

THE SUFFOLK CITY SCHOOL BOARD FALL RETREAT MINUTES
Wednesday, November 5, 2025 ~ 5:00 P.M.
The College and Career Academy (CCAP), 4169 Pruden Boulevard, Suffolk, VA 23434

Board Members Present:

Heather Howell, *Chair*
Sean McGee, *Vice Chair*
Dr. Dawn Brittingham
Valerie Fields
Karen Jenkins
Kimberly Slingluff

Board Members Absent:

Tyron Riddick

Administrative Staff Present:

Dr. John B. Gordon III, *Superintendent*
Wendell M. Waller, *Esquire, School Board Attorney*
Tarshia L. Gardner, *Clerk*
Dr. Rodney J. Brown, *Chief of Administrative Services*
Dr. Okema S. Branch, *Chief Academic Officer*
Dr. Stenette Byrd III, *Chief of Schools*
Shawn Dickerson, *Coordinator of Data and Research*
Jessica Allen, *Supervisor II Zone Transportation*

OPENING OF RETREAT

➤ Opening and Welcome

Board Chair Howell opened the retreat and welcomed all in attendance. She briefly summarized the agenda then yielded the floor to Dr. John B. Gordon III, Division Superintendent. Dr. Gordon introduced staff present and gave an overview of the reports that were to be shared by his team.

REPORTS BY THE SUPERINTENDENT

➤ Bus Disciplinary Procedures

Dr. Rodney Brown, Chief of Administrative Services, discussed school bus disciplinary procedures. He provided an overview of general guidance related to student behavior, conduct, discipline procedures, and the discipline matrix. He also highlighted the partnership and collaboration between students, administration, and parents as they work together to ensure that every bus ride is safe, orderly, and positive for all students. Additionally, Dr. Brown explained the procedures and consequences for behaviors displayed by students that are contrary to proper bus etiquette.

Board Members and Dr. Brown engaged in a discussion regarding bus aides, removing students from buses, and educating students and parents regarding proper bus behavior.

➤ New Accountability Model

Dr. Stenette Byrd, Chief of Schools, discussed the new accountability model for the Virginia Standards of Quality (SOQ) issued by the Virginia Department of Education. This model determines requirements for school accreditation. Using information from Suffolk Public Schools for the 2023-2024 and the 2024-2025 school years, Dr. Byrd compared the four data

models which included the following: (1) the Accreditation Model (Standards of Quality (SOQ)), the New Framework (uses categories and weighting, applies complex calculations, expected on tract target of 80 points, ideal for realizing and celebrating growth); (2) the Federal Performance Report (only concerned with reading and math, uses less complex pass/fail calculations, growth is not included, ideal for determining where to focus attention and resources), and (3) the Federal Designations (combines all previous models into one designation, relies on the other models, informs the public of school progress, articulates the level of support needed, ideal for allocating funds and resources). He also explained each model, how the models work, and how scores are calculated. Dr. Byrd shared that the next steps in exploring and understanding the data included: (1) monitoring changes; (2) advocating for appropriate representation; (3) adjusting models to reflect changes; (4) continuing overall school improvement efforts; (5) increasing pass scores; and (6) focusing on advanced achievement.

Board Members, Dr. Byrd Dr. Gordon, and Dr. Branch discussed the different levels of accreditation, what happens when a school is accredited with conditions, and academic plans and monitoring. Dr. Byrd stated that based on preliminary data/scores for the 2024-2025 school year, all schools in the division would be accredited. However, the framework for 2025-2026 has not yet been finalized by the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE).

➤ 2024-2025 Instructional Data

Dr. Okema Branch, Chief Academic Officer, provided the Board and staff with an overview of Suffolk Public Schools' Instructional Data. Dr. Branch discussed the following: (1) the strategic plan measures; (2) SOL results (overall and by content area); and (3) Advanced Instruction, and instructional leadership. Using information compiled from the years 2022 to 2025, Dr. Branch provided comparisons based on the four goals of the Strategic Plan, including (1) Student Achievement; (2) Climate & Culture; (3) Human & Fiscal Resources; and (4) Community Engagement & Communication. She also provided a comparison of SOL Pass Rates for the years 2022-2023, 2023-2024, and 2024-2025, highlighting areas of progress and regression for English, Mathematics, History, and Science. Dr. Branch provided an update regarding Advanced Instruction, indicating that 1384 students were identified as gifted during the 2024-2025 school year. Additionally, she highlighted a three year comparison of increases/decreases of student enrollment in the following programs: Governor's School for the Arts (GSA), International Baccalaureate (IB) Program, Project Lead the Way Engineering / Biomedical Science (PLTW), The Center for Performing and Production Arts (CPPA), Advanced Placement (AP), and Dual Enrollment. Dr. Branch also highlighted areas of focus for advanced instruction for the 2025-2026, which included an information night, expansion of course offerings, equity in gifted and advanced instruction, and ongoing professional development opportunities. Dr. Branch concluded her presentation by discussing goal setting, monitoring, and responding to data, feedback/support needs in instructional leadership.

Board Members and staff engaged in discussions regarding anti-bullying, availability of resources for students, parents, and staff, the effect special education students have on SOL scores, factors affecting scores, efforts to increase student participation and interests in College Board tests, national recognition program awards, and ASVAB testing.

BREAK

➤ Dinner Break

Due to time restraints, Board Members opted to have dinner while continuing with the retreat. Dr. Gordon's staff were permitted to leave the retreat during dinner, which began at 6:55 p.m.

REVIEW OF PREVIOUS RETREAT / TEAM BUILDING / IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

➤ Introduction of Dr. Janette Williams

Board Chair Howell introduced Dr. Janette Williams, I-MBA, Ph.D., Organizational Psychologist & Business Consultant. Dr. Williams appreciated the information presented by Dr. Gordon's staff, indicating that it was thorough and the division is data driven. Dr. Williams began her work with the board via discussion regarding working together to assist Dr. Gordon and his staff, working through misunderstanding/miscommunication, controlling negative behaviors before escalation, and how to create civility. They also discussed the board's role and whether it was political or non-political, neutralizing a politically charged environment, and what made the board political. Board members, Dr. Gordon, and Dr. Williams engaged in a dynamic conversation which provided key components for each group. This will allow the board and Dr. Gordon to move towards each other and work together. They discussed how to close the gap between productive work and eliminating unnecessary noise/distractions, working together for the good of all students, staff, and constituents, what it would take to find common ground between board members, and the ability to compromise. Operating in this manner will help board members to successfully represent their borough as they address the concerns of constituents that were heard during campaigns, and doing what's best for students. Board members freely shared their concerns, frustrations, ideals, convictions, perceptions, and discussed specific situations which impacts and impedes the board and prevents them from working together for the academic success of students.

Board members agreed that establishing open lines of communication with all members, finding neutral ground, working together, showing respect, being proactive, helping the public to understand the processes within the division, being humble, having candid conversations with each other, granting grace, agreeing to respectfully disagree, being honest, and turning toward each other, enhances board collaboration and fosters trust.

Dr. Williams concluded by stating "*Communication is the bedrock for trust.*" She encouraged the board to support the superintendent and his team, reach out to the person you have the lack of trust with to see if you can move forward, pause a couple of seconds before sending the email and pick up the phone to communicate, focus on turning towards one another, and remember that the most important thing is the students. Operating in this manner will make a world of difference.

COMMENTS / DISCUSSION

Dr. Gordon recommended and welcomed another visit from Dr. Williams.

ADJOURNMENT

➤ Adjournment of Meeting:

Board Chair Howell thanked all for coming together and participating in the retreat. There being no further business, the November 5, 2025 School Board Fall Retreat was adjourned at 8:52 p.m.

Heather S. Howell, *Board Chair*

Tarshia L. Gardner, *Board Clerk*