

REGULAR MEETING MINUTES OF THE SUFFOLK CITY SCHOOL BOARD

Thursday, January 15, 2026 ~ 5:30 P.M.

King's Fork Middle School, 350 King's Fork Road, Suffolk, VA 23434

Board Members Present:

Sean McGee, *Chair*
Heather Howell, *Vice Chair*
Dr. Dawn Marie Brittingham
Valerie Fields
Karen Jenkins
Tyron Riddick¹
Kimberly Slingluff

Administrative Staff Present:

Dr. John B. Gordon III, *Superintendent*
Wendell M. Waller, *Esquire, School Board Attorney*
Tarshia L. Gardner, *Clerk*
Keesha Johnson, *Deputy Clerk*

OPENING OF PUBLIC MEETING/WORK SESSION

➤ Call to Order

Board Chair McGee called the meeting to order at 5:30 p.m.

MOTION TO GO INTO A CLOSED MEETING

➤ Attorney Wendell Waller read the following motion

A motion is needed to go into a closed meeting to discuss the following item and subject pursuant to the Virginia Freedom of Information Act found at Virginia Code Section 2.2-3711:

1. The discussion and/or consideration of Student Appeal Number 2025/26-5EH, which involves a request that a student be expelled from Suffolk Public Schools for 365 calendar days, where the discussion in an open meeting would involve disclosure of information contained in the student's scholastic record.

Which is authorized by the Virginia Freedom of Information Act, found at Virginia Code Section 2.2-3711 (A)(2).

Vice Chair Howell moved and Board Member Slingluff seconded the motion to go into the closed meeting as read by Attorney Waller.

Upon roll-call vote, the vote was: Aye: 6 / Nay: 0 / Abstain: 0 / Absent: 1 (Riddick). The motion Passed by vote of 6 to 0.

Board Chair McGee reminded Board Members that personal devices are not allowed in the closed meeting.

¹ Due to traffic, Board Member Riddick arrived to the meeting at 6:30 p.m.

RECONVENE IN PUBLIC MEETING

- Meeting Called to Order
Board Chair McGee reconvened the public meeting.

CERTIFICATION OF CLOSED MEETING

- Attorney Wendell Waller read the following certification
A Resolution of Certification of the Closed Meeting of January 15, 2026 Pursuant to Section 2.2-3712 of the Code of Virginia

WHEREAS, the School Board of the City of Suffolk 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 of the Code of Virginia, requires a certification by the School Board that such closed meeting was conducted in conformity with Virginia law.

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

Vice Chair Howell moved and Board Member Dr. Brittingham seconded the motion to approve the Certification of the Closed Meeting as read by Attorney Waller.

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

MEETING RECESS

- Meeting Recessed
There being no further discussion, Board Chair McGee recessed the meeting at 6:14 p.m.

RE-OPENING OF PUBLIC MEETING

- Meeting Called to Order
Board Chair McGee re-opened the public meeting at 7:00 p.m.
- Pledge of Allegiance
Board Member Fields led all in the Pledge of Allegiance.
- Moment of Silence
A moment of silence was observed by all in attendance.
- The Mission of Suffolk Public Schools
Board Member Jenkins read the mission of SPS.

ACTION ON CLOSED MEETING ITEM

➤ Student Appeal #2025/26 - 5 EH (Expulsion Hearing)

Vice Chair Howell moved and Board Member Jenkins seconded the motion to deny the recommendation for expulsion and recommended Home Education Services, and also recommended wrap-around services.

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 6 / Nay: 1 (Dr. Brittingham) / Abstain: 0 / Absent: 0. The motion Passed by vote of 6 to 1.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

➤ Approval of Agenda:

Vice Chair Howell moved and Board Member Slingluff seconded the motion to approve the agenda as presented.

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 7 / Nay: 0 / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed by vote of 7 to 0.

PUBLIC SPEAKERS ON AGENDA TOPICS

➤ Citizen Comments on Agenda Items

The Clerk read the statement of decorum for speakers who sign up to address the Board.

1. Dr. Judith Brooks-Buck – Re: School Board Policies. Dr. Brooks-Buck expressed her concerns with: (1) board raises while doubling the workload of employees; (2) Policy 25/26-58; (3) the audit (city & SPS); (4) the procurement process; (5) vendor selection; and (6) the use of \$175,000 to pay for the audit; (7) inaccuracies spread by unsolicited groups; and (8) the diversion of public funds to private sources. She asked the board to consider all information before moving forward with plans that have nothing to do with student learning or safety.

REPORTS BY THE SUPERINTENDENT

➤ Good News Report

Anthonette Dickens, Communications and Community Engagement Officer, shared good news happening within the division utilizing a PowerPoint presentation. Dr. Gordon, Division Superintendent, and Mr. McGee, School Board Chair, recognized and congratulated outstanding student athletes who earned all-state honors, one of the highest recognitions in high school athletics. The athletes were recognized for their participation in football and competition cheer.

➤ Calendar of Special Events

Dr. Gordon, highlighted information from the calendar of special events. He reminded board members of the National Wear Red Day for heart disease awareness and asked board members to wear red to the February 12, 2026 School Board meeting in honor of this awareness.

CONSENT AGENDA

➤ Approval of the Consent Agenda

Vice Chair Howell moved and Board Member Slingluff seconded the motion to approve the Consent Agenda.

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 7 / Nay: 0 / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed by vote of 7 to 0.

With the approval of the Personnel Report in the Consent Agenda, Dr. Gordon introduced Ms. Kimberly Warholak as the new Director of Special Education. Ms. Warholak was excited about the opportunity, and was thankful for the support of family and friends, especially the late Talmadge Darden who saw her leadership potential long before she recognized them in herself.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

- Ordinance 25/26-59 thru Ordinance 25/26-71 and Ordinance 25/26-73
Board Members chose to consider all ordinances collectively, except for Ordinance 25/26-58 (Item 1), Ordinance 25/26-72 (Item 15), and Ordinance 25/26-74 (Item 17).

Vice Chair Howell moved and Board Member Dr. Brittingham seconded the motion to approve all Ordinances with the exception of Ordinance 25/26-58 (Item 1), Ordinance 25/26-72 (Item 15), and Ordinance 25/26-74 (Item 17).

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 7 / Nay: 0 / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed by vote of 7 to 0.

- Ordinance 25/26-58: An Ordinance Amending Chapter 2, Article 2, Section 2-2.6:1 entitled "Aspirational Statements; School Board Norms; Protocols; Filing complaints; and Consequences for Violations" of the Policies of the Suffolk City School Board - Second Reading
Board Member Riddick asked for clarification whether or not the 12 month calendar year referenced the actual calendar year (January to December), or SPS fiscal calendar beginning July 1. Attorney Waller clarified that the calendar year would be January to December. Additional dialogue ensued regarding flexibility to change the year from "calendar" to coincide with the division's operational calendar, and non-support of the policy.

Vice Chair Howell moved and Board Member Fields seconded the motion to approve Ordinance 25/26-58 as submitted.

Board members engaged in additional dialogue regarding the policy and recommended sending it back to the PRC for additional language to include the same courtesy to the School Board Attorney and Clerk that is being given to the Superintendent regarding requests that require considerable work or time.

(Vice Chair Howell moved and Board Member Fields seconded the motion to approve Ordinance 25/26-58 as submitted.)

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 6 / Nay: 1 (Dr. Brittingham) / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed by vote of 6 to 1.

- Ordinance 25/26-72: An Ordinance Amending Chapter 10, Article 18, Section 10-18.3 entitled "Statement of Purpose; Charter School Defined; subject to federal and state law prohibiting discrimination; subject to student assessment and accountability requirements; open enrollment required; Charter School Applications; review team established; role of review team; procedures for receiving, reviewing and ruling on charter school applications;

opportunity for input from teachers, citizens, etc." of the Policies of the Suffolk City School Board - Second Reading

Board Member Riddick stated that his request to consider this policy separately was done in error, as he briefly expressed his concerns with charter schools.

Board Member Dr. Brittingham moved and Vice Chair Howell seconded the motion to approve Ordinance 25/26-72 as submitted.

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 6 / Nay: 1 (Riddick) / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed by vote of 6 to 1.

➤ Ordinance 25/26-74: An Ordinance Amending Chapter 10, Article 18, Section 10-18.6 entitled "Charter School Personnel; Funding; Revocation and Renewal of Charter Contract; Reports to Board of Education; Reports by the Board of Education" of the Policies of the Suffolk City School Board - Second Reading

Board Member Riddick led the discussion as he expressed concerns with the language in the policy regarding the possibility of an employee serving dual roles as a charter school and a public school's employee. He asked if the board had any flexibility with amending or removing the language, or if parameters could be included in policy. Attorney Waller clarified that the language was taken directly from the Code of Virginia, however, the board could exercise its discretion to either allow or not allow personnel of the school board to also become employees of the charter school, if they chose to enter into a contract with a charter school. Vice Chair Howell also clarified that the language is flexible but the presence of the policy is required.

Board Member Dr. Brittingham moved and Vice Chair Howell seconded the motion to approve Ordinance 25/26-74 as submitted.

Additional conversation ensued regarding possible risks for tabling a vote on the policy which Attorney Waller clarified that there was no problem if the board chose to table the policy. He also shared that whether a part of SPS policy or not, if it is written in State Code, you must still follow the directive.

(Board Member Dr. Brittingham moved and Vice Chair Howell seconded the motion to approve Ordinance 25/26-74 as submitted.)

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 5 / Nay: 2 (Jenkins/Riddick) / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed by vote of 5 to 2.

NEW BUSINESS

➤ Payment of Bills and Payroll – December 2025

Vice Chair Howell moved and Board Member Fields seconded the motion to approve the Payment of Bills and Payroll – December 2025 as submitted.

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 5 / Nay: 2 (Dr. Brittingham/Slingluff) / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed by vote of 5 to 2.

➤ School Board Meetings Schedule

Vice Chair led the discussion regarding multiple board meetings. Board Members discussed the pros and cons of holding two board meetings per month, start times (earlier/later/both

beginning at 6 p.m.), closed meetings (6 p.m. at the second meeting only), public meetings (7 p.m.), and meetings being held at City Hall vs. KFMS. Vice Chair Howell indicated that the clerk and her counterpart at the city communicate well in advance and regularly regarding reserving the council chamber, however, our board meetings are at the mercy of schedule availability as other meetings are also held in council chamber. Vice Chair Howell recommended that board members reach out to their counterparts at the city in the effort to assist support for possible chamber availability. Board members also discussed dinner being served at meetings. It was also recommended to reverse the approval of school board raises, if the board chooses to hold one meeting per month.

Vice Chair Howell moved and Board Members Slingluff/Dr. Brittingham seconded the motion to hold two school board meetings each month beginning at 6 p.m.

Additional dialogue ensued regarding verbiage being added to the motion as was discussed by the board (removal of dinner, time limit on business meeting.) Board members expressed their support/non-support of the additional language. Attorney Waller clarified that a hard-stop time can be included, and for meeting flexibility, include a provision that could extend meeting times, when needed.

(Vice Chair Howell moved and Board Members Slingluff/Dr. Brittingham seconded the motion to hold two school board meetings each month beginning at 6 p.m.)

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 4 / Nay: 3 (Fields, Jenkins, Riddick) / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed by vote of 4 to 3.

Before discussing the next item on the agenda, RFP Vendor Selection, Board Chair McGee announced that the January 29, 2026 meeting was cancelled, as there are no work session items to review.

➤ RFP Vendor Selection

Board Member Riddick moved and Board Member Fields seconded the motion to suspend the quest as a board to move forward with a Forensic Audit.

Board Chair McGee read the following statement:

At the December 11, 2025 meeting of the School Board, the School Board voted to award a contract to Cherry Bekaert to perform a forensic audit of the financial practices of Suffolk Public Schools. Fifteen audit firms submitted proposals in response to Request for Proposals 1910-P. Recently, it was brought to my attention that all fifteen audit proposals were reviewed as required by the Virginia Public Procurement Act, but there was an inadvertent omission to submit paperwork showing that the mandatory rubric was considered when reviewing all fifteen proposals. Therefore, in order to protect the integrity of the process, a vote will take place tonight for the appointment of a Committee of the School Board to once again review all fifteen proposals and report to the full School Board their first and second choices using the agreed upon rubric and submitting the required paperwork. The School Board wants to ensure that a contract is awarded based on best value, ensuring fairness, transparency, and maximum competition when making the award. In the meantime, the award to Cherry Bekaert has been stayed pending the outcome of the review process. We plan to conduct this review

expeditiously, with the hope of having a vote to award the auditing contract at the February 26, 2026 meeting of the School Board.

Board Member Riddick led this discussion sharing information from the city's recently conducted audit. This was an audit of both the City and the Schools finances. The audit report has five comments regarding the City's financial management, and there were no comments regarding financial management by the Schools. Over the past 10 years straight, Suffolk Public Schools received "no comments" during their audit, which included the activities fund, and a clean audit on the federal level relative Title I and 6B funds. There is no reason for a deeper dive requiring a forensic audit. He indicated that the audit would be contradictory to the board's mission statement "to effectively and efficiently manage capital." He asked board members to use the \$175,000 needed for the audit, for student achievement and to use their board salaries to pay for the audit. Board Members shared reasons for their non-support of the audit which included: lack of funding, auditing firm selection, no suspected fraud or misappropriations of funds, and the lack of borough support.

(Board Member Riddick moved and Board Member Fields seconded the motion to suspend the quest as a board to move forward with a Forensic Audit.)

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 3 / Nay: 4 (Dr. Brittingham, Slingluff, Howell, McGee) / Abstain: 0. The motion Failed by vote of 4 to 3.

Vice Chair Howell moved and Board Member Slingluff seconded the motion for the board to appoint a special committee to review all 15 proposals and report to the full school board their first and second choices using the agreed upon rubric and submitting all required paperwork.

Additional conversation ensued as Board Members Slingluff, Dr. Brittingham, Howell, and McGee were asked by Board Member Riddick to individually share their reasons for wanting to move forward with the audit. Board Chair McGee directed attention to last year's agenda and video of the meeting for that information. Additional questions were asked regarding reasons for the audit, and salaries being used to pay for the audit.

(Vice Chair Howell moved and Board Member Slingluff seconded the motion for the board to appoint a special committee to review all 15 proposals and report to the full school board their first and second choices using the agreed upon rubric and submitting all required paperwork.)

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 4 / Nay: 2 (Fields, Jenkins) / Abstain: 1 (Riddick). The motion Passed by vote of 4 to 2.

During Board Member Riddick's vote, he requested that the explanation of his abstention vote be recorded verbatim. He stated: "I abstain, and in compliance with our policy, I want to state my reasons for abstaining. I am abstaining because the four board members don't have a reason as to why they want to move forward, that they are willing to share with the public. I believe that is an ulterior motive that is being at play here at the expense of taxpayer dollars. So, that's why I'm abstaining from voting."

At the completion of the vote, Board Chair McGee appointed Vice Chair Howell and Board Member Slingluff to the special committee to review proposals. He shared the following statement regarding the selections for the committee: "I reached out to the other board

members regarding my decision for this. So, everybody had feedback for me on my two choices.”

➤ 2026-2027 Calendar Presentation (Info Item Only)

Using PowerPoint presentation, Dr. Okema Branch, Chief Academic Officer, provided information regarding the calendar committees process and timeline, demographic makeup, proposed calendar options, and the committee’s recommendation to the Board for Option 1 for the 2026-2027 school year. Conversation was had between Board Chair McGee, Dr. Branch, and Dr. Gordon as they discussed the date for second semester high school orientation day. Board Chair McGee encouraged colleagues to share the information with the school community to get feedback. This was an info item only. No action was required at this time.

➤ Year End Priorities 2026 (Info Item Only)

Dr. Gordon shared background information regarding the projects on the 2026 Fiscal Year End Projects Priorities Listing. He specified that the listed price estimates are for January and are subject to change and that \$15.2 million would be needed to complete all projects listed. Noting that not all projects can be completed, Dr. Gordon stated that tough decisions and choices will have to be made and he itemized the following top five year-end priorities of the division:

1. Tennis courts
2. Bus camera system replacement
3. Metal detection system replacement
4. Raptor printers replacement
5. 2% Bonus

Board Chair McGee recommended that board members review the information shared and be prepared to vote.

This was an info item only. No action was required at this time.

PUBLIC SPEAKERS ON NON-AGENDA TOPICS

➤ Citizen Comments on Agenda Items

The Clerk read the statement of decorum for speakers who sign up to address the Board.

1. Dr. Judith Brooks-Buck – Re: Policy - KSES. Dr. Brooks-Buck addressed issues with the audit discussed by the board, suggested that board members respect the roles and responsibilities of the superintendent and staff, and for members to apologize for negative actions/comments made by board members towards teachers, the superintendent, and staff, relative to the incident at Kilby Shores Elementary School.

BUSINESS BY BOARD MEMBERS

➤ Comments and Reports by School Board Members

Board members shared congratulatory remarks to the new Chair and Vice Chair, new administrator, the City-Wide Teacher of the Year, and the students/staff mentioned in the Good News Report. They also expressed their condolence to the family of the SPS employee who passed away. Board members thanked Dr. Gordon and his staff for their hard work, dedication and for going above and beyond the call of duty. Residents were encouraged to reach out to board members to engage in dialogue regarding issues and policies of the division as these conversations help board members to ensure that their borough’s students have a voice and are fully represented. A member also reminded the public that not everything heard

from the dais is truthful, nor worthy of a response, and welcomed dialogue from residents to ensure transparency and to be actively engaged in the actions of the division. Board Members wished all a good night and safe travels.

INFORMATION ITEMS

- Dr. Gordon shared condolence to the families of the staff who passed away as he highlighted the family atmosphere within the division as we are able to lovingly share memorable stories of these individuals. Board Chair McGee asked all to observe a moment of silence in respect of the loss of our SPS family members.

ADJOURNMENT

- Adjournment of Meeting:
There being no further discussion, Board Chair McGee adjourned the January 15, 2026 School Board Meeting at 9:16 p.m.

Sean McGee, *School Board Chair*

Tarshia L. Gardner, *Clerk*