrum moved, and Member Jenkins seconded the motion to approve (School Facilities Funding).

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

- **Covid Testing Program (info item) – Richard Fortune, Supervisor of Activities and Athletics provided an update to the covid testing program. SPS has collaborated with the company Aegis to provide covid testing to our students via the TestingWorks! Program. Results from these tests will be reported, by email or text, to Suffolk Public Schools, parents, and the Virginia Department of Health. Consent is required before anyone can be tested.**
- **SEAC Annual Report (info item) – Saul Godinez, SEAC Committee Chair, presented information to the Board. He highlighted the committee's accomplishments and activities for the 2020-2021 school year. He stated that the goals for the 2021-2022 school year are to continue to focus on how students with disabilities are impacted by student academic performance, SOL Testing and Alternate Assessments, Transportation, and the Special Education budget, to name just a few.**

PUBLIC SPEAKERS ON NON-AGENDA TOPICS

- The Clerk read the statement regarding decorum for those scheduled to speak.
 - Nicole Sperry – (Bullying, Mitigation strategies for Covid at Schools, Conspiracy Theories Shared at Previous Meeting) She felt that the conspiracy theories regarding covid testing are unfounded and that bullying cannot be stopped unless all come together. She is also concerned that students are in close proximity in the classroom and while waiting for parent pickup. She also stated that adults should set the example by wearing their masks correctly.
 - Janet Woody-McKinney – (Tone Deaf School Board) She does not agree with having to specify topic(s) of discussion in order to address the Board. She also stated that the Board does not listen to its constituents and are not providing a safe environment for students.
 - Margaret Rankin – (Policy Reviews) She does not agree with the makeup of the Policy Committee and felt that others (citizens/parents/teachers) have no input in policy decisions. She stated that policy should not be made in a vacuum.
 - Angela Kilgore – (Teacher Shortage and Rejection of Certified Teachers When We Are Issuing Bonuses to Teachers for Being Overworked) She expressed her disappointment with Suffolk Public Schools not employing and retaining qualified teachers. She emphasized that 32 teachers resigned in one week and felt that these positions should be filled immediately. She asked if employment agencies are being used to vet teachers, if the agencies are LLC owned, and if SPS are vested in these agencies.
 - Jeff Sperry – (Covid Mitigation and Prevention Strategies) He encouraged all to get vaccinated and stated that his daughter was exposed to covid by a job she was forced to do by walking sick students to the nurse's office, which brought her in contact with other sick students. He indicated that his daughter was called a liar as it is disputed that his child assisted sick children.
 - Carly Bosco – (Volunteers in School Buildings) She indicated that volunteers are needed especially at the elementary level and that these volunteers would be glad to assist teachers and will lighten their work load. She stated that volunteers should have to prove their vaccination status before being approved to volunteer.

Board Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck clarified that the statement regarding 32 teachers resigning in one week is not accurate. She also provided clarity regarding the statement that SPS hired an employment agency to interview teachers. She indicated that this was a story on social media. Dr. Brown, Human Resources Director and Dr. Gordon indicated that no such action had been taken.

BUSINESS BY BOARD MEMBERS

- Board Members were thankful to Dr. Gordon and his staff for their leadership and hard work and thanked the citizens for coming to speak. They were also excited about the good things happening in the division and looked forward to the many wonderful things to come. They congratulated Mrs. Salerno for her accomplishment as the State of VA Elementary Art Teacher of the Year. Members recognized and welcomed Heather Howell to the Board and are looking forward to working with her.
- Several Members expressed their concern with the current negative treatment of Board Members and Dr. Gordon. They reminded all that the children are watching and that the

adults should be setting the example. They emphasized the fact that the teachers are under enormous stress and suggested some duties/responsibilities should be adjusted to help alleviate these pressures.

- Condolences were offered to the Sperry family on the loss of their daughter Theresa.
- Member Riddick informed his constituents of a Town Hall to be held for the Suffolk Borough, November 8th, 6:30 p.m. – 8 p.m. at East Suffolk Recreation Center. Other boroughs will not be a part of this activity.

INFORMATION ITEMS

- SPS Health Dashboard Update
- Financial Report – Capital Projects
- Accident Report – October 2021
- SPS Condolence: Patricia Artis – 12 Months Custodian – OES – 22 Years of Service (5/3/1999) – Passed Away 10/23/2021

ADJOURNMENT

- There being no further business or questions Board Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck asked for a motion to adjourn the meeting.

Member Johnson moved, and Member Riddick seconded, the motion to adjourn.

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

Board Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck adjourned the November 4, 2021 School Board Meeting at 11:37 p.m.


Dr. Judith Brooks-Buck, *Board Chair*


Tarshia L. Gardner, *Board Clerk*