

REGULAR MEETING MINUTES OF THE SUFFOLK CITY SCHOOL BOARD

Thursday, December 11, 2025 ~ 5:00 P.M.

Suffolk City Hall, 442 W. Washington Street, Suffolk, VA 23434

Board Members Present:

Heather Howell, *Chair*

Sean McGee, *Vice Chair*

Dr. Dawn Marie Brittingham

Valerie Fields

Karen Jenkins

Tyron Riddick

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 Howell called the work session to order at 5:00 p.m.

➤ AI Use In SPS

Vice Chair McGee requested to have open dialogue regarding the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in the school division. Dr. Gordon provided information regarding staff training, AI implementation/usage in the classroom including Gemini (AI platform for Google) and Notebook LM. AI usage on homework assignments will be stipulated by the classroom teacher, and steps moving forward. He also provided answers to questions previously submitted by Vice Chair McGee. Conversation ensued as board members expressed their concerns with AI regarding data privacy, plagiarism/academic integrity, consequences of violations, limiting the use of AI within the division, and using funds to educate families about AI through various family/community engagement and/or town hall events.

➤ Career & Technical Education Report

Using a PowerPoint presentation, Dr. Andre Skinner, Director of Career and Technical Education (CTE), provided information regarding the functions of the CTE Advisory Council, its membership, meeting dates (December 16, 2025), student events (Professional Student Conference, Career Expo), and the Career Expo Business Participants. He explained that the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) School Report Data tracks high schools relative to industry credentials that students take. He indicated that 2041 students had stackable credentials which will be advantageous to students pursuing college careers and job opportunities. Dr. Skinner explained the Competency Attainment Rates, and the CTE Completer Testing Rates. He discussed the CTE Good News Report by highlighting the Project Lead The Way programs (PLTW). He stated that out of 260+ high schools across the United States and two out of 22 schools in the state of Virginia, Lakeland (LHS) and Nansemond River High (NRHS) Schools were recognized as PLTW Distinguished Schools for the 2024-2025 school year. Dr. Skinner also recognized two teachers from NRHS who received the W!se 2024-25 Financial Literacy Certification Gold Star Teacher Award, Jason Bartholomew and Melissa Kemp. He also highlighted the success of the Start Today and Rise (S.T.A.R.) Program and the departments that participate by providing high-quality work-

based learning opportunities to students. Students also earned a salary during their learning experience. Dr. Skinner concluded his presentation by highlighting the GOTEK program which provides career exploration for middle school students in grades 6-8.

Due to time constraints, Board Chair Howell thanked Dr. Skinner for his presentation and asked board members to share their accolades during board business and/or to communicate questions to Dr. Gordon.

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. Discussion of the award of a public contract involving the expenditure of public funds, including interviewing a selected offeror and discussing terms and scope of a contract to provide services for a Forensic Audit pursuant to RFP 1910-P, where discussion in an open meeting would adversely affect the bargaining or negotiating strategy of the public body

Which is authorized by the Virginia Freedom of Information Act, found at Virginia Code Section 2.2-3711 (A)(29).

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

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

Board Chair Howell reminded Board Members that personal devices are not allowed in the closed meeting, but SPS issued laptops are permitted in the closed meeting area.

RECONVENE IN PUBLIC MEETING

- Meeting Called to Order

Board Chair Howell reconvened the public meeting.

CERTIFICATION OF FIRST CLOSED MEETING

- Attorney Wendell Waller read the following certification

A Resolution of Certification of the First Closed Meeting of December 11, 2025 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 (1950), 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.

Board Member Riddick 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: 7 / Nay: 0 / Abstain: 0. The motion Passed by vote of 7 to 0.

MEETING RECESS

➤ Meeting Recessed

There being no further discussion, Board Chair Howell recessed the meeting at 7:01 p.m.

OPENING OF PUBLIC HEARING ON 2026-2027 OPERATING BUDGET

➤ Meeting Called to Order

Board Chair Howell called the Public Budget Hearing to order at 7:20 p.m.

➤ Public Comments Regarding The 2026-2027 Operating Budget

There were no speakers who registered to address the Board regarding the 2026-2027 Operating Budget.

➤ Adjournment of Public Budget Hearing

Board Chair Howell adjourned the Public Budget Hearing at 7:20 p.m.

RE-OPENING OF PUBLIC MEETING

➤ Meeting Called to Order

Board Chair Howell re-opened the public meeting at 7:20 p.m.

➤ Pledge of Allegiance

Board Member Slingsluff 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 Riddick read the mission of SPS.

➤ Musical Selection – NRHS Choir – Directed by Dr. Karen Waddell

The NRHS Choir performed three selections: “Vox” by Greg Gilpin, “I Heard the Bells” by Ruth Morris Gray, and “Carol of the Bells” by Leontovich, arr. Wilhousky.

Board members congratulated the students and Dr. Waddell for the outstanding musical performance.

ACTION ON CLOSED MEETING ITEM

➤ Awarding of a Public Contract

Board Member Riddick moved and Board Member Dr. Brittingham seconded the motion for a contract to be awarded to Cherry Bekaert to conduct a Forensic Audit of the financial records of Suffolk Public Schools as outlined in RFP 1910-P Forensic Audit for a sum not to exceed \$175,000. And that the School Board Attorney prepare a contract for execution by the parties consistent with Virginia law and containing such terms and conditions as set forth in RFP-1910-P Forensic Audit, and pending the results of a public hearing regarding the audit.

Attorney Waller provided clarification regarding the motion due to the language “Pending the results of a public hearing regarding the audit.” He indicated that awarding a contract to Cherry Bekaert would be conditional and based on the results of a public hearing. Upon that clarification, Board Member Dr. Brittingham expressed the desire to rescind her second to the motion. Attorney Waller further clarified that Dr. Brittingham’s second could not be rescinded.

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

Board Member Dr. Brittingham moved for a contract to be awarded to Cherry Bekaert to conduct a Forensic Audit of the financial records of Suffolk Public Schools as outlined by the RFP 1910-P Forensic Audit for a sum not to exceed \$175,000. And that the School Board Attorney prepare a contract for execution by the parties consistent with Virginia law and containing such terms and contracts as set forth in RFP-1910-P Forensic Audit. Board Member Slingluff pointed out an error in the verbiage of the motion. She indicated that it should read “...containing such terms and conditions...” Board Member Dr. Brittingham corrected her motion.

Board Member Dr. Brittingham moved and Board Member Slingluff seconded the for a contract to be awarded to Cherry Bekaert to conduct a Forensic Audit of the financial records of Suffolk Public Schools as outlined by the RFP 1910-P Forensic Audit for a sum not to exceed \$175,000. And that the School Board Attorney prepare a contract for execution by the parties consistent with Virginia law and containing such terms and conditions as set forth in RFP-1910-P Forensic Audit.

Conversation ensued as board members discussed their affirming/dissenting votes regarding a public hearing on the audit. Board members shared the following information to support their view:

- Lack of public input regarding the audit;
- Not holding a town hall as previously approved;
- Cost of the audit;
- Abuse and/or misuse of taxpayers money;
- Inefficient sample pool of constituents requesting the audit;
- Using \$175,000 for an audit while facing funding deficits;
- Neglecting expert advice;
- Campaign promise for an audit;
- Fraud prevention.

It was also recommended for board members to rescind the salary raises and shift those funds to pay for the audit.

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 shared the reasons for his abstention vote.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA

➤ Approval of Agenda:

Board Member Riddick moved and Board Member Jenkins seconded the motion to approve the agenda with the addition of a discussion of the process for having a public hearing regarding budget transfers under new business as an info/action item.

Attorney Waller provided clarification regarding adding items to the agenda. He pointed out that items can be added to the agenda and voted on the night of the meeting so long as the item does not directly impact students or employees of Suffolk Public Schools.

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

There were no public speakers on agenda topics.

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 Mrs. Howell, School Board Chair, recognized and congratulated Erica Truong, elementary winner of the Superintendent's Holiday Card contest; Jamie Hockaday for receiving the "Outstanding Beginning Teacher" award from the Virginia Music Educators Association (VMEA); Angie Salerno, Sarah Patton, and Sarah Rhodes for presenting groundbreaking work in adaptive fine arts curriculum development at the Virginia Art Education Association Conference. They also recognized Dr. Joleen Neighbours, Coordinator of Fine & Performing Arts, for being selected to serve on the State Board of the Virginia Association of Music Educators (VMEA); and Caydence Parker Field Hockey Class 5 All-State Team and for being named the Player of the Year.

➤ SERTOMA Grants for Special Education Teachers

Special recognition was given to the organization SERTOMA who presented Dr. Gordon and Board Chair Howell with a check for \$6,000 to support special education teachers with classroom needs, instructional materials, and resources that enhance learning opportunities for students with disabilities.

➤ Calendar of Special Events

Dr. Gordon, Division Superintendent, highlighted information from the calendar of special events. Dr. Gordon congratulated Dr. Lawrence Whiting, Director of Food and Nutrition Services, on his retirement and for his service to the students and staff of Suffolk Public Schools. Dr. Whiting was thankful for the opportunity to have worked in SPS and with wonderful people.

CONSENT AGENDA

➤ Approval of the Consent Agenda

Board Member Slingluff moved and Board Member McGee 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.

After approval of the Personnel Report in the Consent Agenda, Dr. Gordon introduced the following new administrators:

- Crystal Satchell, Coordinator, Department of Human Resources
- James Riddick, Director, Department of Food and Nutrition Services

The new administrators introduced their families and were thankful for the opportunity.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

➤ Ordinance 25/26-43 through Ordinance 25/26-49 (items 1-7) and Ordinance 25/26-51 through Ordinance 25/26-57 (items 9-15)

Board Member Slingluff moved and Vice Chair McGee seconded the motion to approve Ordinance 25/26-43 through Ordinance 25/26-49 (items 1-7) and Ordinance 25/26-51 through Ordinance 25/26-57 (items 9-15) collectively, as submitted.

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

➤ Ordinance 25/26-50: An Ordinance Amending Chapter 7, Article 31, Section 7-31.5 entitled "Grounds for suspension of staff members; no suspension longer than 60 days; escrow requirements when charged for certain offenses; suspension of insurance benefits prohibited; superintendent to notify school board when arrest of employee" of the Policies of the Suffolk City School Board - Second Reading

Board Member Slingluff recommended an addition to the policy to read "...the Superintendent shall immediately inform the school board..." or remove the ambiguity of a time frame for which the Superintendent may inform the school board.

Attorney Waller clarified that the policy cannot be changed from the dais, but must be returned to the Policy Review Committee (PRC). Board Members expressed their concern with the wording of immediately, preventing the superintendent from collecting pertinent information.

Board Member Slingluff moved and Board Member Dr. Brittingham seconded the motion to approve Ordinance 25/26-50 as is, and then send it back to the PRC for additional language.

Additional dialogue was had between board members regarding timelines, transparency, and a unified release of information between the schools and Suffolk Police department.

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

NEW BUSINESS

➤ Payment of Bills and Payroll – November 30, 2025

Board Member Jenkins moved and Vice Chair McGee seconded the motion to approve the Payment of Bills and Payroll – November 30, 2025.

Discussion was had between board members and Attorney Waller regarding possible resolution, communication, or whatever could be done to remove board members rejection of this item so that it can be considered with the rest of the Consent Agenda.

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.

➤ Resolution 2025/26-10: A Resolution of the Suffolk City School Board Celebrating America's 250th Anniversary

Vice Chair McGee recommended dedicating a week for students and the community to celebrate America's 250th Anniversary through civics lessons and community activities. Board members shared their excitement for this resolution.

Board Member Slingluff moved and Board Member Dr. Brittingham seconded the motion to approve Resolution 2025/26-10.

Additional conversation ensued between board members and Dr. Gordon regarding an all-inclusive celebration, advertising, process and date for celebrating this anniversary.

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

➤ Discussion Regarding Two (2) School Board Meetings Per Month (Info Item Only)

Board Members discussed the benefits, cost, burdens, and the impact on staff of having two meetings per month. Members recommended continuing with two meetings per month as they have been helpful in conducting the business of the board in a more time-efficient manner. They also discussed the placement of the board's work session, whether at the first meeting or second meeting. Board Member Riddick recommended keeping the first meeting as is and the second meeting for pertinent business. Dr. Gordon explained the effect that second meetings are having on: (1) staff/human capital; (2) inability to have all meetings at City Hall; (3) meetings time/preparation, and (4) the overall weight of responsibilities a second meeting is placing on staff. He recommended that if two meetings are held per month, the first meeting would be business only, and the second meeting would include the work session, if needed.

This was an information item only; no action was required at this time.

➤ Timeline of Incident at Hillpoint Elementary School

Dr. Gordon led the discussion regarding the incident at Hillpoint Elementary School. He indicated that any conversation/discussion regarding this topic must proceed with caution to prevent any violation of the employee's rights. He then provided information that was shared with board members and the public of the timeline of events that occurred on November 21, 2025 at Hillpoint Elementary School.

➤ Ordinance 2025/26-58 through Ordinance 2025/26-74

First reading only, no action required at this time nor was there any discussion.

➤ Discussion About the Process Regarding a Public Hearing Related to Budget Transfer Initiatives

Board Member Riddick led the discussion regarding this topic. He shared his concerns regarding inconsistent practices as it relates to transferring items in our budget. He recommended that a policy be created to guide public hearings when budget transfer initiatives are presented to the Board. Mr. Riddick indicated that the public must be given sufficient notice of the budget transfer in order for citizens to sign up to address the board regarding the budget item. He felt that at tonight's meeting, the board abandoned the process of allowing the public the opportunity to speak to budget transfers. Attorney Waller provided clarification regarding the difference between public hearings (which was conducted at tonight's meeting) and what Mr. Riddick was looking for relative to budget transfers. He shared that the main two differences are notices and signing up to speak. Dr. Gordon shared his concerns/challenges with Mr. Riddick's request. Board Member Riddick requested to refer this item to the Policy Review Committee to craft a policy that stipulates, before completing a budget transfer of public funds in our operating budget, that we give the public an opportunity to come and voice their opinion and speak specifically to the matter.

REPORTS BY THE SUPERINTENDENT cont.

At this time, Board Chair Howell indicated that a special announcement from Dr. Gordon was missed that was a part of the Good News Report. Dr. Gordon shared that Suffolk Public Schools received a 100% fully accredited designation from the Virginia Department of Education. He also shared that this was the third time in 20 years that all Suffolk schools were fully accredited. Dr. Gordon thanked board members who reached out to thank staff for their hard work, then shared the designation breakdown by school. He also explained the various criteria used by the Department of Education and highlighted the two distinguished schools in the division, Lakeland High School (92.2) and Nansemond River High School (92.6). He continued in his discussion by explaining raw data versus growth, gave directions for finding this information on the website, and explained possible adjustments to the School Performance Plan. Dr. Gordon shared his pride in this accreditation, the growth of the schools, and two schools recognized as distinguished.

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. Janet McKinney – Re: FOIA Request. Mrs. McKinney does not agree with the FOIA process, fees charged for her request, and discrepancies entailed in the bill received. She shared information from the FOIA Council Charges Guide.
2. Travis McKinney – Re: FOIA. Mr. McKinney does not agree with the FOIA process and fees charged by Suffolk Public Schools. He indicated that the charges are filled with discrepancies.

BUSINESS BY BOARD MEMBERS

➤ Comments and Reports by School Board Members

Board Chair Howell reminded Board Members of their five (5) minutes time limit. Board Members attended various celebrations throughout the division and enjoyed the Joint City Council/School Board meeting. They expressed pride in the accreditation status of our schools, the distinguished designation of LHS and NRHS for PLTW, and students who

participated in the Fine and Performing Arts, athletic winners, and former students who received training through the Start Today and Rise (S.T.A.R.) Program. Members also thanked Dr. Whiting for his service, Dr. Gordon and his staff for their hard work, welcomed new administrators to SPS, and offered condolences to current/former employees who have passed away. Board Member Riddick stated that he would announce his intentions regarding school board re-election next week. Board Members offered holiday wishes to all.

MOTION TO GO INTO A SECOND CLOSED MEETING

➤ Attorney Wendell Waller read the following motion

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

1. The discussion and/or consideration of the performance of the school superintendent relative to his interactions with and responses given to Board Member Slingluff regarding the Hillpoint incident.
2. Consultation with legal counsel employed by the School Board regarding a specific legal matter, and more specifically, whether Board Member Slingluff acted in violation of the school superintendent's contract of employment and policies of the school board when she requested information regarding the Hillpoint incident.

Which is authorized by the Virginia Freedom of Information Act, found at Virginia Code Section 2.2-3711 (A)(1) and (A) (8).

Board Member Slingluff moved and Board Member Dr. Brittingham seconded the motion to go into a second closed meeting as read by Attorney Waller.

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

Board Chair Howell reminded Board Members that personal devices are not allowed in the closed meeting, but SPS issued laptops are permitted in the closed meeting area.

RECONVENE IN PUBLIC MEETING

➤ Meeting Called to Order

Board Chair Howell reconvened the public meeting.

CERTIFICATION OF SECOND CLOSED MEETING

➤ Attorney Wendell Waller read the following certification

A Resolution of Certification of the Second Closed Meeting of December 11, 2025 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 (1950), 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.

Board Member Jenkins moved and Board Member Fields seconded the motion to approve the Certification of the Closed Meeting as read by Attorney Waller.

Upon roll call vote, the vote was: Aye: 5 / Nay: 1 (Riddick) / Abstain: 1 (Slingluff). The motion Passed by vote of 5 to 1 to 1.

ACTION ON SECOND CLOSED MEETING ITEM

- No action was required on the second closed meeting items.

INFORMATION ITEMS

- Board Chair Howell encouraged the board to review the information items. She extended condolences to the families of employees who have passed away.

ADJOURNMENT

- Adjournment of Meeting:

There being no further discussion, Board Chair Howell adjourned the December 11, 2025 School Board Meeting at 12:13 a.m.

Heather Howell, *School Board Chair*

Tarshia L. Gardner, *Clerk*