

STAUNTON CITY SCHOOL BOARD  
STAUNTON, VIRGINIA  
Called Meeting Minutes  
September 21, 2020

The Staunton City School Board convened in the Chambers of Staunton City Hall, 116 W. Beverley Street, Staunton on Monday, September 21, 2020, at 6:00 p.m., for a special called meeting with members in attendance as follows:

Kenneth Venable, Chair	Amy Wratchford, Vice-chair
Robert Boyle	Natasha McCurdy
	Christine Poulson
	Ronald Ramsey
Dr. Garrett Smith, Superintendent/Deputy Clerk	
Brenda Lovekamp, Clerk	

The Chair called the meeting to order. He called upon Dr. Smith, Superintendent to present.

The Superintendent gave a brief report on two pieces of good news received since the last meeting:

- SCS Teacher of the Year, Lisa Cooper, first grader teacher at Bessie Weller Elementary School, was named the Region V Teacher of the Year.
- SCS was named a School Division of Innovation, one of only 15 school divisions to receive this designation out of the 132 Virginia school divisions.

The Board extended congratulations on these items.

**Review and Consideration of the Plan for Return to In-Person Instruction**

Dr. Smith, Superintendent, reviewed his recommendation made at the August 10 meeting and the subsequent action taken by the Board. He reminded that his recommendation was to begin the school year in the virtual-only option for the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter, with the Board's action extending that through the first semester, subject to periodic review by the superintendent and a recommendation to return to the blended model as the situation progressed.

Dr. Smith provided an update on the virtual learning program currently in place in SCS, the preschool program where students are attending in person four days per week, and the various small group in-person supports that were put into place for students who are need of the additional support. He commended SCS teachers for the fantastic job they have done to adjust to virtual teaching and learning. He introduced preschool teachers, Kate Tacy and Melissa Allen, who shared their experiences with in-person instruction at the preschool center.

The Superintendent shared that a new tool became available from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) last week that will assist school division leaders in determining when it is safe to return to in-person learning with mitigation strategies in place. He noted that while the VDH data shows our area as low risk at this time, local COVID-19 numbers were still trending up due to the recent outbreaks at healthcare facilities and colleges/universities in our region, and that this upward trend aligns with the predicted September spike that ultimately influenced his decision in August to recommend a virtual start for the first quarter. Dr. Smith shared that in the weekly meeting last week, Dr. James Lane, State Superintendent strongly encouraged all school divisions operating in a virtual environment to bring students back for in-person instruction as soon as safely possible.

Dr. Smith stated that he was seeking permission to survey families in the coming weeks about which model they prefer (virtual or hybrid) so the school division can begin to plan for a return to in-person learning when it is safe to do so, noting that the last survey was administered in June. He indicated that, understanding the workload burden on teachers operating in two different instructional models, both the virtual and hybrid options would likely look different from what was proposed over the summer based on what has been learned over the past several weeks.

Stephanie Haskins shared information garnered from a survey conducted among staff after the first two weeks of instruction to gather input about how things were going with the all-virtual model. She summarized that overall, the majority of responses were positive, with teachers noting some concerns, including: there were still some students who had not connected or engaged in anyway; assessing students in the virtual model is challenging; connection issues and other disruptions/distractions occur, etc. In the survey, teachers also shared some considerations/needs when preparing for a return to in-person instruction, including: sufficient time to plan for lessons for both models; preparing the classroom with mitigation strategies in place, time to practice mitigation strategies with students, balancing schedules/planning time, etc. Ms. Haskins shared some additional considerations for the division: both virtual and in-person instruction would need to be different in the hybrid model; ensure both models are sustainable; keep classes/teachers in place as much as possible in order to maintain relationships; ensure equitable direct instruction for both models; closely monitor instructional hours to meet requirements; provide adequate time for teachers offer individualized support for students/families.

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Dr. Smith reported that a small central office team visited Green County Schools last week to see how their in-person instruction was working, and that he planned to send an administrator and team of teachers from each school to visit one of their counterpart schools in Augusta County to see how the hybrid model is working, ask questions, etc. He added that he also planned to attend some of the in-person student events and gather input from the students.

Dr. Smith again expressed appreciation for the outstanding efforts of teachers and staff, but acknowledged that the virtual model was not working for many families, and that the virtual model had exacerbated any existing inequalities in our school division and community. He stated that, with no foreseeable end to the pandemic, it was imperative for the school division to look for the best ways to educate our students and execute our mission in the meantime.

In summary of his comments, Dr. Smith noted the following:

- A new tool is available from the CDC to help school leaders determine when it is safe to return to school,
- Mitigation strategies and the current health plan are working in SCS, and
- The division needs updated information from families to plan for a return to in-person learning.

The Superintendent reiterated his recommendation to survey families again regarding their preferences for the virtual or hybrid options, adding that this valuable information was needed in order to determine the school division's next steps. He pledged to continue to work with families and students for whom the virtual model was not working well.

Board members engaged in a time of discussion regarding the amount of lead time that might be given to parents and staff to prepare for a schedule change and return to hybrid instruction, concerns regarding any potential outbreaks, the added uncertainty of the upcoming flu season, concerns that were received from teachers about a possible move to hybrid, whether or not the Board should amend their August 10 decision, the language that might be needed for any new motion, etc.

**Christine Poulson moved to alter the August 10 decision related to the opening of schools to include that the Board will consider the Superintendent's recommendation to return to a blended model or in-person learning no earlier than the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> semester. The motion was seconded by Natasha McCurdy.**

Discussion continued among Board members regarding the desired intent of the motion, whether or not the language in the motion met that intent, and the Board's desire not to limit the Superintendent's ability to bring back small groups or individual students in need of additional support, etc.

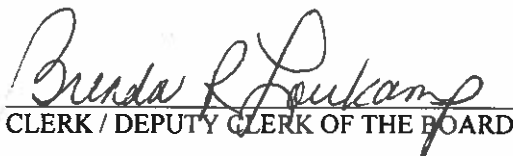
**Amy Wratchford amended the motion language and moved as follows: that the School Board alter the August 10 decision related to the reopening of schools, that the Board will consider the Superintendent's recommendation to return to a blended model or in-person learning no earlier than the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> semester, and that this does not preclude providing in-person support to identified students. This amended motion, as updated, was seconded by Natasha McCurdy. The Board voted on this motion as follows:**


Christine Poulson – aye  
Amy Wratchford – aye

Robert Boyle – no  
Natasha McCurdy – aye

Kenneth Venable – aye  
Ronald Ramsey – aye

Having completed the agenda for the special called meeting, the Chair adjourned the meeting at 7:12 p.m.

  
CLERK / DEPUTY CLERK OF THE BOARD

  
CHAIR OF THE BOARD