

Gaston County Schools
Board of Education
March 16, 2026
Regular Meeting

MINUTES

The Gaston County Board of Education met in a regular session on Monday, March 16th, 2026, at 5:30 p.m. in the Central Office Boardroom at 943 Osceola Street, Gastonia, NC 28054. Those Board Members in attendance were: Chairman Josh Crisp, Vice Chairman Dot Cherry, Lee Dedmon, Tod Kinlaw, Robbie Lovelace, Brent Moore, Jeff Ramsey, Janna Smith, and A.M. Stephens III.

Additional attendees include: Superintendent Dr. Morgen A. Houchard, Attorney Sonya McGraw, Associate Superintendent Tonya Kales, Assistant Superintendents Bessie Harvey and Rebekka Powers, Chief Communications Officer Todd Hagans, Chief Technology Officer Curtis Poplin, Executive Director of Human Resources Beth Suber, and Board Clerk Cindy Beck.

Chairman Crisp called the meeting to order at 5:30 p.m. and welcomed everyone.

Invocation

Pastor Jeff Allen, First Baptist Church of Mount Holly, led the invocation.

Pledge of Allegiance

Asher Loftin and Zy'marion Dickey, both 7th grade students from Stanley Middle School, led the Pledge of Allegiance.

Character Trait

River Guyton, 2nd grade and Harlow Case, 5th grade both from Pinewood Elementary School reported on the Character Trait of Honesty.

Agenda Adoption - Action

The Board considered Agenda Adoption – Action

Superintendent Houchard recommended that the following items be removed from the Consent Agenda for further Administrative and Policy Review:

- H. Proposed Renaming of Memorial Stadium to Henry Jones Stadium
- I. Name Press Box at Fraley Field (Danny Eaker)
- J. Proposed Naming of the Basketball Court at North Gaston HS

Motion to adopt the Agenda as Amended (excluding the Consent Items H, I, and J) was made by Mr. Tod Kinlaw; seconded by Mr. Brent Moore, motion carried unanimously. (9-0)

Good News – Information

Mr. Todd Hagans presented the Good News for March.

The Hunter Huss Boys Basketball Team was recognized as the State 5A Champions for North Carolina. The team scored the most points ever in a North Carolina High School Athletic Association Boys' Championship game.

Ms. Dot Cherry presented a plaque of recognition to the team.

Next, O'Shauna Holland, representing Stuart W. Cramer High School and holding the NCHSAA record for most points scored by a girls' basketball player, was recognized.

Mr. Jeff Ramsey presented a certificate of recognition to O'Shauna.

The Wrestling State Champions and Runner-up were recognized for their accomplishments.

- Bentley Sly, Stuart W. Cramer High School, 4A State Championship in the 150-pound weight class
- Cameron Massey, North Gaston High School, 5A State Championship in the 138-pound weight class
- Nick McClellan, East Gaston High School, 4A State Championship in the 285-pound weight class
- Jonathan Moore, Ashbrook High School, 6A State Championship in the 285-pound weight class
- Ammon Scott, South Point High School, 5A State Runner-up in the 150-pound weight class

Mr. A.M. Stephens III presented a certificate of recognition to each student.

Swimming State Champions and Runner-Up were honored.

- Philip Johnson, East Gaston High School, two State Championships at the 4A Swim Meet
- Wyatt Smith, East Gaston High School, placed third in the State 4A Diving Event
- Ila Turner, South Point High School, silver medalist 5A 50 Yard Freestyle

Mr. Tod Kinlaw presented a certificate of recognition to each athlete.

Gastonia Sister Cites Youth Ambassadors to Germany and Peru

Mr. Todd Hagans recognized a group of high school students who will experience life in another country as they serve as youth ambassadors for the Gastonia Sister Cities student exchange program. Some of the students will visit Gotha, Germany, this summer, while others will travel to Santiago de Surco, Peru.

The following students will be visiting Germany:

- Emmy Nelms, East Gaston
- Ryleigh Autry, Forestview
- Lucy Boudreaux, Forestview
- Tucker Peoples, Forestview
- Annabelle Radford, Forestview
- Cameron Cook, Highland
- Ginny Shoemaker, Highland
- Nixon Sipe, Highland
- Natalie Sanchez, Hunter Huss

The following students will be visiting Peru:

- William Cook, Highland
- Eli Dunn, Gaston Early College of Medical Sciences
- Vienne Hoffard-Cosky, Gaston Early College of Medical Sciences
- Erin Cassell, Highland, will visit Germany. She was unable to attend and was recognized.

Mrs. Janna Smith presented each student with a certificate of recognition.

Department of Exceptional Children Grant

The Good News continued by celebrating an exciting opportunity that will support our youngest learners at Gardner Park Elementary.

Recently, Gaston County Schools received a grant that will support the implementation of K-2 School Ready Resource classes. This initiative is designed to provide intensive, specialized instruction for students in kindergarten through second grade who need additional support in developing foundational academic and behavioral skills necessary for success in school.

The School Ready Resource program focuses on individualized instruction aligned with the North Carolina Standard Course of Study and each student's Individualized Education Plan. Students in these classrooms benefit from smaller learning environments, consistent routines, and targeted support in core academic areas while also developing important school-ready behaviors.

Thanks to the grant funding, Gardner Park Elementary will add one Exceptional Children Teacher and one Exceptional Children Teacher Assistant to support this program.

Gaston County Schools has also been awarded grant funding to implement Amira Learning, an AI-powered reading assistant that integrates assessment, instruction, and tutoring into one platform to support reading proficiency.

The program listens to students read aloud, provides real-time coaching, and gives teachers actionable data to identify skill gaps in phonics, decoding, and vocabulary, thus helping students improve reading fluency and comprehension. Through this grant, we will receive more than 1,600 licenses for the Amira AI Phonics Tutoring Program to support Exceptional Children students in grades K-8 with daily, individualized phonics tutoring through personalized lessons that function like a one-on-one reading tutor. The grant will also provide headphones with microphones for participating students, ensuring they can fully engage with the program's interactive features while strengthening literacy outcomes.

Mr. Chris Mills and Amanda Hulse from the Department of Exceptional Children were present and accepted a certificate of recognition presented by Mrs. Janna Smith.

NCAEOP Professional Standards Program Certification

Mr. Todd Hagans recognized a group of our educational office professionals who have completed the requirement for their Professional Standards Program Certificate. The North Carolina Association of Educational Office Professionals grants the state-level certification.

- Ruth Dionicio - Professional Certificate
- Louise Howell - Advanced Associate III Certificate
- Samantha Reid - Professional Associate Certificate
- Shannon Wright - Advanced Associate III Certificate

Mr. Hagans also acknowledged the following office professionals, who were unable to attend the meeting:

- Mary Erlan - Advanced Associate II Certificate
- Savannah Grigg - Advanced Associate II Certificate
- Temika Middlebrooks - Professional Certificate
- Emily Walters - Professional Associate Certificate

Ms. Dot Cherry presented each office professional with a certificate of recognition.

Recognition of School Social Workers

The importance of School Social Work Week was highlighted, and Mr. Hagans recognized and honored the district's school social workers. Social Workers play a vital role in supporting students' academic success and well-being every day.

The following school social workers were honored for their commitment and service:

- Brittan Smith
- Tabatha Lynch
- Angela Ferguson
- Beryl Miller
- Michelle Black
- Meg Richards; and
- Paris Goudy, who was chosen recently to serve as our School Social Worker of the Year for 2026-2027.

In recognition of their continued efforts to strengthen connections between home and school for the students and families they serve, a "Celebrate!" plaque was presented to the group, alongside Director of Social Workers Bobbi Mills, in appreciation of their daily dedication and hard work.

Ms. Dot Cherry presented the plaque of recognition.

United Way of Gaston County

Mr. Hagans spotlighted the 10 schools that led the charge in our 2025-2026 fundraising campaign for the United Way of Gaston County.

Gaston County Schools has long been a cornerstone of local fundraising efforts for the United Way, playing a vital role in supporting United Way programs across three key areas: education, health and wellness, and financial stability. This year, Gaston County Schools achieved a total contribution of \$118,878.84. We extend our heartfelt thanks to everyone who contributed and participated in this year's campaign.

It's truly inspiring to see our school community come together every year to support the important United Way programs that make a difference right here at home.

Leading the way for 2025-2026 is Mount Holly Middle School. Under the leadership of principal Curtis Mitcham and assistant principal Deon Kennedy, Mount Holly raised a total of \$7,028.65 to become our top fundraising school for the 2025-2026 year.

The remaining top nine fundraising schools and the dedicated coordinators who helped make this success possible were:

- Holbrook Middle School contributed \$6,427.92.
- Southwest Middle School contributed \$5,841.73.
- North Gaston High School contributed \$5,200.
- Cramerton Middle School contributed \$4,800.
- Belmont Middle School contributed \$4,540.19.
- Hunter Huss High School contributed \$4,050.
- Carr Elementary contributed \$3,620.
- Ashbrook High School contributed \$3,514.
- H.H. Beam Elementary contributed \$3,063.40.

Mrs. Janna Smith presented a plaque of recognition to each school's principal.

Classroom Moment – Information

Ms. Kelly Cunningham presented the Classroom Moment that highlighted how teachers collaborate to analyze student data, identify learning gaps, and plan targeted reteaching to ensure every student moves toward mastery. This collaborative approach allows educators to respond quickly to student needs and provide the right support at the right time, strengthening instruction and improving outcomes for every student.

(View Presentation)

Public Expression – Information

Karen Elrod

611 Costner School Road

Bessemer City, NC 28016

Re: Release Time Bible Education

Holly Skibo

1409 Baxter Road

Cherryville, NC 28021

Re: Change of placement of W.B. Beam Intermediate School students

Jennifer Hamilton

10195 Claybrooke Drive

Charlotte, NC

Re: NCRising

Jamie Sherrill

Cherryville Township

Re: Beam Intermediate possible closing

Destyani Harris

327 S. Pink Street

Cherryville, NC 28021

Re: Against moving 5th grade to middle school

Angie Anthony
356 Tot Dellinger Road
Cherryville, NC 28021

Re: Splitting W.B. Beam Intermediate to move 4th graders to Cherryville Elementary and 5th graders to Chavis Middle

Wade Stroup
101 C S Elm Street
Cherryville, NC 28021
Re: W.B. Beam Intermediate

Elizabeth Shuford
315 Linwood Avenue
Cherryville, NC 28021
Re: Closing of W.B. Beam and its negative impact on students and community

Approval/Correction of Minutes – Action

Motion to adopt minutes as presented for:

February 16, 2026, regular meeting,

February 23, 2026 –2026-2027 Budget Work Session Meeting, and

March 11, 2026 –2026-2027 Budget Work Session Meeting Minutes

Motion made by Mr. A.M. Stephens III; seconded by Mr. Tod Kinlaw, motion carried unanimously. (9-0)

Operations Committee Report – Information

Brent Moore is chair of the Operations Committee, and members are Dot Cherry, Lee Dedmon, and Tod Kinlaw. Ms. Dot Cherry provided a summary report of topics considered and discussed at the most recent meeting.

(View report)

Curriculum & Instruction Committee Report – Information

Mr. Jeff Ramsey is chair of the Curriculum & Instruction Committee, and the members are Robbie Lovelace, Janna Smith, and A.M. Stephens III. Ms. Janna Smith provided a summary report of topics considered and discussed at the most recent meeting.

(View report)

Policy Committee Report - Information

Ms. Dot Cherry is chair of the Policy Committee, and the other members are Janna Smith and A.M. Stephens III. Mr. Stephens provided a summary report of topics considered and discussed at the most recent meeting.

(View report)

Superintendent's Budget Request 2026-2027 - Information

Superintendent Houchard shared a presentation of the Superintendent's Budget Request for the upcoming 2026-2027 school year, including a focus on Sustainable Financial Stewardship.

Key Points covered:

- Historical Information
- Planning Allotment
- Operating Requests
- Capital Maintenance Requests
- Funding Request Summary

(View Presentation)

The Board received the Superintendent's Budget Request recommendation for the 2026-2027 school year. The Board will discuss and review this request in anticipation of adopting their Budget Request to send to the commissioners at their April meeting.

Consent Agenda – Action

The Board considered the Consent Agenda:

Consent Agenda – Action

Consent Agenda Item (s) will be adopted with a single motion, second vote, unless a request for removal from the Consent Agenda is heard from a Board Member.

- A. Recommended Personnel
- B. Budget Amendments & Budget Transfers
- C. Construction/Repair Change Orders
- D. 2026-2027 Calendar Change
- E. Reduction In Force (RIF)
- F. High School Exam Schedule
- G. ESS Contract
- H. ~~Proposed Renaming of Memorial Stadium to Henry Jones Stadium~~ (removed from the agenda)
- I. ~~Name Press Box at Fraley Field (Danny Eaker)~~ (removed from the agenda)
- J. ~~Proposed Naming of the Basketball Court at North Gaston HS~~ (removed from the agenda)
- K. U-5821 051 (NCDOT) S. New Hope Rd. Widening
- L. Contracts
 - 2026-2027 Academic Resources
 - Google Workspace
 - Selection Process for General Contractor
 - Cherryville ES Lighting Conversion
 - Lawn Care Services Amendment
 - Ida Rankin Rooftop Unit Replacement
 - Page Primary Rooftop Replacement
 - Stadium Field Maintenance
 - Stuart Cramer Baseball/Softball Field Renovations

Motion

Motion to adopt the Consent Agenda as presented was made by Mr. A.M. Stephens III ; seconded by Mrs. Janna Smith. Motion carried unanimously. (9-0)

Superintendent's Comments

Superintendent Houchard shared a few announcements about upcoming events and activities.

This week, our Academically Gifted Department will be hosting the Math Masters and Battle of the Books competitions for elementary schools, and then Saturday, March 28, we will hold our annual RoboGASTON robotics competition at Forestview High School.

On Saturday, March 21, Forestview High School will host a Prom Closet from 9:00 a.m. until 12:00 p.m., giving students in need an opportunity to receive a free prom dress.

On Tuesday, March 31, the Star Teacher-Student Awards for the Class of 2026 will be held at 5:30 p.m. at Gaston Early College High School. GSM Services was thanked for sponsoring this year's ceremony.

Spring Break begins on Friday, April 3, with a holiday for all students and employees. Spring break continues April 6–10, with Friday, April 10, as an optional teacher workday. Students return to school after spring break on Monday, April 13.

Next month, our middle school fine arts performances include the all-county chorus concert on Tuesday, April 14, beginning at 7:00 p.m. in the Holbrook Middle School auditorium, and the all-county band concert on Saturday, April 18, starting at 2:00 p.m., also in the Holbrook Middle School auditorium.

Superintendent Houchard shared that a spending and purchasing freeze was implemented effective March 1, 2026, to address budget concerns, in addition to the hiring freeze enacted in December. The district will continue to pursue cost-saving measures while maintaining a quality educational experience for students.

A loss of \$7.2 million in Low Wealth Supplemental Funds from the state, coupled with the expiration of ESSER funds and continued inflationary increases, has created operational challenges.

Several contracts for renovation and repairs were approved this evening – these are capital expenses. We have funds for capital improvements; where we are lacking is in operational funds. And, capital and operations are two separate funds of money.

Superintendent Houchard shared that discussions with county management, county commissioners, and state officials are ongoing regarding the budget and that a conservative approach is being taken for next year's planning.

He expressed that the district is in need of additional budgetary support and noted that, without timely funding, difficult decisions may be necessary that could affect employees in schools during the current school year.

The county commissioners have approved the transfer of \$3.2 million in our capital funds to operating funds. That funding transfer helped, but we are going to need more help, and we are going to continue the critical conversations with our elected leaders.

He indicated that the district is approaching the point of implementing layoffs and workforce reductions, which may become necessary soon without additional operating funds.

Closing Remarks

Chairman Crisp thanked the Board members and the community for their support of our schools and the Board of Education.

Chairman Crisp wished the following a "Happy Birthday" :

Superintendent Houchard - March 2

Mr. A.M. Stephens III - March 3

Mrs. Robbie Lovelace - March 24

The next Board meeting will be held on Monday, April 20, 2026.

Chairman Crisp asked the Board to consider going into Closed Session under, N.C.G.S. §143-318.11(a)(6) Personnel, and N.C.G.S. §143-318.11(a)(3) Consultation with Attorney.

Motion to go into Closed Session was made by Ms. Dot Cherry; seconded by Mr. Brent Moore; motion carried unanimously. (8-0)

The Board went into Closed Session at 7:44 p.m.

The Board returned to Open Session at 8:52 p.m.

Adjournment

All business having been conducted, a Motion to adjourn was made by Mrs. Janna Smith, seconded by Mr. Jeff Ramsey, and the motion carried unanimously. (8-0)

The Board Meeting adjourned at 8:53 p.m.

Approved:



Josh Crisp, Chairman
[Corporate Seal]



Morgen A. Houchard, Secretary

Date Approved: 4-20-26