

REGULAR MEETING OF THE SUFFOLK CITY SCHOOL BOARD
Thursday, June 10, 2021 ~ 5:00 P.M.
Suffolk City Council Chambers, 442 W. Washington Street, Suffolk, VA 23434

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

Board Members Present:

Dr. Judith Brooks-Buck, *Chair*¹
Phyllis Byrum, *Vice Chair*
Karen Jenkins
Linda Johnson¹
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*

5:00 P.M. – OPENING OF PUBLIC MEETING/WORK SESSION

The School Board Meeting/Work Session was called to order by Vice-Chair Byrum.

SPS Visioning 2021 Presentation:

Dr. Gordon covered information on the following topics:

- Summer 2021: Summer Series – beginning July 5th - with a tiered approach (Summer Academy, Summer School, Summer Bridge). The Summer Bridge program will be used to try to make up for some of the learning loss from the 2019-2020 school year.
- Professional Learning Focus – to include Equity and Implicit Bias Training, Continuous Learning for Continuous Improvement, LEAD SPS, Instructional Innovation, and Virginia Tiered Systems of Support.
- Instructional Planning – to include Continued Curriculum Audit, Continuous Learning for Continuous Improvement, Instructional Innovation, Initiative Familiarity. We have to challenge our kids to make sure they are getting everything they need. We are pushing high engagement...asking teachers to be “Edutainers – part educator and part entertainer.”
- Dynamic Learning Environment – Dr. Gordon explained what these words mean and emphasized that this will be an important part of our division. He said our job is to make sure students and staff are excited to return to school in the fall. We want to be able to see and hear the energy when you walk into a classroom. Teachers will serve more as a facilitator in the classroom. Classrooms should be engaging and inviting. Dr. Gordon explained that teachers must have knowledge, pedagogy, creativity, engagement; instruction must be innovative and include pop culture; and students have four jobs: engagement, interests, edutainment, explanation. All will be required to participate in higher order thinking. Administrators must be prepared and show instructional leadership. They must model the behavior they want to see.

¹ Due to traffic delays, Board Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck and Member Johnson were not present at the beginning of the meeting. Vice-Chair Byrum opened the meeting and work session and began with the SPS Visioning Presentation by Dr. Gordon. Both Members arrived during this presentation.

- SPS Facilities and Maintenance Overview – Dr. Gordon explained that the branding and marketing will have students and staff excited about returning to their schools. SPS will also spend the next 18 months making repairs to include building maintenance upgrades, sinkhole repairs, painting, parking lot resurfacing, gym floors repairs, and creating a Center for Performing and Production Arts among many other projects.

Dr. Gordon indicated that there is a lot of work being done and he is excited about the coming school year. He then turned the meeting over to the Board Chair. Dr. Buck thanked Dr. Gordon for his presentation, explained the reasons for her tardiness, and asked members if they had any questions or comments regarding Dr. Gordon’s presentation.

Member Story asked what kids were targeted for the Summer Bridge Program. Dr. Gordon replied that the program will have open enrollment for everyone. Members thanked Dr. Gordon for his enthusiasm and for the information as they expressed their excitement for the coming school year.

Superintendent’s Evaluation Instrument:

Dr. Buck explained that the evaluation tool is the same tool used last year with the exception of the assessment as there are test scores available. The test scores will be a part of the evaluation tool this year. She then led the board through the document, explaining each standard. She encouraged all to ask questions during this time. She stated that each member will receive a binder of information by June 23rd to assist them in completing the evaluation. Dr. Buck also informed Members that everything was to be returned to Ms. Gardner no later than July 6th, by the close of business. Clarification was given to emphasize that the “close of business” means by 5 p.m. on July 6th.

Citizen Advisory Committee Appointments:

Dr. Buck explained that it was time to begin the process for making appointments to the Citizen Advisory Committees. She stated that if a member would like to keep their appointee from last year, the appointee must send a memo or some correspondence indicating their desire to remain on the committee. Members discussed details regarding letters, deadlines and asked questions. It was agreed that letters of interest must be received by July 12, 2021 to be considered for a committee. As letters are received, the Clerk would forward them to members for consideration. Members were to review the letters they receive and be prepared to select their appointee at the School Board Meeting on July 15, 2021.

There being no further questions or comments, the meeting was recessed by the Board Chair.

MEETING RECESS

RE-OPENING OF PUBIC MEETING:

The meeting was called to order by Chair, Dr. Brooks Buck and Member Johnson led all in the Pledge of Allegiance.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Vice-Chair Byrum moved, and Member Riddick seconded the motion to add under Consent Agenda a field trip for Lakeland High School on June 17-18, to Lynchburg, VA.

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

Member Johnson moved, and Member Jenkins seconded the motion to approve the agenda as written.

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

PUBLIC SPEAKERS ON AGENDA TOPICS

Two speakers, Deborah Wahlstrom and Jeanne Swain, commented on the Safety Audit Committee. They both expressed their frustration/disappointment with this committee and the committee's lack of information and focus on school safety versus disciplinary issues.

Speaker Richard Cecconi made comments regarding textbooks and PTA. Mr. Cecconi expressed his concern that textbooks are being purchased without them being made available to the public for review before the purchase. He suggested that these books be put online and made available for citizens. Mr. Cecconi also indicated that only six school in the district had a PTA organization. He indicated how important it is for kids to have parental involvement in their child's school through PTA and suggested that the Board look into this and work on making sure that all schools have a PTA organization that parents can be a part of.

REPORTS BY THE SUPERINTENDENT

Good News Reports: Dr. Gordon introduced Mr. Charles Brabble, Digital Communications Specialist, to present the following information from the Good News Report

- a. Student Recognitions (Brandon Campbell, Evelyn Taliaferro, Breon Clemons, Aubrey Freeman, Salma Amrou)
- b. Student Recognitions: Suffolk Art League – Sharon Picot & Chip Picot Student Scholarships (Ayanna Johnson, Miley Meadows, Ezekiel Pearson, Marianalla Salem, Easton Shores, Savannah Stephens, David Yohe, Kamryn Yohe)
- c. School Based Mental Health Grant
- d. SPS Teacher Spotlight – May

Dr. Gordon presented information from the Calendar of Special Events

CONSENT AGENDA

Member Story requested the removal of the following items from the Consent Agenda and add them to the agenda under New Business: #2 (2021-2022 Consolidated Grant Application), #13 (Resolution 20/21-29), #14 (Resolution 20/21-30), #15 (Resolution 20/21-31), and #16 (Resolution 20/21-32).

Vice Chair Byrum moved, and Member Mayo seconded, the motion to approve the Consent Agenda with the removal of items 2, 13, 14, 15, 16 to be added to New Business.

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

At this time, Dr. Gordon highlighted the new positions and employees to the SPS/SAO family:

- Darrell Medley – (current employee) new middle school Principal at KFMS.
- Dana Bilby – (current employee) new elementary school Principal at EFES.
- Dr. Janet Wright Davis – (current employee) new elementary school Principal at NPES.
- Jerilyn Dickey – (from Norfolk Public Schools) new Assistant Principal at JFKMS.
- Amber Reese – (from Chesapeake Public Schools) new middle school Assistant Principal.
- Dr. Angela King – (Chesapeake Public Schools) new Supervisor of School Counseling (new position).
- Mr. Richard Fortune (Hampton Public Schools) new Supervisor of Student Activities and Athletics (new position).
- Dr. Joleen Neighbours – (current employee) new Supervisor of Fine and Performing Arts (new position).
- Cynthia Deevers – (current employee) new Supervisor of Social Emotional Support (new position).

Dr. Gordon concluded the personnel announcements and Dr. Buck express her excitement to have these individuals in place with SPS and is looking forward to their success.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

There was no unfinished business.

NEW BUSINESS

SPS Health Dashboard:

Dr. Gordon explained that Dr. Rice had a family emergency and would not be in attendance. He stated that SPS is in the yellow and the green but paused to give caution due to a recorded spike in cases. He highlighted the stats for Suffolk and indicated that the numbers can change if we do not follow the safety precautions. He mentioned that there was an increase in cases in school aged children 7-9 for the Western Tidewater area. Dr. Gordon indicated that this would be the last report of this data unless there is a spike in cases. He then paused for questions. (There were no questions.)

Dr. Buck stated that everyone did not honor the honor code and if you are here and you know you did not take the vaccine to respect the rights of other people and wear your mask. Dr. Gordon stated that individuals attending graduation must wear a mask.

Safety Audit Committee Presentation:

Dr. Gordon introduced Mr. LeFevre to present information to the Board. Mr. LeFevre explained the interventions currently in place at SPS including Western Tidewater, Social Emotional training, just to name a couple. He highlighted areas of concern from the committee and their recommendations.

Board Chair Brooks-Buck gave a history of how this committee was formed and the criteria for what they do. She asked Attorney Waller if any of the laws have changed which would require a change in the charge of this committee. Mr. Waller indicated that the charge that was given to the committee is the exact same definition of the Safety Audit that is in the Code of Virginia. He indicated that the charge is not limited to student behaviors. It is much broader however, it is consistent with the charge given.

Member Story stated that the language was changed back in March to match more of the directives. Mr. Waller agreed that changes were made and that those are the changes that she was seeing. She then asked if there was more instruction to be given to the committee. Mr. Waller replied no. Mr. Waller gave Member Story the code in the Code of VA to look up the definition of this committee. He explained that there was a difference in what Member Story thought was the definition of the School Safety Audit is and what a School Safety Audit Committee is charged to do. Member Story indicated that this was not what the DOJ stated as to what this committee was supposed to do. She then yielded back to the Board Chair. Mr. Waller gave further clarification stating that there are certain forms required to be completed as part of a school safety audit (e.g. School Crisis Plan, Emergency Management Plan, Medical Emergency Response Plan, etc.) these are a part of the forms that make up the audit. However, it is not the audit. He pointed out that the audit is the report being presented by Mr. LeFevre. Member Johnson gave further clarification that reports like the Emergency Management Plan is completed by the Fire Marshall's office, the Police office and those other offices in public safety. Member Johnson also stated that it is not fair to the committee to insinuate that things are not being handled correctly as this is just a presentation and not the end result. Member Story read a part (letter C) of the code that Mr. Waller referenced and suggested that the information read be included in the definition of what the School Safety Audit should be doing. The information will be referred to the Policy Committee for review.

Organizational Chart 2021-2022:

Dr. Gordon highlighted information from the organizational chart which include new/upgraded positions and employees. He indicated that some of the student activities will be expanded down to the elementary level with Mr. Fortune. This will increase student involvement. He explained each new position, giving the rationale and projected success with the new positions.

Vice-Chair Byrum moved, and Member Johnson seconded the motion to approve the organizational chart presented by Dr. Gordon for 2021-22.

There being no questions by board members, the vote began.

Upon a roll call vote, the vote was: (Jenkins, Johnson, Mayo, Riddick)

As Member Story was called for her vote, she began to explain why she was voting "no". The Clerk interrupted stating that once the vote has begun, a reply can be given after the conclusion of the voting process. Mr. Waller provided clarification by stating once the motion is made and the chair asks is there any discussion, that is the time to explain how you will vote and why. Board Chair Brooks-Buck indicated that she will give Member Story the opportunity to explain her vote at the conclusion of the vote as a time for discussion was not offered. At this time, the Clerk continued with the vote (Byrum, Brooks-Buck).

Aye: 6 / Nay: 1 (Story) / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed. 6 to 1 to 0.

Member Story explained her vote indicating the following:

- Good positions but it's a lot of money in one year.
- Positions involve insurance, how will these positions be sustained as these are expensive positions.
- Would like to have seen money amounts/extra added costs with these positions.

- Citizens did not see all of the positions to SAO, even though good positions, what's the added costs.
- Added more positions than what's budgeted.
- Money/finances are not clear of where the extra money is coming from.

Board Chair Brooks-Buck stated that all of the positions presented were all in the budget. With the budget that was just approved, these positions were included and funded. Those positions were discussed many times throughout the budget process.

Budget Adjustment #3 – 2020-2021:

Chair Brooks-Buck gave Member Story the opportunity to share her concerns with this item as she requested to move it from Consent Agenda to New Business. Member Story explained that she didn't not have a problem with the adjustment but she wanted the reason to be shared in public for the record so the public would know what the extra money is for. Mrs. Forsman stated that the adjustment was due to an increase in the grants budget. She also explained about CARES Act II money that was approved from the state. All of this required the authority to deposit the money into the bank which was approved by the City and now needed the Board's approval which is the reason for the budget adjustment.

Member Riddick moved, and Member Mayo seconded the motion to approve.

There being no questions by board members, the vote was taken.

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

Board Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck considered Items 5 (Resolution 20/21-29), 6 (Resolution 20/21-30), 7 (Resolution 20/21-31), 8 (Resolution 20/21-32) together as they all were regarding textbooks:

Member Story asked the following questions:

- Was there a public display to view the textbooks, were they online, did the public know that these textbooks were going to be adopted? – Mr. Hinds was called to the podium to address Member Story's questions. He explained the process and overall selection then indicated the following: there was a public review process; the textbooks were posted online on the webpage; public review was April 30th; hyperlinked on our webpage; was also republished with links. He also stated that additional steps were taken by placing an ad in the Suffolk News Herald paper and in their paper online. Mr. Hinds used his laptop to show these postings. Member Story was glad that the public heard his reply.

Member Riddick moved, and Member Jenkins seconded the motion to approve all the items as one.

There being no questions by board members, the vote was taken.

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

PUBLIC SPEAKERS ON NON-AGENDA TOPICS

The Clerk read the charge for all speakers.

Cindy Chafian spoke about Transparency and Accountability. She expressed her lack of faith in transparency with the Board and the district. She cited examples where transparency has failed including personal attacks, frivolous lawsuits, conflict of interest as the Board, in her opinion, would not allow a prom but a Board Member can host a private prom. Linda Johnson, who is widely disliked, was put in the Board's seat against the wishes of those of her borough.

At this time, Board Chair Brooks-Buck interrupted indicating that personal attacks are not allowed.

Ms. Chafian was allowed to continue. She continued with her disappointment with how SPS has money for stuff that parents strongly oppose. She stated that classrooms are not fully funded, and programs that are being implemented have Marxist agendas. She said they will demand transparency.

Ross and Deborah Norris spoke regarding concerns for their son Norris and how his experience with SPS and trying to gain access to certain clubs (National Honor's Society, Beta Club) is unacceptable. Norris' current GPA is 3.6 and he has experienced many instances of not receiving multiple awards due to errors/falsification of/with his GPA over the years. The parents stated that the lack of diversity on these advisory board and committees is disappointing. When their son was told that he did not get in the National Honors Society, he said "It's ok, I didn't think I would get in anyway" which broke his parents' hearts. Norris attends NRHS. The Board Chair offered to speak with the parents at a later time as their time to speak had expired.

At this time, the Board Chair read a statement to clarify misinformation. She indicated that she was reading the statement representing the School Board regarding the prom sponsored by the organization "Straighten Up and Fly Right." The letter highlighted the following:

- The prom is not a school sanctioned activity.
- It is not supported, endorsed or sanctioned by the Suffolk City School Board nor Suffolk Public Schools.
- SPS nor the School Board will be responsible or liable for any injuries and/or any damages of any kind suffered by anyone in attendance and participating in this event.
- This prom is a "Private" event sponsored by a "Private, Non-Profit" business as which the Board and SPS have no connection.

BUSINESS BY BOARD MEMBERS

At this time, Vice-Chair Byrum recommended a motion to limit Board comments this evening to five (5) minutes. The motion was seconded by Member Mayo.

There being no questions by board members, the vote was taken.

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

Board Members:

- The Board Members expressed their frustration and disappointment in all of the negativity and lies that has been circulating from within and outside of the Board. They agreed that it is sad when the only thing people do is to always look for the fault in the district instead of being uplifting and helpful.
- Member Johnson stated that she was not running for the board seat and that she was thankful to be a part of this board as they are transparent and work hard to meet the needs of students. She also said that she will continue speaking out and being a firm supporter of Suffolk Public Schools as she has seen firsthand their commitment to the students, staff and community.
- Members thanked Dr. Gordon and his team for all of their hard work, dedication, leadership, and for a job well done as teachers continued working tirelessly to support their students.
- Members were also thankful for the opportunity to receive training via paid conferences.
- Members also expressed their excitement with graduation, the special activities for the seniors of PLTW. Members were proud to attend the “White Coat Ceremony” and the “Capstone Presentations.” These programs captured students doing wonderful things.
- Members expressed their excitement about the great things going on in Suffolk Public Schools and commended the students for their work ethics in the middle of a pandemic. It was mentioned that our students are resilient and dedicated, and that many of our students were graduating with full scholarships to various colleges/universities.
- Member Riddick expressed his frustrations as he clarified the false information being circulated by a colleague regarding a prom being hosted by his non-profit organization “Straighten Up and Fly Right.” He indicated that he received two opinions from the Conflict of Interest and Ethics Council stating that there is no involvement of any sort that constitutes a conflict interest. He then asked Member Story to cease and desist from circulating false information as her actions are unwarranted, unacceptable, harassing and a violation of his rights as a citizen to conduct private business. He indicated that his attorneys will be contacting Member Story. He stated that people and their band of losers who could not handle their own school division of 1000, have the nerve to come to SPS and insult those who are successfully handling a division of over 14,000. He said that he has nothing to hide and if anyone wanted any information, all they had to do was ask.
- Board Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck clarified that all schools have PTA and PTSAs and that there is a volunteer portal available for individuals to apply if they are interested in volunteering in our schools. She also mentioned the wonderful work of the students who participated in the Congressional Art Show.

INFORMATIONAL ITEMS

The following items were provided as informational items only and Board Members asked no questions.

- Financial Report: Capital Projects
- Financial Report May 2021
- Accident Report May 2021

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business or questions, Board Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck adjourned the June 10, 2021 School Board Meeting at 9:11 p.m.

Dr. Judith Brooks-Buck, *Board Chair*

Tarshia L. Gardner, *Board Clerk*