

REGULAR MEETING MINUTES OF THE SUFFOLK CITY SCHOOL BOARD

Thursday, February 8, 2024 ~ 5:00 P.M.

Suffolk City Hall, 442 W. Washington Street, Suffolk, VA 23434

Board Members Present:

Karen Jenkins, *Chair*
Heather Howell, *Vice Chair*
Dr. Dawn Marie Brittingham
Dr. Judith Brooks-Buck
Phyllis Byrum
Tyron Riddick¹
Kimberly Slingluff

Administrative Staff Present:

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

Absent Administrative Staff:

Tarshia L. Gardner, *Clerk*

OPENING OF PUBLIC MEETING/WORK SESSION

➤ Call to Order:

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

➤ Presentation by Dr. Cardell Patillo, VSBA President

Dr. Patillo, Virginia School Boards Association President and School Board Chair from the Portsmouth Public Schools delivered greetings and expressed his deep appreciation for the Board's dedication to the education and well-being of the children of SPS and the community. He commended the Board for their tireless efforts and commitment to fostering and nurturing the educational environment. Dr. Patillo was excited to visit the Board during School Board Appreciation Month. He stated that the Board's role as advocates for children is both vital and challenging, and he thanked them for the countless hours dedicated to shaping the future of our youth. He further stated that their efforts were making a significant impact on the lives of the students and that their commitment to education is building the foundation for a brighter future for the children of Suffolk and the entire Commonwealth. Dr. Patillo read and presented a proclamation signed by Governor Youngkin of Virginia that honored School Board Members for the vital role they play in shaping the educational landscape of the State of Virginia. He thanked the Board and looked forward to their working together to ensure a brighter future for Virginia students.

➤ Calendar Committee Presentation

Dr. Okema Branch, Chief Academic Officer, discussed the 2024-2025 SPS Calendar. She highlighted the diverse group of committee participants (seven administrators, eight teachers, eight parents, and 15 others from various departments) covering levels from PreK-12th grade. The committee considered things that were priorities and "must haves" to both staff and students as well as items that were "nice-to-have" that could potentially be added to the calendar. Dr. Branch stated that a survey was sent to all SPS stakeholders asking if SPS should consider beginning school before Labor Day. An overall total of 5,517 responded that resulted

¹ Board Member Riddick arrived at 5:03 p.m.

in 48% being in favor of, 46% opposed to a pre Labor Day start and 6% of the respondents had no opinion. She explained the 2024-2025 calendar options were:

- **Option 1 Pre-Labor Day Start:** 1 Full; 4 Half-Clerical/Planning Days, 2 Full; 1 Half-Professional Learning Days, 8 Early Release Days, 2 End of Semester Transition Days (no students), 3 Parent Teacher Conference (½ days), Division Closed-Friday before Labor Day, Fall Break-Wednesday–Friday, Winter Break-Monday, December 23, 2024–Friday, January 3, 2025 (10 Days), Spring Break-April 14-18, 2025, Last day of school for students-June 6, 2025, Last day for teachers-June 6, 2025.
- **Option 1 Traditional Start:** 1 Full; 4 Half-Clerical Days, 2 Full; 1 Half-Professional Learning Days, 8-Early Release Days, 2 End of Semester Transition Days (no students), 3-Parent Teacher Conferences (½ days), Fall Break-Wednesday-Friday, Winter Break-Monday, December 23, 2024–Friday, January 3, 2025 (10 Days), Spring Break-April 14-18, 2025, Last day of school for students-June 13, 2025, Last day for teachers-June 13, 2025.

Calendar Committee’s recommendation for the 2024-2025 school year was Option 1 – Pre-Labor Day Start.

Board Members questioned the validity of the survey as they felt there was the possibility of staff completing the survey multiple times which could have skewed the data. They were also concerned that only 38% participated in the survey, the calendar options did not show an increase in professional development days, and that the early school start would impact parent/students summer vacation. It was expressed that the pre-Labor Day start would only benefit athletics and is not academically advantageous.

Mr. Dickerson, Coordinator of Research and Data, explained the possibility of staff members completing the survey multiple times as they were able to access the survey again using a different demographic, and that he could not differentiate between single versus multiple completers as the survey was anonymous. He also stated that the national average for individuals completing online surveys is 20% and the calendar survey received more than the national average.

Dr. Branch explained that the 2024-2025 calendar would provide teachers with additional planning/clerical days and a full two-week winter break. Dr. Gordon added that although the calendar looked similar to last year, based on survey feedback, breaks were a driving factor for the calendar selection. He also explained that the four days at the beginning of the school year would be beneficial for students and teachers as it provided additional instructional days at the start of school instead of at the end when students are fatigued.

Additional conversation, questions, explanations/clarification ensued between Board Members, Dr. Gordon and his staff.

➤ Communications & Community Engagement Update

Anthonette Dickens, Communications & Community Engagement Officer, explained that the connection with stakeholders occurs through three primary methods, mass notification (text messages, emails, and phone calls), local news outlets, and social media platforms. She also explained that through various community partnerships, business sponsors, and community events, stakeholders have the opportunity to engage with and work collaboratively with the school division. Mrs. Dickens highlighted the event “Strong Mind Strong Body” in partnership with Organic Roots Yoga Studio which focused on the mental health aspect of our students and staff. Additionally, partnerships with the Suffolk Police Department, Commonwealth Attorney’s Office, Sheriff’s Office, and the Norfolk FBI focused on

developing safe communities within SPS. Other partnerships and/or events include Parents and Partners, Nourishing our Neighbors, and the partnership with Belk which provided coats to families during the winter season. Other partnerships that are a part of our community leadership initiative help assist schools with monetary donations. For example, Believers Church provided four schools with a check for \$7500 (totaling \$30,000) to SPS. It's through alliances like this that help ensure the success of the students of Suffolk Public Schools. Mrs. Dickens stated that there were a total of 19 different events hosted by the division which provided an opportunity for families to participate and engage with Suffolk Public Schools. Mrs. Dickens also highlighted how communications and community engagement has expanded to be inclusive of all students by ensuring that newsletters are ADA compliant, and offered in 11 different languages. This allows for the opportunity to translate information and increase the connection with our ELL students.

Mrs. Towanda Shirley, Director of Special Education, provided highlights from various special education events and outreach programs which the students, parents, and the community were able to participate in. She stated building relationships with parents will aid in the attendance rate, offer support for student achievement, and provide parents with many available resources. Mrs. Shirley stated that one of the ways in which information and resources are provided to parents is through the "Tuesday's Tips Newsletter." This newsletter is posted through Peach Jar each week and it gives parents the awareness of various programs/information students can access (including postsecondary and transition tips), and upcoming conferences or trainings that may be available.

Board Members were appreciative of the report and thanked Mrs. Shirley, Mrs. Dickens and her team for keeping students and stakeholders engaged with Suffolk Public Schools.

➤ Strategic Plan Update

Dr. Okema Branch, Chief Academic Officer, provided an update regarding the Strategic Plan. She stated that some of the data in the report was not being captured in the previous plan indicators therefore there was no information to be used as a comparison. She also mentioned that the report covers half of the year, as all data will not be available until the school year has ended (i.e. the climate data). She reminded all of the vision, the six-point mission, the slogan, and the following four goals: Goal 1: Student Achievement, Goal 2: Climate and Culture, Goal 3: Human and Fiscal Resources, Goal 4: Community Engagement and Communication. Dr. Branch explained each goal, indicators, targeted initiatives, and highlighted increases/decreases in various areas. She stated that as an effort to give students as much exposure and opportunity as possible, after school transportation was provided for students needing it. She highlighted that the addition of S3's, support staff safety monitors, and teacher assistants, offered another level of support to students and staff, differentiated professional development/professional learning, and the initiatives used to increase staff retention gave more opportunity for behavior and instructional success and student achievement. She also stated that the various initiatives through Community Engagement including partnerships with businesses, and working collaboratively with community stakeholders on division-wide events helps us to be more inclusive and brings on a true partnership for the home/school community connection.

Board Chair Jenkins thanked Dr. Branch for her presentation and the work done which shows that the administration was listening to the Board. She expressed pride in the wonderful things happening within Suffolk Public Schools.

MEETING RECESS

- There being no additional business in the Work Session, Board Chair Jenkins recessed the meeting.

RE-OPENING OF PUBLIC MEETING

- Meeting Called to Order:
Board Chair Jenkins called to order the regular public meeting at 7:22 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.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

- Approval of Agenda:
Board Member Riddick moved and Board Members Dr. Brittingham and Slingluff seconded the motion to approve the agenda with a discussion by Board Members regarding School Board Engagement added to New Business.

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:
There were no speakers registered to address the Board.

REPORTS BY THE SUPERINTENDENT

- Good News Report:
Anthonette Dickens, Communications and Community Engagement Officer, highlighted information from the Good News Report. Believers Church was recognized as a Gold-Level Sponsor for donating a total of \$30,000 to SPS. Dr. Gordon and Mrs. Jenkins presented representatives from the Church with a certificate and gifts of appreciation for their support.
- School Board Appreciation Month & School Board Clerk Appreciation Week
In honor of School Board Appreciation month, Dr. Gordon recognized and presented gifts to School Board Members for their hard work and continued support of Suffolk Public Schools.

On behalf of the School Board, Board Chair Jenkins recognized and presented gifts to Ms. Gardner and Mrs. Johnson for School Board Clerk Appreciation Week. Board Chair Jenkins stated that Clerks are the glue that holds the Board together.
- Calendar of Special Events:
Dr. Gordon highlighted the events listed on SPS website for January/February. He highlighted the Parents as Partners event, thanking Dr. Branch and her team, our business partners, Chair Jenkins, Vice Chair Howell, and Board Member Slingluff for coming to support the event. Dr. Gordon congratulated Dr. Catherine Pichon, Director of Elementary Leadership, and Dr.

Kristal Taylor, Principal at Hillpoint Elementary School, for successfully defending their doctoral dissertations. Dr. Pichon earned the distinction of receiving “no comments/edits” on her dissertation defense. He also provided an update to the John F. Kennedy Middle School project. He thanked the staff, the IT department, and the staff at SECEP for making adjustments to ensure the success of the construction project. He also thanked Mr. Napier and his team and MB Kahn construction for strategically delivering (5 a.m.)/picking up (5 p.m.) materials at times that would not interrupt the day-to-day operations of the school. Dr. Gordon indicated that the project is proceeding extremely well.

CONSENT AGENDA

➤ Approval of the Consent Agenda:

Vice Chair Howell moved and Board 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.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

There was no unfinished.

NEW BUSINESS

➤ Calendar Committee Presentation

Board Member Riddick moved and Board Member Dr. Brittingham seconded the motion to table action on the School Calendar Committee until the meeting in March to give time for Board Members to engage with the community regarding the calendar options which will have an impact on staff, students and parents as partners.

Board Member Riddick felt that items were not being presented to the Board in a timely manner. He expressed concern over moving too fast with decisions without engaging with the community. Board Member Dr. Brittingham agreed with Mr. Riddick and recommended voting on a calendar option at the March meeting and deferring the pre-labor day start until the 2025-2026 school year. Dr. Brittingham highlighted a lack of support from the Holy Neck borough for the calendar options.

Vice Chair Howell asked for clarification of the recommendation, whether it was all encompassing or if voting was to be taken in parts. Mr. Riddick stated that based on his motion, the vote would be all encompassing and not considered in parts. Vice Chair Howell recommended considering the item in parts to allow for a compromise of options.

Dr. Gordon expressed his concern with tabling the calendar options as the issue regarding vacation planning will still be a point of discussion. He also indicated that February approval of the calendar by the Board allows for the division to move forward with summer planning and a delay would have a trickle-down effect on summer school, and the start of teacher work days, etc. Dr. Gordon stated that delaying a vote on the calendar to receive additional feedback from the community is one thing, but delaying to 2025-2026 school year goes against the data from the survey which favored a 2024-2025 Pre-Labor Day start.

Additional conversation ensued between Board Members and the Superintendent.

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

- Resolution 23/24-21: A Resolution of the School Board of the City of Suffolk, Virginia, Approving the Policy Services Agreement Between VSBA and Suffolk City School Board

Vice Chair Howell moved and Board Member Dr. Brooks-Buck seconded the motion to approve Resolution 23/24-21 as presented.

Upon electronic vote, the vote was: Aye: 6 / Nay: 1 (Dr. Brittingham) / Abstain: 0. The motion passed by vote of 6 to 1.

- Ordinance 23/24-47: An Ordinance Amending Chapter 7, Article 26, Section 7-26.3 entitled "Professional Staff Development; professional development for teachers and principals; 2024-2025 school year training in science-based reading research; required participation by instructional personnel" of the Policies of the Suffolk City School Board - Second Reading

Board Member Dr. Brooks-Buck moved and Board Member Byrum seconded the motion to approve Ordinance 23/24-47 as presented.

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

- Ordinance 23/24-67: An Ordinance Amending Chapter 10, Article 3, Section 10-3.5 entitled "Virginia Freedom of Information Act; public record defined; not required to create a public record; rights of citizens; making a request for public records; penalties for altering or destroying public records; School FOIA Officer; Training required; types of records; commonly used exemptions" of the Policies of the Suffolk City School Board - Second Reading

Board Member Dr. Brooks-Buck moved and Vice Chair Howell seconded the motion to approve Ordinance 23/24-67 as presented.

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

- School Board Engagement Discussion

Board Member Riddick recommended that the Board increase its level of community and school involvement/engagement. He suggested that the Board should have thorough engagement with the schools through school events, and to have access to the facilities owned and operated by SPS in order to know what's going on within the school division. He expressed that the Board doesn't have a clearly defined scope of engagement and that Board Members could have a more meaningful impact by having a presence in the schools. Board Member Riddick also suggested instituting a school board scholarship.

Board Chair Jenkins stated that there are many opportunities available to all board members to engage with the schools as she had attended six events within the week. She encouraged members to volunteer and become members of the PTA as a way to connect and engage with schools. She agreed that members should be engaged but stated that it must be done properly. She did not agree with going into schools unannounced.

Board Member Riddick felt that his suggestions were misunderstood. He clarified that the Board as a whole, as a unit, not individual engagement, should have a plan of action for engagement as a body. He felt that board members are not in the building enough which precipitates the uneasiness of staff when members are present in the buildings. He suggested planning what Board engagement should look like. He also stated that in order to make an accurate assessment of what's going on and the needs of the schools, unannounced visits would be necessary. He added that when staff know that Board Members are coming to visit their building, they put their best foot forward and encourage their students to be on their best behavior. Board Member Riddick stated that just as teachers have surprise evaluation, pop visits should be done as well. He further stated that all of the things requested is a part of board engagement.

Board Member Dr. Brooks-Buck highlighted the engagement she has done and stressed the fact that this level of engagement is also available to all board members by volunteering and participating in various school activities. She does not agree that the Board as a whole should have a particular schedule due to all members being busy with work, volunteering, and/or family obligations. She does not agree with someone else dictating her schedule or any other Board Member's schedule for engagement because opportunities are available to everyone at a time that's convenient for the Member. Board Member Dr. Brooks-Buck stated there is a difference between governance and administrative day-to-day and it is not the Board's job to go in and catch anyone doing anything that they are not supposed to be doing. She added that as a Board Member, she talks with the General Assembly, Congress, the local government (City Council) about policy, governance, and the needs of the division, not making pop visits in schools which is not a part of governance. Dr. Brooks-Buck indicated that engagement may be different for each Board Member as there are seven different communities to consider and each member operates/engages in the way best suited for the needs of their constituents. She also highlighted her contributions to scholarships given out by the Superintendent. She stated that the Board never agreed to a scholarship as it is not something that must be done. She felt that the Board should concentrate on Board responsibilities and not try to catch people doing anything outside of their job.

Board Member Riddick felt that his requests were misconstrued and that the requests were for the Board as a whole, not individual engagement. He highlighted past events that the Board no longer does, such as community tours. He stated how that would be a way for Board Members to understand the needs of other communities, not just their own borough.

Board Member Riddick moved and Board Member Dr. Brittingham seconded the motion for Board Members to be allowed one week per quarter to enter into the school system and access all real property owned or leased by Suffolk Public Schools. Not to interfere with the day-to-day, but to do a walk-through.

Dr. Gordon, requested additional information/clarification as the motion by Board Member Riddick. He felt that the term "walk-through" meant investigation which interferes with day-to-day operations. Anything seen or discussed is to be referred to the superintendent, and Board Members shouldn't be meeting with teachers and principals. Board Members are responsible for governance and policy. Dr. Gordon expressed his concern about potential gray areas, adjustments in the "Norms and Protocols," policies, etc. He felt that the short notice change does not give the Superintendent, his team, faculty and staff enough notice to understand the ramifications of this request. He expressed his agreement with Board Member Riddick until the point of making pop visits as it crosses over into school board responsibilities

and staff responsibilities. Dr. Gordon asked to see in writing what these visits would entail before the Board vote.

Board Members were asked to cast their vote when Board Member Byrum asked for the motion to be restated. The Clerk stated the motion:

Board Member Riddick moved and Board Member Dr. Brittingham seconded the motion that Board Members be allowed to access to all property of Suffolk Public Schools to do a walk-through, one week out of each quarter.

Upon electronic vote, the vote was: Aye: 4 / Nay: 3 (Dr. Brooks-Buck/Byrum/Jenkins) / Abstain: 0. The motion passed by vote of 4 to 3.

PUBLIC SPEAKERS ON NON-AGENDA TOPICS

➤ Citizen Comments on Non-Agenda Items:

The Clerk read the statement regarding decorum for those scheduled to speak.

Jonathan Powell – (Projected Improvements within SPS and Budget Formulation) Mr. Powell expressed his concerns with his FOIA request regarding contract requirements not being fulfilled. He indicated that 21 days has passed without a response. He also expressed his concern with the lack of information, no fact findings, and no failures/successes being discussed by the Board regarding SPS mass casualty events. He asked if the planning committee had met to discuss the issues and if a plan is being modified to ensure the safety of all citizens, staff, and teachers.

BUSINESS BY BOARD MEMBERS

➤ Comments and Reports by School Board Members:

- Congratulated and commended the administrators who gave presentations during the School Board Work Session, the teachers recognized in the Teacher Spotlight section of the Good News Report, and the Food Service intern students for doing a great job.
- Thanked Believers Church for their support of SPS and the students as they continue leading the way for others to follow, Dr. Neighbours and the Center for Production and Performing Arts for exposing students to Grammy Award winning talent, LHS for the School Board Appreciation Gift, the Special Education Department for their hard work and for fully engaging with parents during events, Dr. Gordon and his team and all SPS staff for the excellent work that they do, and Board Members for their gifts and talents for School Board Appreciation Month.
- Attended and enjoyed the Finance Committee Meeting, the Purple Star event and the band at CFCMS, the Parents as Partners event, and the CTE Professional Student Conference. All were encouraged to attend these events and other events throughout the division as this is a way to support students and schools. Also attended and appreciated the information shared at the Gun Violence Awareness event at NRHS.
- Received a scholarship to attend the Noah Webster School Board Training. Enjoyed two days of excellent, informative, and cutting edge training via various seminars. Attended the VSBA Capital Conference and learned about potential upcoming legislation and enjoyed the eye-opening presentation on vaping. Also attended SWES Health and Wellness event.

- Reminded and encouraged all to attend the Special School Board Meeting regarding the Budget being held on February 29th, and a Town Hall in the Suffolk Borough (date and time to be announce in a few days.)
- Highlighted a homework help center opening in March and asked for volunteers who could tutor in Math and Reading. Also highlighted a tutoring program through Southside Baptist Church which partners with Kilby Shores Elementary School.
- Recommended that during the development of the strategic plan, to set measurable goals that are in line with student achievement and school safety.
- Encouraged teachers and students to keep striving for excellence, and thanked them for showing up every day and for giving it their best. Also thanked everyone for attending to the meeting in person or via YouTube.
- Stated that all members and their boroughs are different, and asked members to do positive things to ensure the safety of all schools.

INFORMATION ITEMS

- Accident Report – January 2024
- Capital Projects Financial Statement
- Financial Report January 2024
- SPS Condolence: Kathy Dearsley – Retired Bus Driver (2023) – 13 Years of Service – Passed Away 01/11/2024

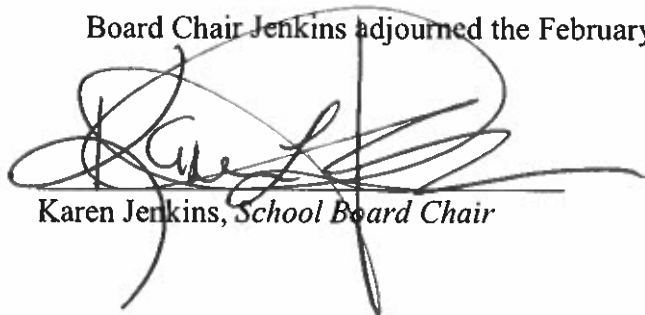
ADJOURNMENT

➤ Adjournment of Meeting:

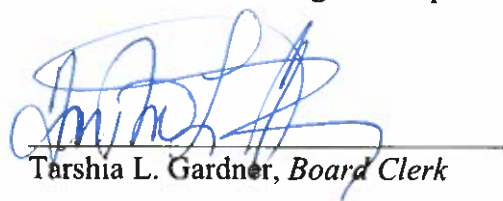
Board Member Dr. Brooks-Buck moved and Board Member Dr. Brittingham seconded the motion to adjourn the February 8, 2024 School Board Meeting.

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

Board Chair Jenkins adjourned the February 8, 2024 School Board Meeting at 9:06 p.m.



Karen Jenkins, *School Board Chair*



Tarshia L. Gardner, *Board Clerk*

