

The Rockbridge County School Board held their regular meeting on Tuesday, January 9, 2024, at the County of Rockbridge Administration Building.

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

CALL TO ORDER

Superintendent Thompson called the meeting to order at 5:30 p.m. and requested that everyone rise for the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag.

Superintendent Thompson stated that the first order of business would be the Board's re-organization for the year 2024 and asked for nominations for Board Chairman. Trustee Burant nominated Trustee Whitmore for Chairman and passed by a 5-0 roll call vote, with Trustee Whitmore being elected as Chairman.

- Trustee Berkstresser – Yes
- Trustee Brown – Yes
- Trustee Burant – Yes
- Trustee Ojure – Yes
- Trustee Whitmore – Yes

Chairman Whitmore asked for nominations for Vice-Chairman. Trustee Brown nominated Trustee Burant for Vice-Chairman, and passed by a following 5-0 vote roll call vote with Trustee Burant being elected as Vice-Chairman:

- Trustee Berkstresser – Yes
- Trustee Brown – Yes
- Trustee Burant – Yes
- Trustee Ojure – Yes
- Trustee Whitmore – Yes

Upon recommendation by Superintendent Thompson, motion by Trustee Brown, seconded by Trustee Burant, and passed by a 5-0 vote, the Board appointed Ms. Rhonda Humphries as Clerk for the calendar year 2024.

Upon recommendation by Superintendent Thompson, motion by Trustee Berkstresser, seconded by Trustee Burant, and passed by a 5-0 vote, the Board appointed Mr. Timothy Martino as Deputy Clerk for the calendar year 2023.

Upon recommendation by Superintendent Thompson, motion by Trustee Berkstresser, seconded by Trustee Ojure, and passed by a 5-0 vote, the Board named Mr. Timothy Martino as Superintendent's Designee through January 31, 2025.

Upon recommendation by Superintendent Thompson, motion by Trustee Ojure, seconded by Trustee Brown, and passed by a 5-0 vote, Dr. Phillip Thompson, Superintendent; Mr. Timothy Martino, Assistant Superintendent; Mr. David Daniels, Director of Financial Services; and Mr. Jason Kirby, Chief Business Officer were appointed as School Board Fiscal Agents with the authority to approve the payment of bills if the School Board is unable to meet.

Chairman Whitmore asked for discussion of committee assignments and the following committee members were designated:

- Discipline Committee: Trustee Berkstresser, Trustee Brown, Trustee Ojure
- Ad Hoc Committee: Trustee Whitmore, Trustee Burant
- Rockbridge County Public Schools Foundation: Trustee Brown

Chairman Whitmore announced that the Board will continue to conduct their regular meetings on the second Tuesday of each month beginning at 5:30 p.m.

Superintendent Thompson read the School Board Member Code of Conduct and requested that all School Board Members sign the document in agreement with the code of conduct.

CHANGES TO THE AGENDA: None

STUDENT / STAFF RECOGNITION: None

CONSENT AGENDA

Upon recommendation by Chairman Whitmore, motion by Trustee Lovell, seconded by Trustee Burant, the board approved the following items on the Consent Agenda:

- Minutes: 1) December 12, 2023 [Special Meeting]; 2) December 12, 2023 [Regular Meeting]; 3) December 13, 2023 [Discipline Committee Hearing]
- Field Trip and Bus Use Requests
- Fundraiser Requests
- Applications for Use of Facilities
- Appointments and Resignations

Appointments

Professional

Madison Lloyd, Elementary School Teacher, site to be determined, effective 2024-2025 school year

Support Staff

Ana Chavez, Teacher Assistant, Maury River Middle School, effective January 10, 2024

Food Service

Jennifer Williams

Substitute

Dillon Seawright

Cyanne Harkins

Kendall Nye

Madison Russell

Car Drivers

David Stanley

David Funkhouser

Professional Staff

Resignation

Gwen Whitmore, Teacher, Fairfield Elementary School, resigning effective January 2, 2024

Katleyn Nicely, Teacher, Fairfield Elementary School, resigning effective January 2, 2024

Support Staff

Resignation

Krailyn Guymon, Teacher Assistant, Central Elementary School, resigning effective January 18, 2024

- **Business Items**
 - Approved appropriations to Fund 50 for new grants in the amount of \$16,913.00
 - Approve Monthly Financials in the amount of \$4,852,419.36
- **Religious Exemption Request**

PUBLIC COMMENT:

One patron addressed the board regarding the issue of psychological safety of children in regards to LGBTQ+ books, materials, as well as informal and formal education for ages four through ten.

The patron referenced research from a study of "The National Institute of Medicine", specifically peer-revised research of January 2011 which reflected teen suicide rates as high as seven times the non-LGBTQ+ rate of suicide. A Pro LGBTQ+ research group, "The Trevor Project", conducted a national survey in 2022 on youth mental health and the patron provided the findings of the survey. The patron asked if the board will consider this research compelling enough to at least pause, for grades K-5 children, the circulation of LGBTQ materials, books, and teaching about gender fluidity, alternate sexual lifestyles, and transgenderism. The patron requested the pause just until evidence can be brought to bear that assures the safety of our children. The patron stated that he does not mean pausing the proper and equal love and respect and protection of these LGBTQ+ children in our schools; that discrimination would be more than unfair; it would be tragic.

BUDGET PLANNING:

Mr. Jason Kirby, Chief Business Officer, provided an update on the fiscal year 2025. He stated that the school division has received the calc tool related to the Governor's budget. Administration is in the beginning stages of analyzing and looking at how it may affect the school division for the 2024-2025 school year but there is nothing concrete at the moment to report. The next steps are to schedule another budget work session with the board to continue on the upcoming budget. Superintendent Thompson will be in contact with board members regarding the scheduling of that meeting. Administration will also await the proposed House and State budgets and subsequent calc tools, which generally come in late January or early February.

COMMITTEE REPORTS: None**INSTRUCTIONAL REPORT:**

Ms. Melanie Hickman, Principal, Natural Bridge Elementary School, provided a report "Building Relationships". The highlights of her report are as follows:

- Daily Launch: morning announcements, which include a Moment of Silence, Pledge of Allegiance, Birthday Announcements, and the Rocket Chant.
- Well-Wishes: Teachers await the arrival of students each morning at their door to greet them. Students choose how they would like to be greeted each morning.
- Student Choice: Fifth graders were given an opportunity to create and design a cover for the 2023-24 yearbook. Students were leaders for the Safety Patrol.
- Student Activities: Fall Festival, Grades 3-5 Informance; Winter Festival
- Communication: Updates of weekly events using School Messenger; attendance information; Monthly Newsletter; and an updated marquee on the school campus.
- One-Word Challenge: Teachers were presented with a challenge for the New Year. Rather than a typical resolution, they were asked to choose a one-word resolution for the year. The words will be posted on the outside of classroom doors and they will share their word with their class.
- Mr. Martino, Assistant Superintendent, reflected that Ms. Hickman is building culture by creating energy for students and adults, citing the morning Rocket Chant as a perfect example. The chant echoes the hallways each morning. He stated that culture is hard to build especially in the climate of a public school right now.

Mr. Timothy Martino, Assistant Superintendent, provided an "All-In Update". He stated that the program just began on January 8, 2024 and there have been minimal technical issues. The elementary students in grades 3-5 are working on it for three thirty-minute sessions per week. The middle school students who scored below 477 on their math SOL last year are working on it each day for thirty-minutes. The program will go through the end of March; the learners at the middle school who exceeded that threshold have some specific things going on for that group of students. Administration will meet with the representative via group telephone call in two weeks to help walk through how to use the data. The initial upload was "let's get started" because the program houses everything for the division; the division will not have to collect data but must learn how to access it. He offered appreciation to Becky Bennett, Supervisor of Instructional Technology, and to Paige Owens, Director of Technology and CTE, for their instrumental help in preparing and organizing for the start of this program. Administration will evaluate the program in a month. Mr. Martino stated that it is always challenging to give up instructional time during the day when you want to have more core instruction; time was not cut out of the math block. Mr. Martino stated that administration feels optimistic but the program is also just getting started. Mr. Martino will provide a later update.

- Chairman Whitmore inquired if there is a VDOE staff member who is attached to Rockbridge County Public Schools.
 - Mr. Martino stated that the consultant is from the company, ZEARN.
- Trustee Ojura inquired how many middle school students fall below that point and are in the program.
 - Mr. Martino deferred to Mr. Jason Breeding, Assistant Principal, Maury River Middle School, who stated that there are approximately 370 students out of a total of 455 students. The state set the mandate cut-off at 477. If the score were to go to 400, which is passing, there would be a lot more students not in the program. There are clubs and activities that students can be involved with who are not participating in the ZEARN program.

- Mr. Martino stated that the threshold is high. There is data that reflects that students who score 385-415, some get lucky, some do not. Once a student exceeds the 415 and definitely cross 425, it reflects that a student has the content. There are guidelines that must be followed. All students at the elementary level are participating in the program, as there were a minimal of students who were not going to do it. The program works on a child's level so it paces with the child.
- Trustee Brown inquired if the program is indefinite or is there an end if a child moves through it quickly. She reiterated that 477 is a remarkable achievement.
 - Mr. Martino stated that it is unknown at this time, while noting that the division has to be careful with it as it is more screen time and there are some concerns about it, while noting it is early and we do not know what it will do yet. We learned during Covid that we need to get students off screens more and that is why the time has been kept fairly low.
- Trustee Burant inquired if ZEARN has an ending; if the curriculum runs out.
 - Mr. Martino stated that he will find out from the vendor
 - Superintendent Thompson reflected that the board members are realizing their frustration while trying not to be negative. The program was rolled out very quickly and the division is still trying to get answers.
 - Mr. Martino stated that he will update at the February board meeting, after using it for a month. It has been hard to navigate in working with schools to block out time. There is intervention time already built-in at the school level so time is being taken from there. If not for the intervention time, master schedules would have to be re-built. Mr. Martino stressed that schools have done a good job taking it on.
- Trustee Ojure inquired if there will be student feedback, citing that if students like the program, it may be worthwhile for other students as well.
 - Mr. Martino stated that the design is super child-friendly. The only concern is how much a student is able to work through in thirty-minutes.
- Chairman Whitmore inquired if there is potential summer component to this program.
 - Mr. Martino stated that the contract with the VDOE runs out at the end of June.
 - Superintendent Thompson stated that is part of the reason why it was rolled out so very quickly in order to get it going since they are paying for the program.
- Trustee Burant inquired who is navigating at each school.
 - Mr. Martino stated that it is "all hands-on-deck" and that is why a stipend has been provided. Administrators are coordinating the over-arching and at the end of the day all are working to help kids to achieve higher. It is a designated block in the day.
- Chairman Whitmore inquired if RCPS administration will see the data or does the data just go to ZEARN.
 - Mr. Martino stated that is the other challenging part. Administration is trying to take the data-lift off teachers. Administrators learn from data does the program align to the data results or do we need to provide separate intervention for what the data is telling us. There must be a reasonable sample size before you can make any instructional decision.

INFORMATIONAL ITEMS:

Mr. Randy Walters, Chief Operations Officer, provided a detailed update on the Rockbridge Innovation Center progress and noted that the project is on schedule and is hopeful that in a year from now, there will be a new RIC in place. He provided a detailed update on the Transportation Office. He provided an update on the RCHS intercom system and stated that he was there today as they were testing the system. He feels they are within a day or two of releasing a functional intercom system and then training of staff will take place.

ACTION ITEMS:

Upon recommendation by Chairman Whitmore, motion by Trustee Burant, seconded by Trustee Berkstresser, the board voted 5-0, to approve the Rockbridge County High School Program of Studies, as presented.

Upon recommendation by Chairman Whitmore, motion by Trustee Ojure, seconded by Trustee Berkstresser, the board voted 5-0, to approve the Maury River Middle School Program of Studies, as presented.

Superintendent Thompson provided the following information on Social Media, Student Addiction, and Accountability. The highlights of his report are as follows:

- Social Media Today: Social media is everywhere and permeates much of our society. It can be found in homes, schools, automobiles, buses, restaurants, retail, etc. The effects of social media positive and negative. Social media can influence students and adults alike.

- Social media companies develop products/applications; promote compulsive and excessive use by school age children; evidence currently exists that companies are aware of and intent upon designing products to addict school-age children.
- The Surgeon General issued an advisory in 2023 that stated that 95% of youth ages 13-17 report using a social media platform, with more than a third saying they use social media “almost constantly”; Nearly 40% of children ages 8-12 use social media even though the commonly required minimum age on most platforms is age 13.
- Peer Reviewed Scientific Literature confirms that the compulsive and excessive use of social media platforms have significantly contributed to a crisis in the mental and physical health of America’s school-aged youth. Increased anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, eating disorders, harm caused by online bullying, impairment of self-control and regulation, and sleep deprivation.
- Student Health: The damage to students’ mental health and physical well-being shows up in our schools every day and we are left to respond to consequential behaviors that disrupt the learning environment and require school-based interventions. “Our children and adolescents don’t have the luxury of waiting years until we know the full extent of social media’s impact. Their childhoods and development are happening now. While social media use can have positive impacts for some children, the evidence noted throughout [the] Surgeon General’s Advisory necessitates significant concern with the way it is currently designed, deployed, and utilized.” At a moment when we are experiencing a national youth mental health crisis, now is the time to act swiftly and decisively to protect children and adolescents from risk of harm.
- Protecting Our Youth:
 - Protecting our Youth from Social Media Addiction Primarily falls to parents and the children themselves;
 - Nearly 70% of parents say parenting is more difficult today than 20 years ago; Top two cited reasons – Technology and Social Media;
 - Nearly 80% of parents believe technology companies have a responsibility to protect children from inappropriate content.
 - Schools share in this challenge when students are at school.
 - In speaking with our administrators, especially at the middle school and high school level, nearly every student infraction in schools today have something to do with social media.
 - Threats, rumors, images, videos, etc. shared via these apps often cause major disruptions to the learning environment.
 - Nationwide Multi-District Litigation Against Social Media Companies
 - School Boards nationwide are joining litigation against several social media companies.
 - As of December 1, 2023, over 400 school divisions nationwide have initiated suit against social media companies. Numerous Virginia divisions have engaged legal counsel and soon will be filing suit.
 - Defendants in the litigation include:
 - Meta (Owner of Facebook and Instagram)
 - ByteDance (Owner of TikTok)
 - Snap (Owner of Snapchat)
 - Google (Owner of YouTube)
 - The opportunity to join this litigation has been brought to our attention.
 - If the School Board chooses to join other school divisions across the country in this litigation:
 - It would, first and foremost, allow us an opportunity to potentially help shape the future of our children by forcing social media companies to change the design of their products to prevent childhood addiction and harm.
 - There is a potential for monetary compensation. Compensation could be used to help mitigate the harm already caused by these products.
 - The only cost to RCPS would 25% of any potential monetary compensation to RCPS for the work of all attorneys involved.
- Trustee Burant inquired what litigation will do to stop the social media addiction.
 - Superintendent Thompson stated that it will change the habits and help to change the algorithm and stop addiction. The hope is to change behavior in companies so they are not addictive in the way they are right now.
- Trustee Burant inquired how is RCPS involved and what the level of involvement will be in this litigation.

- Superintendent Thompson stated that the level of involvement, if the board does go forward, is that we would be asked as a school division, and in the Central Office, for data, which would reflect how it is affecting the school division. Some of the data requested may be the resources that have been put in place by RCPS to try to help students, discipline data, and how much time is it taking the division to try to alleviate the behaviors that is taking teachers, administrators, and counselors away from the duty of educating our students. This may reflect five to ten hours of work for our Central Office staff.
- Trustee Burant asked for, and received clarification, that should the compensation be available, it would offset extra work time and personnel.
 - Superintendent Thompson stated that we are a great school division, but we are a small school division. The relatively small nature of work, ten to fifteen hours, was part of the deciding factor to take part in this litigation.
- Trustee Brown stated that the goal is always to rebound back to what is best for our students. This will provide an opportunity to send a message to the community, administrators, and school community and to advocate to our students that, as adults, we know what is best for them.
- Chairman Whitmore stated that the board has discussed the details of the litigation, both as a constructive action and as a symbolic action. He stated that based on the awareness of seeing the challenge that our educators, staff, and everyone sees on a regular basis that is affecting our students and families every day, and this may provide a possibility of what can we do as a division to help.

Upon recommendation by Chairman Whitmore, motion by Trustee Berkstresser, seconded by Trustee Brown, and passed by a 5-0 roll call vote:

Social Media Multi-District Litigation / Resolution Authorizing the retention of legal counsel to represent the board in litigation against certain social media companies because of the significant harm to students' mental health caused by their products which are designed to encourage addiction and excessive use and directing counsel to proceed with the initiation of litigation against such defendants and to join the significant number of school boards across America seeking money damages from the social media companies to aid schools with the costs associated with managing the fallout and disruption in schools caused by such products

NEW BUSINESS:

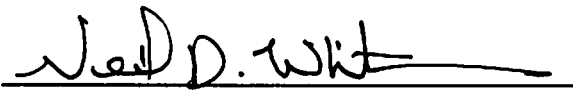
- Vice-Chair Burant welcomed Dr. Lenna Ojure as the new board member representative of the Buffalo District and expressed appreciation for the opportunity to work with her.
- Chairman Whitmore expressed his excitement to have Dr. Ojure on the board as we move forward into 2024.

SCHOOL BOARD

The next regular meeting of the Rockbridge County School Board will be held on Tuesday, February 13, 2023 / Location: County of Rockbridge Administration Building, 150 South Main Street, Lexington, Virginia.

ADJOURNMENT

Upon motion by Trustee Burant, seconded by Trustee Ojure, and passed by 5-0 vote, the meeting was adjourned at 6:36 p.m.



Neil D. Whitmore, Chairman



Rhonda B. Humphries, Clerk of the Board