

REGULAR MEETING MINUTES OF THE SUFFOLK CITY SCHOOL BOARD
Thursday, February 10, 2022 ~ 5:00 P.M.
City Council Chamber, 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*
Phyllis Byrum, *Vice Chair*
Heather Howell
Karen Jenkins
Lorita Mayo
Tyron Riddick
Sherri Story¹

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. Brooks-Buck welcomed everyone to the work session and reminded those in attendance of the CDC guidelines and mitigation protocol. All persons not wearing a mask were asked to leave the room.

Board Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck asked Mrs. Story to wear her mask and she refused to put it on. There was a back and forth exchange between Board Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck and Member Story.

Board Chair Dr. Brooks Buck asked Attorney Waller to read a motion due to Member Story's noncompliance with wearing her mask. Attorney Waller read the following:

As provided for by Robert's Rules of Order, a motion is needed to remove Sherri D. Story from City Council Chambers because of her failure to abide by the order of the Chair and CDC Guidelines that all fully vaccinated and unvaccinated people wear a mask in public indoor settings in areas of substantial or high transmission to prevent the spread of the coronavirus infections. The transmission level currently being high in the City of Suffolk.

Vice-Chair Byrum made the motion consistent with the statement read by Attorney Waller, and Member Jenkins seconded the motion to approve the motion.

¹ Board Member Sherri Story was escorted from the meeting due to her failure to abide by the order of the Chair and CDC Guidelines that all fully vaccinated and unvaccinated people wear a mask in public indoor settings in areas of substantial or high transmission to prevent the spread of the coronavirus infection.

Member Story did not agree with the motion and stated that the Board Members did not have the power nor the right to remove her from the meeting for not wearing a mask and that if she was removed from the meeting, it would be at the Board's peril. She threatened that they knew what would happen if she was removed without them having the power to do so and that the Board would run the risk of spending more money on a lawsuit. Story further stated that she was following the Governor's orders just as she had followed the last Governor's orders when she wore a mask while under emergency orders to do so and that there is currently no emergency and no mask mandate in place. Story said that as an elected official that she had the right to be at the meeting and that the removal process was a power play which had nothing to do with student achievement.

Several exchanges occurred between Board Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck and Member Story and members of the audience began speaking out which also disrupted the meeting. Police Officers were instructed to escort persons disrupting the meeting from Council Chamber.

Board Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck indicated that the rules for all School Board Meetings still apply to Members and persons in attendance whether the meeting is being conducted at City Hall or on school property. She also stated that she has the right to run the meeting in accordance with those rules. However, several unmasked members in the audience continued to speak out which caused disruptions and were escorted out from the Chamber.

Board Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck indicated her wishes for everyone to remain in attendance for the meeting, including Mrs. Story, but the choice was theirs to wear a mask and remain or to not wear a mask and be removed from the meeting.

Upon a roll-call vote, the vote was: Aye: 4 / Nay: 2 (Howell/Story) / Abstain: 1 (Jenkins). The motion Passed. 4 to 2

Member Story refused to put on her mask and refused to leave her seat therefore, Board Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck called for a 10 minutes break while they waited for Mrs. Story to be escorted from the meeting by police officers.

Dr. Brooks-Buck apologized to the public for the interruptions and once again reminded attendees to wear their mask while inside the building.

➤ **2023-2028 Focus Areas – SPS Strategic Plan**

Dr. Branch presented an overview of information that was based on the Board's feedback.

As Dr. Branch began her presentation, a citizen, who had previously been removed from the meeting, returned and sat in the Chamber without wearing a mask and became antagonistic with Board Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck. The citizen was escorted from the meeting for disrupting the meeting.

Member Riddick requested a Point of Privilege and asked if the Sergeant at Arms would not permit any persons escorted out of the Chamber to re-enter.

Dr. Branch continued her presentation highlighting the following focus areas:

- Student Achievement
- Climate and Culture
- Human and Fiscal Resources

- Community Engagement and Communication

Dr. Branch also identified what the next steps are in the Strategic Plan process:

- Identify short/long-term goals within each of the focus areas using SMART Goals.
- Each goal should specify a clear objective and identify one or more indicators that allow stakeholders to know whether that objective has been attained.
- School Board will then develop and implement an Action Plan.

Board Members had no questions.

➤ **SPS Online: Mid-Year Updates**

Dr. Branch presented updates to the Board by highlighting the following:

- Enrollment numbers (495)
- Instructional Setup, Staffing, and Impacts
- Student Transitions – In-person; Virtual
- Pros and Cons of Current Program
- Next Steps and Action Items

Dr. Gordon indicated that SPS Online will remain in effect for a while and that military and transfer families will also have the option of this program.

There being no further discussion the meeting was recessed.

● **MEETING RECESS**

● **RE-OPENING OF PUBLIC MEETING**

➤ **Call to Order:**

The meeting was called to order by the Board Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck.

➤ **Pledge of Allegiance:**

Board Member Howell lead all in the Pledge of Allegiance.

● **APPROVAL OF AGENDA**

Vice-Chair Byrum moved, and Member Riddick seconded the motion to adjust the agenda to move *Reports by the Superintendent* to follow *New Business*.

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

Vice-Chair Byrum moved, and Member Riddick seconded the motion to table Student Appeal #21/22-2 until February 23, 2022.

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

- **PUBLIC SPEAKERS ON AGENDA TOPICS**

- The Clerk read the opening statement regarding decorum for those who signed up to speak.
 - Carly Bosco (Personnel Report, Proposed School Calendar) – Thanked Dr. Brown for the changes to the Covid dashboard, Transportation for the smooth bus routes and bus tracker system, FBES staff for their daily efforts, and for the opportunity to participate on the calendar committee and suggested that schools start before Labor Day. She asked what was being done to address issues with teachers being disrespected by students, parents, and leadership? Ms. Bosco also felt that teachers were not being compensated for their lost time and requested that the Board act swiftly to remedy these issues and concerns.
 - Dr. Deborah Wahlstrom (Personnel Report, Payment of Bills and Payroll) – Did not agree with the Curriculum Committee having meetings before the Board approved the committee and stated that the process is very inconsistent. She agreed with improvements to the budget process but did not agree with the amount of monies spent for survey services. Dr. Wahlstrom hoped that students are benefitting from the Study Skills program as she was not able to ascertain student benefits or achievements. She also does not have confidence in the purchase card program.

- **CONSENT AGENDA**

- **Approval of the Consent Agenda**

Vice Chair Byrum moved, and Member Howell seconded, the motion to accept the Consent Agenda as written.

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

- **UNFINISHED BUSINESS**

There was no Unfinished Business.

- **NEW BUSINESS**

- Board Members set February 23, 2022, at 6 p.m., location being Col. Fred Cherry Middle School to have the Special School Board Meeting for the Superintendent's Presentation of the Proposed Budget.

Vice Chair Byrum moved, and Member Mayo seconded the motion to establish the special meeting for the Superintendent's Proposed Budget on February 23rd, 6 p.m. at Colonel Fred Cherry Middle School.

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

- **Calendar Committee 2022-2023**

Dr. Branch provided an overview of the calendar committee's process, timeline, and options. She thanked the committee members for their commitment to the work. She stated that the Committee was made up of 35 members of multiple stakeholders. The Committee

collectively voted and selected two options to be presented to the Board out of a total of eight calendar options. Dr. Branch highlighted that the vote was strictly by the Committee.

Member Riddick asked if Fall Break covered the entire week as other divisions have adopted. Dr. Branch stated that was not an option in the two that are being presented. The school divisions that chose to do so, their decision was not made in the original format of the calendar creation. Those days were built into their calendars after the fact due to teacher burnout to accommodate some days off. Dr. Branch clarified that each school division must complete 180 days or 990 hours, (SPS does both), and in order to add two days to the week of fall break, the school year must be extended or take other off days would be taken off and this would more than likely affect winter break.

Vice Chair Byrum moved, and Member Howell seconded the motion to approve Option 1 for the calendar for next year.

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 5 / Nay: 1 (Riddick) / Absent: 1 (Story). The motion Passed. 5 to 1

- Resolution Number 21/22-13: A Resolution of the School Board for the City of Suffolk, Virginia, Approving a Bid Award to Landtek Group, Inc. to Construct a Turf Field at Lakeland High School Pursuant to a Written Invitation to Bid Issued by Suffolk Public Schools.

Vice Chair Byrum moved, and Member Riddick seconded the motion to accept Resolution 21/22-13: A Resolution of the School Board for the City of Suffolk, Virginia, Approving a Bid Award to Landtek Group, Inc. to Construct a Turf Field at Lakeland High School Pursuant to a Bid Issued by Suffolk Public Schools.

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

REPORTS BY THE SUPERINTENDENT

- Good News Report: Ms. Ward, Community Engagement Officer, highlighted the following good news events that happened throughout the division.
 - SPS Alumni: Kalea Leverette, NRHS c/o 2011
 - 2022 Exhibit of Excellence
 - Kilby Shores Google Site Art Room
 - KFHS Git It Together: High School Seat Belt Challenge
 - KFHS Class of 2022 IB Diploma Candidates
 - Grants and Awards
 - January Teacher Spotlight
 - #BuildingTheBestSPS – Ms. Jones, Cafeteria Worker at OES
 - Green Star Educator Nominees
 - School Board Appreciation Month
 - School Board Clerk Appreciation

- Calendar of Special Events: Dr. Gordon spotlighted the events on the calendar.

- Dr. Gordon stated that Senate Bill 739 still needed to be approved in the House and that students must still wear masks on school busses according to Federal law. He also stated that employees are still required to wear masks as the Bill only addressed students, not staff and that masks can still be required at school board meetings as the Chair has the authority to set conditions for meetings. Dr. Gordon highlighted that SPS is about making sure there are as few disruptions as possible and that about 99% of students have no problem with wearing masks and that teachers overwhelmingly support masks in SPS. He stated that we are not trying to infringe on the rights of anyone, but are trying to protect all persons as the health condition of an individual is not known and that SPS is working hard to keep their students and staff safe. Dr. Gordon also thanked Mrs. Forsman and her team for a clean audit and stated why would SPS make changes to doing things differently when we get great audits and any information indicating something contrary to that is misinformation.
- Board Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck thanked Mrs. Forsman for another clean audit and emphasized that most people know that we are doing a good job. She also stated that City Council and the audit team was at Council's last meeting and agreed that they are the ones who handle our audit and they understand all that is involved.
- **PUBLIC SPEAKERS ON NON-AGENDA TOPICS**
 - The Clerk read the statement regarding decorum for those scheduled to speak.
 - Todd Puopolo (Masks in Schools) – **No show**
 - Greg Kasmark (Masks, Slop Lunch, Jail Atmosphere, Coworker Fallout, Bus Drivers) – **Cancelled, did not attend meeting**
 - Dr. Dawn Marie Brittingham (Budget, Audits, Reading Scores) – Stated that Suffolk Citizens for Accountability has continually asked for clarity on budget anomalies with athletics and purchasing cards. She asked for a full forensic audit of the entire budget, and asked when will SPS leadership and the Board address the following: lack of progress in reading, policies that negatively impact students and educators regarding masks, unconstitutional genetic jabs, and transgender policies. Dr. Brittingham feels that those issues are convoluted, not transparent, and that the Board is not being accountable.
 - Chloe Vinson (Bullying) – Stated that she was a victim of bullying at her school. She did not agree with the way the situation was handled. She felt that she had to hide from students and was scared/terrified to go to school. Chloe said she also tried to befriend her bullies but not all were willing to get to know her.
 - Margaret Rankin (SOL & PAL Data, Decline in Student Achievement) – **No show** However, Deborah Kliche yielded her time to read Margaret Rankin's letter. The letter indicated that the data from the VDOE from 2016 to present reflected a trending decline in achievement and the on-time graduation rate. Ms. Rankin is of the opinion that SPS students are not learning and not performing on grade level which is the direction that SPS should not continue. She suggested that the Board have open discussions and make changes that will directly benefit the students and stop acting like "bad things" are not happening in the schools. Ms. Rankin concluded with asking the Board to work at understanding what each teacher and student needs to be successful.
 - Dr. Deborah Wahlstrom (Misinformation, Division-Level School Safety Committee) – She felt that her comments at previous meetings were accurate. She disagreed with Board Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck and Dr. Gordon for responding to her comments and labeling them as misinformation. She also felt that it was inappropriate to for them to

chastise citizens for sharing verifiable information. She felt that the Chair was inaccurate when she stated that the lawsuit she filed against the Board had not been settled, when it was; however, the Board is appealing the court's decision. Dr. Wahlstrom expressed disappointment that all the people who volunteered to participate were not appointed to committees and she suggested that this was due to some form of discrimination. She asked the Board to do what's needed to get the committee back on track.

- James Lewis (Mask Mandate) – **Cancelled, did not attend meeting**
- Dan Spaulding (Concerns Over Covid Mitigation Strategies) – **Did not speak due to being removed earlier from the meeting**
- Lena Bandeau (Mask policy, mask shaming, various news articles, covid protocols, covid testing of athletes, violence in schools, lack of consequences, inaccurate/misleading information, inability of the Board to accept responsibility, hypocrisy of the Board) – She disagreed with the Board Chair telling a previous speaker how to fix bullying situations indicating it was the Chair's responsibility to fix them. She felt that the Board picked which mitigation strategies they would follow. They followed Governor Northam but not Governor Younkin. Ms. Bandeau said that Board Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck showed hypocrisy when she changed from a face shield to a face mask during the October meeting, and the Superintendent did as well when he posed for a picture during a National Night Out event in August not wearing a mask. She believes that the division should halt all Covid protocols including testing of athletes. She also disagrees with a statement made by Dr. Brooks-Buck that was printed in the Virginian Pilot on October 1, 2021 where she said that the Board was majority female and African-American which some white people resented. She asked for data supporting that statement. She felt that the comment was very divisive.
- George Mears (School Board and Superintendent dysfunction and hostility to public appeals to SPS transparency, elimination of race and LGBTQ indoctrination, and continuing need for School Board Members to resort to FOIA to access basic information that every School Board Member should have to reach intelligent public-school policy, health, and curriculum decisions) – He was of the opinion that School Board Meetings are self-congratulating pep rallies. He was also of the opinion that SPS schools were performing far below what was acceptable, which is why children are attending the private schools. Mr. Mears stated that he had the right as a taxpayer to demand better performing schools in the city. He stated that the School Board is not being transparent and that it is grossly wrong when School Board Members have to get information via FOIA requests. He also suggested that the board suffers from internal conflicts that play out in public and result in lawsuits. He informed the Board of his support of the recall effort and stated that the Board and their behavior must stop so they can focus on student issues that really matter. He went on to state that the Board and Superintendent must work together to improve student performance. He concluded his comments by suggesting that the public education system is broken.
- Teresa Anderson (Masks, Respect For Authority, and General Science) – Does not agree with the mask mandate by SPS and agrees with masking of students being the parent's choice. She was of the opinion that teachers and students have been harmed enough by the wearing of masks and stated that even Dr. Fauci stated that masks do not work.
- David Laumann (Concerns with School Administration) – **Did not speak due to being removed earlier from the meeting**

- **BUSINESS BY BOARD MEMBERS**

- Board Members thanked all who signed up to speak highlighting that communication is important and can be conducted with civility, professionalism and intelligence. Input is always welcomed from the community as they all strive to be on the same page with the students. We should all strive to treat all with kindness as did the student who spoke regarding bullying. She was commended for her bravery by combating bullying with kindness.
- Members thanked Dr. Gordon, his team, and the Clerks for their hard work, dedication, and the significant amount of time and hours contributed to Suffolk Public Schools. They also thanked Pastor Wilkins for his generosity as he supplied gifts to Members as an expression of his gratitude. They recognized the teachers and students who were highlighted in the Good News report and were proud to hear of their successes.
- Members expressed that despite the vicious personal attacks, criticism, bullying, and the difficulty in sitting and listening while the public tell only one side of a story, it was still their desire to serve on the Board. It was admonished that Members should be the example of the change they wish to see in the world and should stop wasting time with political protest and recognize that we live in a democracy. Members also stated that all bullying should be investigated and if there are any founded cases of bullying there should be zero tolerance. A Member also felt that safety concerns were not taken seriously and the reaction to those concerns were dismissive. The Member stated that there should not be a double standard.
- A Member also expressed that their education did not prepare them for school board duties during the Covid pandemic. It was explained that the Board was trying to do their best to keep students safe as they utilize the same safety protocols in place for the Governor's children who attend Georgetown Prep school. They have a mask mandate and vaccination requirements. The Member stated that fewer than five people complained about masking while parents and teachers thanked the Board for continuing the mask mandate in SPS. It was stressed that this measure was done for the health and safety of all students, employees and the community.
- Condolences were expressed for the loss of Mr. Curtis Milteer who served for over 40 years in city government, was a champion for public education and supported SPS. He will be greatly missed.

- **INFORMATION ITEMS**

- Accident Report – January 2022
- Financial Report: Capital Projects
- Financial Report – January 31, 2022
- SPS Health Dashboard Update

- **ADJOURNMENT**

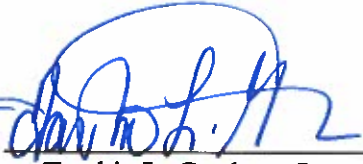
- There being no further business or questions Board Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck asked for a motion to adjourn the meeting.

Vice Chair Byrum moved, and Member Riddick seconded, the motion to adjourn the meeting.

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

Board Chair Dr. Brooks-Buck adjourned the February 10, 2022 School Board Meeting at 9:09 p.m.


Dr. Judith Brooks-Buck, *Board Chair*


Tarshia L. Gardner, *Board Clerk*