

SPS staffing outlook improves

BY JIMMY LAROUÉ
STAFF WRITER

Suffolk Public Schools is closing in on having all of its classrooms covered in time for the start of the 2022-2023 school year.

Chief of Schools Dr. Stenette Byrd III told the School Board at its Thursday work session that it had closed the gap in vacancies, even since Aug. 5 when it updat-

ed information in advance of the board's meeting.

At that time, the school division had 106 teaching vacancies — 47 at elementary schools, 17 at middle schools and 42 at high schools.

As of Aug. 10, the school division had 85 teaching vacancies, with more than double the long-term substitute teachers hired, going from 26 to 53. There is the equivalent of 15 unfilled

classroom positions, Byrd said, down from 34.5 — nine elementary school teachers, two middle school teachers and four high school teachers.

Elementary school teaching vacancies, in the previous five days, went from 47 to 40, middle school vacancies declined from 17 to 13, and high school vacancies dropped from 42 to 32. Long-term substitutes rose from 17 to 31, middle school

long-term substitutes went from 3 to 10 and high school long-term substitutes increased from six to 12.

Board member Heather Howell asked what happens in elementary classrooms when they are condensed, and whether there would be an instructional assistant in those circumstances. Byrd said there are caps to classroom size.

“Condensing two classes to

create a class of 40 can't happen,” Byrd said. “There are certain numbers targeted. So we still are going to stay under our caps when we have to condense a classroom. But that's always just the first thing we want to look at. We would not condense to the point where it would be beyond the class size that a teacher would teach in in a normal situation.”

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Teachers: Long-term subs, new hires to get added support

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Byrd said long-term substitutes will be given additional support. They will be a part of the new teacher orientation and will be assigned mentors, two things that had not been done in the past, he said, and they also will begin receiving pay at that point.

“Our thought process is, the day we acquire the certified teacher, that mentor’s in place for that individual as well,” Byrd said.

Karen Jenkins asked Byrd whether the hiring process would continue even after the start of school.

In praising the division’s human resources staff for moving to close the vacancy gap, Byrd said hiring efforts would continue and they would support those who are just shy of earning their teaching certification or those in career-switcher programs.

“One of the things that we can do to tackle the teacher shortage is, of course, to continue to support our own,” Byrd said, “those long-term subs who need just a couple of classes to finish, those kinds of things. We think our best option right now, unless

someone just happens to move in town, is to work with those who are already supporting our students.”

Superintendent Dr. John B. Gordon III said the division wanted to have Aug. 15 as a cutoff for new hires, for now, since new teachers would be starting a week later, and to provide the division’s instructional team time to process their paperwork, and to be able to hand out their \$250 signing bonus on their first day.

“And then we’re going to continue to recruit year-long,” Gordon said. “We’ve gotten lucky with a couple of our military families that have actually moved into the area. We’ve found some diamonds in the rough that are going to take on some of our teaching vacancies, but we also are expecting our next major push to be in December for December (college) graduates.”

Byrd also noted that the division has increased pay and stipends for teachers — their pay increasing by 19% over the past few years, he said — and has provided compensation for extra duties while also

putting in instructional and student supports while it continues to address a shortage of teachers.

To mitigate classroom vacancies once the school year starts Sept. 6, the division, at all levels, will first look to condense classrooms. Its second choice at the elementary and middle school levels is to use long-term substitutes, and at the high school level, it will be adding a sixth-block class to a teacher’s schedule.

Its third priority at the elementary level is to use a hybrid sync teacher and learning facilitator, and use the division’s virtual platform for middle and high school vacancies.

Beyond that, only at that point would elementary students shift to a virtual platform. Middle and high school students would use a hybrid sync teacher and learning facilitator, and last, at the high school level, would be using a long-term substitute.

“I think we’re doing well considering the shortages all over, everywhere, the nation, the area,” said board member Lorita Mayo. “Just keep doing what you’re doing, and

hopefully we can continue to fill those positions.”

Board member Sherri Story said she was disappointed that the division will be adding sixth block classes for some high school teachers and was critical of using virtual learning and the hybrid sync model at the elementary level. She said the division needs to address low teacher morale as a reason for them leaving the profession or the division, saying a number who left went to teach for lower pay in Isle of Wight County. Story said the division also was “touting” the addition of a sixth block for teachers and increasing their pay. She also criticized whether qualified long-term substitutes would be teaching a subject they’re licensed to teach.

However, the division currently has not shifted any of its students not already enrolled through SPS Online into virtual learning, and it has yet to determine whether the hybrid sync model needs to be used at the elementary and middle school levels. Byrd, in his presentation to the board, did not use

the mitigation strategies to tout them, but instead noted them as measures to address the shortage until the division can be fully staffed with teachers.

Chairwoman Dr. Judith Brooks-Buck refuted Story’s assertions. She said teachers leaving due to low morale are “not consistent with the facts.” She said many left due to retirement, and though she acknowledged losing some teachers to Isle of Wight, the division gained many others from surrounding local school divisions such as Chesapeake, Portsmouth, Norfolk and others.

Brooks-Buck said that if board members have solutions to the teacher shortage, they should offer them. “I think that we came up with the solutions that we’ve come up with,” Brooks-Buck said, “because we need to fill those positions.”

Chief Academic Officer Dr. Okema Branch said there are currently 184 students enrolled in SPS Online in grades K through 12 — 66 at the elementary level, 70 at the middle school level and 57 at the high school level — for the upcoming school year, down from 220 about a week earlier when she and Byrd submitted the presentation.

The SPS Online program is, she said, primarily taught by Virtual Virginia instructors who are endorsed and certified to teach in their subject areas in Virginia. Branch said 90% to 95% of the course instruction will be live, rather than asynchronous, and it will be 100% live instruction for grades K through 5.

The SPS Online program begins Aug. 24.



SPS sinks \$1.1 million into repair

BY JIMMY LAROUÉ
STAFF WRITER

Sinkhole problems at several schools will cost more than \$1.5 million. Suffolk Public Schools division hopes to have the problem fixed by

this summer.

The division has had sinkholes appear at King's Fork High School, Mack Benn Jr. Elementary School, John F. Kennedy Middle School and Col. Fred Cherry Middle School.

In a memo outlining the request, Superintendent Dr. John B. Gordon III said "this year, we have repeatedly reported the sinkholes that have appeared at various schools across the division. We have taken steps this

year to permanently repair the cause of the damage in order to ensure that we are proactively repairing our facilities."

Gordon said it was a safety issue on the property of those schools, and that one division employee had been injured as

the result of a sinkhole at John F. Kennedy Middle. He said the latest sinkhole was found at King's Fork High in the last 10 days.

The division will transfer

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Sinkhole: Parts of parking lots collapsing

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\$1.1 million from its instructional budget to facilities after the School Board, at its May 12 meeting, voted 6-0, with Sherri Story abstaining, to allow for the budget transfer.

As part of the fund transfer, it will also move \$142,000 to cover salaries, benefits and materials for summer school 2021, and another \$100,000 for purchased security services.

Gordon noted that the total cost for 2021's summer school exceeded its budget by nearly \$130,000 due primarily to the absence of grant funding for elementary school, as funding for stipends for summer school teachers and workers had been paid for by the federal CARES Act.

Also, security services for school resource officers that the city billed to the school division were just over \$103,000 higher than had been budgeted, with an overall cost of \$503,169 versus the \$400,000 that had been budgeted.

The money, Gordon said, is savings from vacancies the division has had in staffing throughout the year.

"This is an unplanned expense," said Chief Financial Officer Wendy Forsman. "You can't plan for this kind of stuff. We don't have emergency funds. We're not allowed to carry forward funds, so this money has to come from somewhere."

She said it would be done "to ensure the safety of our campuses."

Forsman said 90% of the money being spent on sinkholes is happening at King's Fork High School, and Gordon said they have found more than 10 of them at the four schools — one of them at the high school between the baseball and softball fields, he said, was about 20 feet long and 8 to 10 feet deep. Forsman said there is a failing in the drainage at the high school where the pipes were placed under the parking lot and through the campus — none that affect the school building itself, Gordon stressed — "and we're having some major failures in that system with the corrugated pipe."

"In the past, when we had small sinkholes, we would just simply fill them with dirt or gravel," Forsman said. "That is not possible with these. We're having places in the parking lot that have begun to collapse and we have been replacing with pipe, so we're actually fixing the problem in all these different runs that we're finding these sinkholes. So it is a rather expensive endeavor, but it will fix the system as we move forward."

Gordon said the drainage systems that were put in at these schools were not done properly. "Based on my construction experience, anytime a new facility is created, part of the zoning of that building is to ensure that you have proper storm-water drainage, and proper materials were used," Gordon said.

He said they have found piping without rocks around them and plastic pipes that were used instead of metal. He said the sinkholes at the high school have been a longstanding issue, and he wants a permanent, and not a temporary, fix to the problem.

"In the past, we've used small amounts,"

Gordon said. "But now when we have an entire corner of a parking lot that was six feet less than everything else, it becomes a huge safety issue."

Board member Sherri Story asked who was responsible for the problem, and said for her, it was a matter of accountability and ensuring it doesn't happen again with new schools on the horizon. Board Chairwoman Dr. Judith Brooks-Buck said the city was responsible for inspecting and approving the infrastructure.

Gordon, however, said he was not interested in assigning blame, as he was neither superintendent nor working in Suffolk when the circumstances that he believes contributed to the sinkhole issues took place.

He and Brooks-Buck both said the buildings at the schools were never an issue, but rather it has been the property around them that has, in spots, been unsafe.

"Our schools aren't in danger," Gordon said. "But there's areas within the campus that we've had to mark off. We've had a diver. We've had a hole that was actually 10 feet deep that sunk between the football field and the baseball field at King's Fork High School."

He said the division would not put Band-Aids on anything, but rather would spend whatever money needed, and that it had to fix the issues. Because the issue is not just at an older school such as John F. Kennedy, but also at a newer school such as Col. Fred Cherry Middle, the division is doing an assessment of its other schools to determine whether repairs need to be done at those places, also.

In an interview after

the meeting, Gordon said Terry Napier, director of facilities and planning, has been trying to determine who did what at the time.

"I wasn't going to get into that blame game," Gordon said, "because there's not enough evidence to say who had the last inspection. But what I do know is what the diver took pictures of and showed us. The plastic instead of metal, the pipes being put in without rock."

Gordon said that when he learned of sinkholes at Col. Fred Cherry Middle, "it made me think that whatever was happening was, the same process was going on." At that point, he asked Napier and his department to look deeper into what has been happening.

Board member Heather Howell said she had residents in the Sleepy Hole Borough that she represents reach out to her concerned about taking instructional money to pay for sinkhole repairs.

"Operating funds are operating funds," Gordon said. "And so do we really want to risk having any of our current contractors that are fixing this problem waiting on money, charging us more, and then also having the money go into multiple fiscal years? That's our main concern why we're asking you to do this."

"As you can see, Ms. Forsman has put this forth to you all in May because we've been paying for this for a whole year. Like literally, Mr. Napier will send us an email — 'a new one has been discovered, \$40,000, \$80,000, \$100,000.' We basically have the company on-call to fix it. But because of the magnitude of the ones that we've just seen at King's

Fork High School, at the corner of the parking lot, we need to get this done now before this fiscal year is over."

Gordon said he and Forsman can transfer over any amount of money as a part of the division's operating budget "when we see fit that it fits the needs of the school division, and this is a major, major safety issue, major."

"I have a facilities background, too, so I'm a little bit more aggressive when I'm like, we can't keep spending this money," Gordon said. "Let's fix it now. ... I get people thinking, 'he's moving instructional money.' Well, the money's there anyway. We've had these vacancies. It's a safety piece. I used that money to do (the work). I've used it for bonuses too, so I've done some different things with the funds."

"But that's why I appreciated Ms. Howell's question because I don't know what it is where the level of scrutiny that we do is at issue. Our audits are fine, and we use the same auditors as the city. It's just a power dynamic that really needs to stop because we're not going to do anything that's illegal. We always make sure we check on our processes."

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SUFFOLK PARKS & RECREATION

Board debates book use in new class

BY JIMMY LAROUÉ
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Some Suffolk School Board members recently expressed concern over one of the books on a list of possible choices to be used in a middle school Contemporary Literature class.

“Walk Two Moons,” by

Sharon Creech, was initially brought up by board member Sherri Story as one that should not be taught to middle school students.

Reading from a review of the book, Story said the book “is filled with death and sadness. The 13 year-old characters talk about vivid theories that people have been chopped

up” and said a 13-year-old character in the book “draws images of people who annoy her with a noose hanging from a tree.” The book, she said reading from the review, “is intensely depressing.”

“I don’t think that’s a book that I would want our eighth

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Book: Controversy surrounds 'Walk Two Moons'

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graders reading," Story said during the board's April 7 meeting. "I think we have enough problems with depression (and) potential suicide."

Chairwoman Dr. Judith Brooks-Buck asked if the board was supposed to be looking at simply approving the course, which is designed to give eighth graders a survey of 20th century literature to the present, or whether it was approving what students would read in it.

"If a parent has an objection to a book, the child can read an alternative book for credit," Brooks-Buck said. "We never force a child to read a book that a parent disapproves of."

Story said, however, that the board "should have a problem with this book."

Director of Curriculum and Instruction Dr. Maria Lawson-Davenport said the books listed in the course description are not necessarily the ones that will be taught. The course, she said, is an exploration of contemporary literature, with a suggested reading list that was provided as part of the description for it.

She said the course

will include the use of literature circles, with students being given a choice of books to read. "They may not have to read that book," Lawson-Davenport said. "Once we design, and you all approve the course, we can go through and design the course and set it up with literature circles and that type of thing, which allows for student choice."

A list of all the books in the course will be given to parents at the beginning of the school year. Parents, she said, can ask for an optional book if they object to one on the list.

Lawson-Davenport said "Walk Two Moons" is an award-winning book with a Native American primary character.

"Part of the list you see is the diverse characters, making sure that we're representing all of our students," Lawson-Davenport said.

How the books will be taught, she said, is worked out as the division sets up the framework for the course.

Another board member, Tyron Riddick, said he was learning about the issue for the first time, but

he said that using "Walk Two Moons" concerns him and asked whether this is the only book about a Native American that could be used in the course. He said with how impressionable children are and what they are going through, it is not wise to include the book on an approved list of ones to be used.

"I understand that people have the option to opt out, however, if we know something could be detrimental, why even include it as an option?" Riddick said. "Now I understand we're talking about the courses, but the books go along with it. ... It's the tag-along. You can teach the course and these are what we recommend with it, so, me personally, I can't separate the two."

He said with a social and emotional learning "situation" going on in the city and country, "I wouldn't recommend it either."

Lawson-Davenport said after the course is approved, the division then vets the books to be used, and "if at that stage you want us to remove this book, you can make that recommendation as a School Board. That is

your determination if you want to make that recommendation."

She said teachers could, at a later date, add different books.

Brooks-Buck said she didn't know what's in the book, but without any of the board members having read the book, "I don't think we're at a point where we're attacking books and taking them off a book list."

Riddick asked for the motion to approve the courses, with a list of books to be used in them to come back to the board at a later date to be approved.

Brooks-Buck asked if the board would now be approving all teacher book lists. Riddick tried to cut off debate by calling for the question.

Board member Heather Howell asked who vets the book lists before they go to parents. Lawson-Davenport said teachers, media specialists, the instructional team and the administrative office all read the books prior to their being used in a course.

The motion passed by a 6-1 vote, with Brooks-Buck the lone dissenting vote.