

The Rockbridge County School Board held a special meeting on Monday, January 29, 2024. The meeting was held at the Rockbridge County School Board Office.

Present: Chairman Neil Whitmore; Trustees Corey Berkstresser, Catie Brown, Kathy Burant, Lenna Ojure; Superintendent Phillip Thompson and Clerk Rhonda Humphries.

**CALL TO ORDER**

Chairman Whitmore called the meeting to order at 5:07 p.m.

**BUDGET WORK SESSION**

Superintendent Thompson stated this will be a challenging year but he has all confidence that it will be worked out with the Board of Supervisors. Ms. Leslie Ayers is now the Chair, with Dr. Dan Lyons as the Vice-Chair of the Board of Supervisors. Mr. David McDaniel, former Chair, will remain on the Executive Committee with Supervisor Ayers, as he wants to continue working with schools. Superintendent Thompson and Chairman Whitmore met with the Executive Committee recently informing them of challenges that are beginning to surface. Superintendent Thompson stated that all the school administration has is the Governor’s FY25 budget. Numbers that the school division is required to plan for the coming year are not yet available. Schools are required to make a budget at this time of the year with so many factors that will not be known until July 1. The last budget session resulted in board priorities, which were given to Mr. Jason Kirby, Chief Business Officer, to incorporate in the budget planning for FY25.

Mr. Jason Kirby, Chief Business Officer, provided an overview of the budget preparation for Fiscal Year 2024-2025. The following are presentation highlights:

**RCPS School Board Mission, Vision, and Goals**

**RCPS Local Composite Index (LCI)**

The state uses a local composite index to determine a school division’s ability to pay for the local required share of education costs for the Standards of Quality. The LCI is calculated every two years with each new biennium, and considers property value, adjusted gross income, taxable retail sales, and the student and total population in each school division/locality.

Recently, the state determined Rockbridge County to have a higher ability to pay for education when compared to the last biennium. Over the most recent five biennia, the LCI for Rockbridge County has been as follows:

|              |       |
|--------------|-------|
| 2016-2018 -- | .4522 |
| 2018-2020 -- | .4498 |
| 2020-2022 -- | .4506 |
| 2022-2024 -- | .4530 |
| 2024-2026 -- | .4847 |

This increase in LCI for the FY22-24 biennium essentially equates to a lesser percentage of state funding for RCPS over the next two fiscal years. The Rockbridge County School Board continues to advocate with our representatives in the General Assembly in hopes they would support revisiting how the LCI is calculated to ensure a more fair distribution of state funds to areas of true high need such as Rockbridge County. In this biennium, our ADM dropped while our population stayed the same. This along with rises in property values, adjusted gross income, and taxable sales has led to our significant increase in LCI. He referenced a meeting with Mr. Zack Robbins, Virginia House Appropriations Committee, in which it was learned more about the LCI and its factors.

- Chairman Whitmore inquired what the biggest factor is in determining the LCI.
  - Superintendent Thompson stated that this is the first year of feeling the covid effect with a higher increase than many across the state because there are many patrons who bought land here, are still paying taxes on their primary home in the northern part of the state and not contributing to our economy.
- Trustee Burant inquired when there will be an evaluation of the LCI as a funding model.
  - Mr. Kirby stated that the JLARC Study recently evaluated the funding model.
  - Superintendent Thompson stated that conversations are taking place in the General Assembly now that question whether or not the LCI is the proper model for Virginia to use when funding schools. Rockbridge County is considered a small, rural area and it is important to advocate at VDOE for small school divisions as this would help when getting stipends without touching the LCI model.

**RCPS Average Daily Members (ADM)**

The RCPS FY24 budget is based on a locally projected ADM of 2220. As of now, RCPS projected ADM is 2212 based off of our September 30th ADM, a difference of 8 fewer students.

The state projected ADM for FY25 is 2178, a difference of 34 fewer students. We do not feel that this is an accurate estimate of our ADM for the upcoming school year. The ADM estimate that RCPS will be using for budget preparation purposes for FY25 is 2200. When budgeting for FY25 and using an ADM of 2200, the estimated increase in state funding revenues will be approximately \$74,167 more than FY24 state revenues. This increase is contingent on RCPS giving a 1% bonus effective July 1, 2024. If we do not give this bonus payment, our FY25 revenues would decrease approximately \$20,301 from FY24 state revenues. This minimal increase in funding is due to the lack of a raise in the Governor's budget along with our increased LCI.

- Superintendent Thompson stated that he is hopeful that the house and senate budgets will be available by February 29 when we hope to meet with the Board of Supervisors.

**RCPS FY25 Mandatory Budgetary Considerations**

- **Worker's Compensation:** Potential increase; hopeful that it will be small, under \$5,000
- **Health Care Credit:** Figure is unknown as it comes directly from VRS
- **Virginia Local Disability Program (VLDP):** Figure is unknown as it comes directly from VRS
- **Virginia Retirement System:** Potential Decrease
- Trustee Ojura inquired if there is a VRS decrease, what are the objections?
  - Mr. Kirby stated that there is worry if VRS investments bottom out and make-up funds will be late.
  - Trustee Berkstresser inquired if the Virginia legislators vote on this issue and Mr. Kirby confirmed that they do vote on it.
- **Property & Casualty Insurance:** Potential increase  
Each year we look at these costs that either come from the General Assembly and the Governor or from the carrier and must factor them into our upcoming budget.

**RCPS FY25 Budget Considerations**

- **Classified Employees Salary Scales:**  
We were extremely excited to move all of our classified staff to a minimum of \$15 per hour. We are now at the point where we must look at our scales and decide how we want to compensate these employees moving forward.
  - Change our scales from experience based to skill based or a hybrid of experience and skill based. Mr. Kirby stated that there is value in the hybrid plan to train and gain value by gaining extra skills.
  - Give raises on a sliding scale for classified employees starting with higher raises for employees with more experience.
  - Create a brand new scale based on employee experience using pay bands. (Ex. Years 0-5 make \$15, Years 6-10 make \$15.50)
- Mr. Whitmore expressed he could see benefit of investigating all three models even though it would take longer.
- Superintendent Thompson stated that the division would have to budget the max amount with the assumption that all would want to do additional training for more money.
  - Trustee Ojura expressed her thought to restrict slots for the program and ask that employees state their individual case of why they should utilize the program with an agreement that they stay with Rockbridge County Public Schools for a specified amount of time.
- **Salary Increases for Teachers**  
As we plan for the 2024-2025 Fiscal Year, our analysis reveals that we have unfortunately fallen behind in salary compensation once again significantly in relation to our region. Teacher salaries must be maintained and improved in Rockbridge County in order to attract and retain highly qualified staff members. This is even more critical at this time due to the many teachers who are leaving our classrooms due to stress and increased workloads caused by the pandemic as well as retirements. Even with our current biennium budget including a 12% teacher salary increase, we have fallen further behind many of our surrounding school divisions. Each year that we cannot maintain pace with teacher pay, we will begin to fall farther behind other school divisions as we compete not only for the best teachers, but also to simply fill needed teacher and staff positions.

- Mr. Timothy Martino, Assistant Superintendent, stated that during interviews, applicants are getting offers from other localities.
  - Mr. Kirby stated that the goal is to attract teachers at the beginning of their career with an appealing salary. He stated that it would take approximately 1.5 million dollars to get back to the middle of the salary scale to try and keep up pace with surrounding school divisions.
- Trustee Berkstresser inquired if the state has any incentives.
  - Superintendent Thompson stated that there are compensation supplements, which are the bare minimum, but still lacking. They give part and the locality has to come up with the rest of the needed funding.
- Trustee Ojura inquired if there are estimates of change in cost of living.
  - Superintendent Thompson stated that, in talking with teachers, Rockbridge County is expensive to live in. He commended the Board of Supervisors for bringing in businesses to Rockbridge County such as fast food restaurants but is not sure of the tax benefit. He also stated that the county is losing students to home instruction and religious exemption.
    - Trustee Ojura stated that, in regard to home instruction, the division has to monitor it and should receive ADM because of the amount of work involved.
      - Superintendent Thompson stated that it has become a major part of daily routine. To effectively monitor home instruction, it requires quite a bit of time by office staff. This monitoring is effectively an unfunded mandate from the state.
      - Trustee Brown stated that the school board needs to advocate to legislators and relay the home instruction reality.

➤ Health Insurance

When we switched to Aetna for the 22-23 School Year, we were able to negotiate a credit for this current 23-24 school year of \$250,000 along with a guarantee of a rate increase of no more than 13.5%. Moving forward into the FY25 budget, we do not have the credit or any rate guarantees for next year. We must be mindful moving through this budget season that we need to be prepared to budget for any potential insurance related increases for the 24-25 school year. We are currently working with OneDigital and our consultant, Jim Gordon to get rates ASAP and are looking at several options including Local Choice, Other Carriers, and joining larger pools in order to try and control this cost as well as we can.

- Trustee Ojura inquired if we can switch providers.
  - Mr. Kirby stated that the administration is looking at possibilities.
- Trustee Burant inquired to the possibility of looking at larger pools.
  - Mr. Kirby said that it could be possible for Buena Vista, Rockbridge County, and Lexington City to pool together, but that all school divisions must be on board. He stated that another possibility was a consortium with the state of Virginia. He stated that Buena Vista utilizes a self-funded model. A self-funded model requires that the division would be the one taking the risk; Aetna now takes the risk for Rockbridge County Public Schools.
  - Superintendent Thompson stated that the insurance claim data is two months old and should not change much. He is hopeful that Aetna will want to keep Rockbridge County Public Schools.
  - Mr. Martino also cautioned in jumping to other plans as when the move was made to Aetna, most employees were covered.

➤ Inflation/Rising Costs of Supplies and Materials

Costs for everything from fuel to technology to maintenance materials have been on the rise for several years now. We have worked to control these costs and keep the increases within our current budgets for several years now, but with ESSER funding going away and our ADM going down, that is becoming tougher to maintain. Examples- Fuel, Computer Software, Computer Hardware, Cleaning Supplies, Maintenance Materials, Paper, Service Contracts, etc.

- Superintendent Thompson stated that there are priorities in place.
- Mr. Martino stated that the volume of what is being pushed out from VDOE is getting things through the instruction side quickly. He also stated that the RCPS instruction team is five to six people, with some teaching two courses.
  - Superintendent Thompson stated that other superintendents are beginning to get frustrated as well. Superintendent Thompson expressed his sentiments that delegates and senators have many topics to learn about and that it is the responsibility of school divisions to advocate for education.

Mr. Kirby stated that the house and senate budget should be passed by February 16, 2024 and that he will have more information by the end of the month, prior to meeting with the Board of Supervisors.

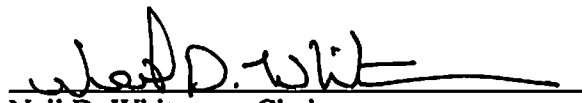
Superintendent Thompson stated that he is proud of our great faculty and staff, while noting that post covid the division has had to hire provisional teachers and career switchers and the responsibility to get them up to par falls on the administration of Rockbridge County Public Schools.

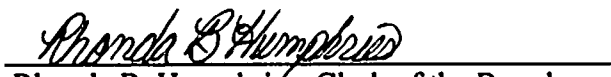
- Trustee Brown stated that there may be new teachers who may not have been in a classroom before.
- Mr. Martino stated that Rockbridge County Public Schools has mentors in place for new teachers. He also noted that recruiting is currently on going.

Chairman Whitmore asked for, and received, a consensus to propose a raise of 4% to be included in the budget.

**ADJOURNMENT:**

Upon motion by Trustee Brown, seconded by Trustee Burant, and passed by 3-0 vote, the meeting was adjourned at 6:27 p.m.

  
Neil D. Whitmore, Chairman

  
Rhonda B. Humphries, Clerk of the Board

The Discipline Committee of the Rockbridge County School Board held a special meeting on Tuesday, February 6, 2024 at Maury River Middle School.

Present: Trustees Corey Berkstresser, Catie Brown, and Lenna Ojure; Randy Walters, Chief Operations Officer; Ashley Rhodenizer, Discipline Committee Liaison.

**CALL TO ORDER:**

Trustee Berkstresser called the meeting to order at 5:15 p.m.

Under Section 2.2-3711.A (2) of the State Code, Trustee Brown recommended that the Board go into a *Closed Meeting* to discuss one student discipline matter. Motion was made by Trustee Brown, seconded by Trustee Ojure, and passed by 3-0 vote.

The Board entered into the *Closed Meeting* at 5:16 p.m.

The Board returned to open session at 6:35 p.m.

Trustee Berkstresser read the following motion to Certify the Closed Meeting:

WHEREAS, the Rockbridge County School Board has convened a closed meeting on this date pursuant to an affirmative recorded vote and in accordance with the provisions of the Virginia Freedom of Information Act; and

WHEREAS, Section 2.2-3712.D of the Code of Virginia requires a certification by this School Board that such closed meeting was conducted in conformity with Virginia law;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Rockbridge County School Board hereby certifies that, to the best of each member's knowledge, (i) only public business matters lawfully exempted by Virginia law were discussed in the closed meeting to which this certification applies, and (ii) only such public business matters as were identified in the motion convening the closed meeting were heard, discussed or considered.

Upon initial motion of Certification of Closed Meeting by Trustee Berkstresser, and seconded by Trustee Brown the motion passed by the following roll call vote:

Trustee Brown - Aye  
Trustee Ojure - Aye  
Trustee Berkstresser - Aye

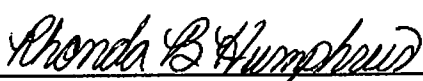
Upon motion by Trustee Brown, seconded by Trustee Ojure, and passed by unanimous vote, the following action was taken regarding student case number 2324-086-10 as a result of a violation of the student code of conduct.

1. Student will be referred to RAHC/CSB for counseling.
2. Student is suspended from the bus for the remainder of the 2023-2024 school year.
3. Student will attend the Alternative Education program for half of the day; the other half of the day will be spent in Strength Training, PE, Building Trades, and Auto Tech.
4. Student may not have any discipline referrals or will be brought back before the School Board Discipline Committee.
5. Student will be on social probation for the remainder of the 2023-2024 school year. During this probation period, student is not allowed to be on any Rockbridge County Public Schools' property after the regular school day; nor attend any extracurricular activities on other schools' property in which Rockbridge County Public Schools is participating.
6. Student will be referred for summer school.
7. Student will check in with Mrs. Little weekly.
8. Student must complete substance abuse counseling.

**ADJOURNMENT**

Upon motion by Trustee Ojure, seconded by Trustee Brown, and passed by 3-0 vote, the meeting adjourned at 6:37 p.m.

  
Corey W. Berkstresser, Trustee

  
Rhonda B. Humphries, Clerk of the Board