

The Rockbridge County School Board held their regular meeting on Tuesday, December 12, 2023, at the County of Rockbridge Administration Building.

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

### **CALL TO ORDER**

Chairman Whitmore called the meeting to order at 5:30 p.m.

### **CHANGES TO THE AGENDA: None**

### **STUDENT / STAFF RECOGNITION:**

Mr. Paige Owens, Director of Technology and Career and Technical Education, congratulated Mr. Mike Lenoir, Ms. Jennifer Balkey, and Ms. Amanda Grimm for being recipients of the W!se 2022-23 Gold Star Teacher Award! To earn the Gold Star Award, a teacher must have achieved a 93% passing rate on the W!se Financial Literacy Certification Test in at least one of their classes during the 2022-23 school year.

Rockbridge County High School was also recognized, with the *Blue Star School Award*. To earn this coveted award, a school must have achieved at least an 80% passing rate on the W!SE Financial Literacy Certification Test on their first attempt. We drastically exceeded that by having 87% pass the first time.

Mr. Owens stated that these are both outstanding achievements, and reflected that administration is extremely proud of the work you do with our students day in and day out.

### **CONSENT AGENDA**

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

- Minutes: 1) November 7, 2023 [Regular Meeting]; 2) November 9, 2023 [Special Meeting]; 3) November 13, 2023 [Discipline Committee Hearing]; 4) November 14, 2023 [Discipline Committee Hearing]; 5) November 27, 2023 [Discipline Committee Hearing]
- Field Trip Requests
- Fundraiser Requests
- Applications for Use of Facilities
- Appointments and Resignations

#### **Appointments**

##### **Professional Staff**

Adam Doll-Hennis, Teacher, Maury River Middle School, effective December 18, 2023  
Kerstin Shafer, Teacher, Maury River Middle School, effective November 27, 2023

##### **Support Staff**

Reneda Chittum, Teacher Assistant, Maury River Middle School, effective December 13, 2023  
Keeley Crews, Teacher Intern, Natural Bridge Elementary School, effective January 3, 2023  
Crystal Cunningham, Teacher Assistant, Central Elementary School, effective December 13, 2023  
Rebecca Staton, Teacher Assistant, Rockbridge County High School, effective December 15, 2023

##### **Substitute**

Raley Young  
Kinsie Ellis  
Ares Alatrisme Pena  
Donna Frazier  
Clara Fleshman

##### **Car Drivers**

Karl Poe  
Leigh Martin

##### **Car/Bus Aide**

Logan Wills

**Winter Coaches 2023-2024**

**RCHS**

**Boys' Basketball**

Ben Kabzinski, Assistant Coach

Gary Randall, JV Coach

**Swimming**

Ellie Tomlinson, Assistant Coach

Allison Gigante, Volunteer Coach

**Cheer**

Ellie Lamb, Assistant Coach

**Spring Coaches 2023-2024**

**RCHS**

**Boys' Soccer**

Michael Kelly, Head coach

**Girls' Tennis**

Mark Sholes, Head Coach

**Professional Staff**

**Resignation**

Melissa Wallace, Teacher, Maury River Middle School, Resigning effective December 19, 2023

**Support Staff**

**Resignation**

Chloe Mahalek, Teacher Assistant, Maury River Middle School, resigning effective January 13, 2024

- Business Items
  - Approved Monthly Supplemental Financial Information for November 14, 2023.
  - Approved debt service payments due January 16, 2024 to US Bank for Rockbridge County Public Schools VPSA bonds in the amount of \$388,4763.88
  - Approved appropriations from additional State revenue in the amount of \$1,015,467.00.
  - Approved budget transfer in the amount of \$104,080.00.
  - Approved Monthly Financials for December 12, 2023 in the amount of \$4,294,724.98.

**PUBLIC COMMENT:**

One person addressed the board expressing his appreciation for answers provided in response to questions he presented to Board at the July meeting, stating that the answers were clear and comprehensive showing significant concern for our children’s safety. The patron addressed the issue of safety and common sense as applied to LGBTQ+ books, materials, and teaching for ages four through ten. The patron referenced research from a study of “The National Library of Medicine” addressing suicide attempts of young people in relation to sexual orientation. He stated that his concern is about children and what they learn at a very early age. The patron inquired if the board and school division would consider such research that is compelling enough to pause further LGBTQ+ books, materials, and teaching about transgenderism and alternate sexual lifestyles just for grades K-5 and just until further evidence can be presented that assures the safety of our children, and by that, he stated that he does not mean pausing the proper and equal love and respect and protection of the LGBTQ+ children in our schools; that discrimination would be tragic.

**BUDGET PLANNING:**

Mr. Jason Kirby, Chief Business Officer, provided a 2024-2025 Budget Update. The highlights are as follows:

- The administration is going through the internal school and department budget requests while waiting on the Governor’s budget. The Governor’s budget will be presented to state lawmakers on December 20, 2023. It is anticipated that the calc tool will be available the first part of January.
- It is anticipated that the House and Senate budget proposals will follow in January/February with the appropriate calc tools being delivered shortly afterwards. It is the hope that the administration will have a finalized state budget in March/April, although that has not been the case in recent years.

- The Local Composite Index (LCI) has been received for the next two budget cycles. The updated LCI increased from .4530 to .4847 which means that the school division can, unfortunately, expect to receive a smaller percentage from the state in Basic Aid over the next fiscal years. The latest LCI increase was the 14<sup>th</sup> highest increase among the 135 localities in the state and means that Rockbridge County now has the 30<sup>th</sup> highest LCI (ability to pay for K-12 education) among those localities.
- The administration will continue to work through the internal budget analysis and requests as well as the priorities that the school board has identified including working to maintain competitive employee salaries as well as providing affordable health insurance rates for our employees and their families while administration waits for further information from the state.

Chairman Whitmore inquired if the surrounding areas also received an increase.

- Mr. Kirby responded that they averaged a smaller increase.

Trustee Burant inquired who has an LCI higher than Rockbridge County.

- Superintendent Thompson stated that there are several who are maxed out; for example, Bath County is one because of the power company being in the area. These counties are wealthier according to the LCI and allows them to be able to better provide for their public education. According to the State, these localities with a higher LCI have a higher ability to pay for their education.
- Trustee Lovell encouraged the board members and administration to reach out to the new representatives and ask that they get work done on time to help school divisions and localities.

#### **COMMITTEE REPORTS: None**

#### **INSTRUCTIONAL REPORT:**

Superintendent Thompson stated that over the next five months at the Rockbridge County School Board meetings there will be opportunity to hear positives and challenges from all Rockbridge County Public Schools.

Dr. Mike Craft, Principal, Rockbridge County High School, provided a School Update on Rockbridge County High School. He provided an overview of what a student's day looks like adding that there are safety measures incorporated. Rockbridge County High School has an open campus meaning that students may go where they choose, once in the building. A few of the safety measures that are in place is that there is an administrator assigned to each level of the building, administrators have their radios on all day. He noted that there is also nineteen to twenty teachers on morning duty. He offered the following highlights for Rockbridge County High School, which included statistics for student involvement, the number of staff members, athletic programs, Fine Arts, Academics and Electives, and fun student activities that are held throughout the school year. Dr. Craft provided a brief overview of the safety measures that were in effect during the previous fire alarm and threat incident. He provided an overview of the safety measures/training that take place with staff as well as students. He provided an overview of discipline prevention and consequences if there is a student discipline issue. The top five discipline issues at Rockbridge County High School are:

- Vape and tobacco
- Relation Issues (drama)
- Skipping Class
- THC vapes
- Refusal to comply

Dr. Craft also provided information from the School Quality Profile.

Sergeant Lawhorne, School Resource Office, Rockbridge County High Schools addressed the importance of building relationships with students who did not previously trust law enforcement; some of these students now come to him for help in solving issues, possibly before they become issues.

- Chairman Whitmore inquired what the school board can do to offer support to School Resource Officers.
  - Sergeant Lawhorne stated that in a perfect world with no budget constraints, it would be ideal to have two SROs at each school.
- Trustee Lovell echoed the importance of building relationships with students and offered her appreciation for what the SRO's do in our schools, as they are co-educators.
- Chairman Whitmore stated that at one time, another school division was considering the decrease in the presence of SRO presence and are now changing their perspective.
- Trustee Burant expressed her appreciation for the positive approach that SRO's take with our students in building positive relationships in working together to help all students be what they want, while reflecting that they are to provide safety.

- Chairman Whitmore inquired if the staff survey after the October incident provided any helpful information for the future.
  - Dr. Craft stated that the survey reflected that 75% felt that communication should have been faster. He stated that administration will continue to try to do better in that respect.
    - Trustee Lovell stated that she feels there is a risk to speak too soon as it could provide inaccurate information until facts are known. She expressed her appreciation that administration handled the crisis in real time, while noting that students have cell phones and called parents before official information could be relayed.
    - Sergeant Lawhorne stated that the October threat had two parts to the threat, which made it more difficult. The threat alluded to the fact that there was an intruder in the building, as well as a bomb. Law enforcement had to follow protocol.
      - Dr. Craft stated that school administration had to wait for law enforcement before they began evacuation. He stressed that the evacuation took place in 12 minutes.

Superintendent Phillip Thompson provided an update on the "All In" initiative. He stated that Governor Youngkin plans to close the achievement gap in math and reading that has developed since covid. He also noted that reading will require more work. The math section is ready to roll out. There are currently steps in place at schools to continue improvement in reading. He provided the following highlights of the Math program:

- All students will participate in grades 3-8 in the Zearn Mathematics program, which is a digital platform.
- Students who are exempt are those who are pass-advanced on their SOL in grades 6-8. The program is an accelerator for math skills.
- Tutors will be in place. RCPS intends to use our current teachers as tutors as they know their students' abilities best. There will be scheduling opportunities during the school day that will not take away from instructional time.
- There will be a \$2,000 stipend for licensed personnel; \$1,500 for classified personnel.
- Principals will coordinate and schedule the program for their individual school.

#### **INFORMATIONAL ITEM:**

Dr. Craft, Principal, Rockbridge County High School, provided information on the changes to the Program of Studies for Rockbridge County High School for the 2024-2025 school year. This will be presented as an Action Item at the Rockbridge County School Board meeting of January 9, 2024.

Ms. Vicki Stevens, Principal, Maury River Middle School, provided information on the changes to the Program of Studies for Maury River Middle School for the 2024-2025 school year. This will be presented as an Action Item at the Rockbridge County School Board meeting of January 9, 2024.

#### **ACTION ITEMS:**

Upon recommendation by Chairman Whitmore, motion by Trustee Berkstresser, seconded by Trustee Lovell, the board voted 5-0, to approve the 2024-2027 Comprehensive Plan as presented.

Superintendent Thompson provided an update to the Student Calendar that was presented at the November 7, 2023 school board meeting. The two-hour early dismissal dates of September 18, November 6, 2024, and February 19, 2025 were added as professional development/student early release days.

Upon recommendation by Chairman Whitmore, motion by Trustee Lovell, seconded by Trustee Burant, the board voted 5-0, to approve the 2024-2025 Student Calendar as presented.

- Trustee Lovell stated that the new teachers have orientation prior to the opening of school and is hopeful that spacing out the professional development days will be more effective.
- Trustee Berkstresser stated that Superintendent Thompson has put in a lot of hard work and had many conversations regarding the development of the calendar. He expressed his sentiment that Superintendent Thompson listens to all constituents and board members and offered his appreciation.

Upon recommendation by Chairman Whitmore, motion by Trustee Berkstresser, seconded by Trustee Brown, the board voted 5-0, to approve the Rockbridge Church Lease Renewal as presented.

**NEW BUSINESS:**

Superintendent Thompson request Mr. Randy Walters, Chief Operations Officer, to provide an update on ongoing projects.

- Mr. Walters stated that the intercom system at Rockbridge County High School is near completion with hopes that it will be finalized upon return from Winter Break. He provided updates on the construction at the Rockbridge Innovation Center. He stated that 95% is complete outside and that work will continue over Winter Break on the interior walls. He stated that the project remains ahead of schedule. The Transportation Office roof has been completed with some interior work still remaining.
  - Chairman Whitmore stated that he understood that some contractors had been pulled off of the job due to an emergency elsewhere.
  - Superintendent Thompson stated that this project was larger than initially imagined but they are making good progress and is hopeful that it can be completed rather quickly.

Chairman Whitmore stated that there is a final recognition, one that is very well deserved, but one that he has not been looking forward to and offered the following words:

*"After eight years of outstanding service as a member of the Rockbridge County School Board, this is Ms. Lovell's final official meeting. Earlier this year, she informed us that she would not be seeking re-election and despite our many attempts to change her mind, she held to that decision. Ms. Lovell's outstanding leadership and service to Rockbridge County Public Schools has spanned many topics and many issues, but there is probably no better example of her leadership than that as board chair during the Covid pandemic. Her steady hand and wise council was of immeasurable benefit during a most challenging time. The county and our school division owe her a great measure of thanks and admiration as she ends her tenure as a board member. Although her official time is ending, my hope is that if her counsel is needed on a future issue, she is only a phone call away."*

Superintendent Thompson offered the following words:

*"Trustee Wendy Lovell is the last board member who was on the board when I was offered this position so it certainly has a bit of a different ring to me. You had just came on the board just prior to me starting my tenure so we both learned these new roles together. You have been an outstanding school board member. I will always remember your guidance and strong leadership, and the fact that you always put students first, no matter who those students were or where they lived. You have always done what is best for our kids; and that is absolutely who Wendy Lovell is. I am proud to have been able to work with you over the past eight years and I will certainly be reaching back out for future advice."*

Trustee Lovell offered the following words:

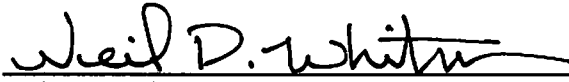
*"It has been an honor to serve you all and to work with you all as it is amazing team, both on the board and in the division, leadership and in the classroom. I have learned so much through this role, and despite the challenges of Covid, I wouldn't turn it down. It's been an incredible experience. I appreciate all of your support, as well as the support of my husband. I will miss it but I'm excited that Lenna Ojura will be sitting in this seat come January; she will do a great job and this great team will continue."*

**SCHOOL BOARD**

The next regular meeting of the Rockbridge County School Board will be held on Tuesday, January 9, 2024 / 5:30 PM / Location: County of Rockbridge Administration Building, 150 South Main Street, Lexington, Virginia.

**ADJOURNMENT**

Upon motion by Trustee Lovell, seconded by Trustee Brown, and passed by 5-0 vote, the meeting was adjourned at 6:56 p.m.

  
Neil D. Whitmore, Chairman

  
Rhonda B. Humphries, Clerk of the Board