

SPS transgender policy update sparks debate at committee meeting

BY JAMES W. ROBINSON
STAFF WRITER

Proposed updates to Suffolk Public Schools' transgender policies met with questions and concerns about language on the role of school officials, parents and students during a special meeting of the Policy Review Committee.

The School Board committee got its first chance to review the updates proposed by Superintendent John B. Gordon III, Ph.D., designed to bring the district policies inline

with the state's new model policy

Meeting Monday, Aug. 7 at Curtis R. Milteer Sr. Recreational Center, Policy Review Committee members Judith Brooks-Buck, Phyllis Byrum and Dawn Marie Brittingham of the Nansemond, Whaleyville and Holy Neck boroughs reviewed the proposed update with Gordon and School Board Attorney Wendell Waller.

Last updated on Aug. 12, 2021, the current update focuses on definitions, nondiscrimination compliance, counseling ser-

vice availability, name and pronoun usage and more.

"We're going to understand that we're going to keep parents involved in what we're trying to do, however, there has to be some level of being able to preserve the students' rights. Especially if what the student feels comfortable with or the student's rights conflicts with the parents wants," Gordon told the committee. "That's the challenge that we were having and also some of the questions that some of my colleagues opposed during

the webinar."

Gordon reviewed suggested updates in a section meant to balance all of these rights.

The proposed updates would say: "Each school in Suffolk Public Schools will make reasonably available, with available resources, guidance and counseling services to all students as provided in 8-VAC20-620-10. Students may participate in counseling services that may benefit the student's overall well-being.

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Policy: Update on transgender wording sparks SPS committee debate

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Students will be required to provide signed parental consent before counseling services are offered, unless Suffolk Public Schools is of the opinion that to require parental consent would pose a danger to the student's health and mental wellness. To the extent possible, parents will be given the opportunity to object before counseling services pertaining to gender are given."

Brittingham expressed her concerns with the changes.

"This is the bare minimum of compliance," Brittingham said. "We can develop more strict adherence to the model, but we shouldn't loosen the framework."

As Gordon provided details of possible changes to the section that focuses on the health and mental wellness of students, Brooks-Buck reflected on an incident that led to the proposed wording.

"We did have an attempted suicide, which shaped some of our context as we looked at this. Because of an incident that we had, we looked at this differently," Brooks-Buck said. "I don't think there's anyone here — most of us being parents and those who have been parents have been responsible for children — want to deny any parents rights."

Brooks-Buck stressed that this is only a policy review and that the committee would not vote on anything.

However, Brittingham followed up on her concerns with this section.

"Who determines if services may benefit a student's well-being? Who makes that determination? Because that seems really subjective to me," Brittingham asked. "How is SPS going to determine if a student is in danger

by parental consent? That's also really subjective."

Gordon explained this would be the role of the student counselor.

"They're going to be the person, 90% of the time, going to determine what is being shared with them is either beneficial for the student or potentially pose a danger," he said.

While counselors are trained in many different capacities, Brittingham said she believes they are not trained specifically to deal with gender identity issues.

Gordon followed up saying that instead of counselors being the "end-all, be-all," they would collect the information and then meet with the administrators, the school psychologist and school social worker.

"It has to be a decision based on what those experts in the field would recommend. And that can also include, based on what the student says, have another immediate conversation with the parent," Gordon said. "We're not taking that part out, but what you have to understand is each student should be able to have someone they can go to in their schools to have this conversation — if this conversation itself or if their gender identity is causing an issue for the student."

Brittingham responded telling Gordon they would "have to agree to disagree."

"Now you are trying to be a parent and that is not the job of Suffolk Public Schools," she said. "It is not our job to step into this area and interfere. I think the way we need to set this up is we always need to consider parents first, because the children belong to the parents OK? They are their primary educators and I know that is probably a concept that



Suffolk Public Schools' Policy Review Committee met Monday to review proposed updates to its transgender policy at Curtis R. Milteer Sr. Recreational Center.

is new and interesting to think about, but they come to us in a partnership."

Brittingham contended school officials shouldn't take on the role of a parent.

"When situations like this come up, we should always go to the parent first, because it's their child," she said.

Brooks-Buck disagreed, explaining that as part of law, educators and school administrators are to act as "parents" when the children are with them.

"When the children are with us, we are indeed acting as the parent when they are with us. Along with rights come responsibilities," she said. "If that were the case, when your children are bullied, we wouldn't be responsible."

Brooks-Buck said if they didn't take responsibility they could simply say that not to worry and wait on the parents.

"We can't do that. We can't abdicate our responsibility," she said. "When they come to school with us, we are responsible if they feel comfortable tell-



ing us that there is an issue.

As an example, Brooks-Buck offered a scenario involving an abused child.

"If a child comes to us for example and says to us, 'I've been abused,' we don't say, 'Let me call your parent and tell them you said you've been abused at home,'" she said. "We have to take on that responsibility. School counselors

are licensed and trained to work with children — they must be in order to be in a public school."

Near the end of the meeting, Brittingham suggested a public hearing be held so that families can hear what is in the proposed update.

Brooks-Buck explained that while the board will vote on the policy in 60 days, the public will have

the opportunity to offer comments.

"I'm sure that anybody who's interested in coming and talking can come to the board and sign up to speak. Either on the agenda items, if we put it on the agenda, or non agenda items they can speak," Brooks-Buck explained, adding they can even address it at the meeting this Thursday, Aug. 10.

SPS transgender policy update opposition voices concerns

BY JAMES W. ROBINSON
STAFF WRITER

Several city residents turned out Thursday night to voice their opposition to draft updates to Suffolk Public Schools' draft updates to its transgender policy.

The speakers addressed the issue during the non-agenda portion of the Thursday, Aug. 10 School Board meeting.

The update was first reviewed Monday, Aug. 7 by the Policy Committee Meeting where proposed updates recommended by Superintendent John B. Gordon III, Ph.D, sparked discussion and debate over language dealing with the role of school officials, parents and students. At that meeting, it was mentioned that residents wanting

to address the policy could do so at this or other upcoming meetings.

All the speakers Thursday can express their disapproval of the policy.

Jason Runner told the School Board he is "appalled" the issue has reached Suffolk Public Schools.

"The amount of Americans that do not want this far, far outnumbers the amount of people who do," he contended. "I hereby formally request that the School Board hold a public hearing on this policy."

Chris Dove voiced his opposition against schools' support of what he called "non-standard orientations."

"Schools have been placed

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CITY OF SUFFOLK/SUFFOLK PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Citizens voiced their opposition to a transgender policy update by attempting to pray for Suffolk Public Schools at the Aug. 10 School Board meeting.

SPS: Opposition at Thursday night meeting

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in this position that they should never have been placed in, in the middle of opposing sides on a social issue. Schools are attempting to balance the rights of parents with the rights of students," Dove said. "I believe schools have gone too far by actively promoting alternative lifestyles."

Dove said schools must support the student's right to live how they choose, along with preventing harassment, bullying and intimidation.

"But schools should not require anyone to accept something that they don't agree with," Dove said. "If an anatomical boy wants to be called 'Sally,' then by all means require everyone to use their preferred pronoun. If Sally prefers to wear dresses, then by all means, prevent any harassment, bullying and intimidation that may result."

However, he said he opposes use of opposite gender restrooms.

"This crosses the line between student's welfare in supporting one side of the social issue," Dove said. "The emotional well-being of some students does not outweigh the emotional well-being of all."

Resident Dacia Smith contends the proposed policy change is encouraging a family's break up instead of supporting the children's parents.

"It proposes that the schools undermine parental authority and encourages secrecy in the parent-child relationship," she said. "This propos-

al suggests that when addressing a student's health, the staff should presume the worst of the parent-child relationship rather than supporting and advocating for parental involvement."

While expressing that it takes a collective community to raise the children of Suffolk, Angela Kilgore asked to hold a prayer for Suffolk Public Schools.

School Board Chairman Tyron D. Riddick said under law this is not allowed during the meeting. While he said he does not "object to prayer," it is out of order during a meeting due to rulings on the separation of church and state.

"I believe that man should always pray, I mean I love prayer," Riddick said. "But this is not the place per the law."

Following being turned away, Kilgore and members of the audience recited the Lord's prayer.

Riddick called for a recess, while School Board Attorney Wendell Waller told the chairman to ask the officers to remove the individuals.

Riddick asked for police to clear the room, but only one officer was needed to come down the aisle to maintain order.

Following the meeting, Riddick said he is concerned he was how people run with misinformation.

"I understand that everyone's concerned. But as a School Board, we are elected to represent everyone. Even persons whose beliefs may be different from ours. And that's

what citizens have to take into count. Everyone has rights," Riddick said. "Not just the Christian citizens, not just the non-christian citizens, not just the heterosexual Christians, but also those who are different than what we have chosen for our personal lives. It is what it is."

He also added that he doesn't want citizens to take away a disapproval of prayer from the meeting.

"I believe in being decent and in order," Riddick said. "We have to be considerate that once we start a practice that that opportunity is afforded to everyone."

At Monday's Policy Review Committee meeting, members reviewed the transgender policy that was last updated Aug. 12, 2021

The proposed updates focus on definitions, non-discrimination compliance, counseling service availability, name and pronoun usage and more.

Gordon told the committee that they are going to keep parents involved in what they are trying to do, but noted there has to be some level of being able to preserve the students' rights when they come into conflict with the parents' wants.

The proposed update states: "Each school in Suffolk Public Schools will make reasonably available, with available resources, guidance and counseling services to all students as provided in 8-VAC20-620-10. Students may participate in counseling services that may benefit the stu-

dent's overall well-being. Students will be required to provide signed parental consent before counseling services are offered, unless Suffolk Public Schools is of the opinion that to require parental consent would pose a danger to the student's health and mental wellness. To the extent possible, parents will be given the opportunity to object before counseling services pertaining to gender are given."

School Board member Dawn Marie Brittingham was the only committee member raising concerns, saying it believes the update does the bare minimum to be compliant, saying it should be more in line with the state model.

The proposed update is expected to come to the School Board for adoption in about 60 days.

Artful Living



Parents vs policy in town hall

BY JAMES W. ROBINSON
STAFF WRITER

“Our heart is for our kids.”
This is what one citizen conveyed during an evening of

conversations held at a town hall hosted by Holy Neck Borough schools board member Dawn Marie Brittingham, Ed.D, Tuesday, Aug. 29, at the Holland Community House.

The meeting focused her concerns on the recent draft updates to the school’s transgender policy, where the proposed updates allow school officials to exclude parents if it

is deemed best for the student’s health and wellness.

The proposed working states: “Each school in Suffolk Public Schools will make reasonably available, with available

resources, guidance and counseling services to all students as provided in 8-VAC20-620-10. Students may participate

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Parents: Brittingham holds town hall transgender policy

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in counseling services that may benefit the student's overall well-being. Students will be required to provide signed parental consent before counseling services are offered, unless Suffolk Public Schools is of the opinion that to require parental consent would pose a danger to the student's health and mental well-being. To the extent possible, parents will be given the opportunity to object before counseling services pertaining to gender are given."

Residents came out to voice their concerns, confusion and the importance of communication between parents and their children.

Brittingham outlined her issues with the school's current policy.

"For me right now, our current policy is very anti-parent in a very delicate situation that a parent should absolutely be a part of and should be spearheading on the behalf of their child," Brittingham said. "The parent should be the greatest advocate of their child, not the school system,"

One citizen wants schools to remain focused on teaching standard education instead of observing the current issues.

"The school should take care of reading, writing ... personal things, family issues should be taken care of by the parent," the unidentified speaker said. "The schools are there to teach. The schools have lost their way somewhere along the way, thinking they can go beyond educating your kids. They can give them moral lessons. The speaker went on to say parents may want to bring up their children as religious, not religious, adding it's not for a school to do it.

"We pay tax dollars for a school to educate them so that when they graduate, they can get a job, they can read and write and that's the school's job. That's it. End of discussion."

Another resident discussed being an aunt to two out of five of her nieces and nephews iden-

tifying as transgender.

"I don't even know what to call them. I'm I supposed to call them nieces and nephews? Am I allowed? I'm not allowed to say that. I honestly don't know what to call these children who I love dearly, I want the best in life for," she said.

Another speaker pointed to the importance of supporting the changed mandates from Gov. Glenn Youngkin and the Virginia Department of Education.

"Those new policies bring the parent in. And if somebody at the school believes that the child can't safely relate this to their parents, then they have a legal obligation to call CPS (Child Protective Services), which then involves the parents," she said. "Now you have the parents involved, now you have the school involved and now you have the parents, who may be a complete revelation to them, and now they have the opportunity where they can get that certified counseling that they're going to get from a professional, not just from somebody in the school. So that's more protective of the children because then, instead of them being coerced or then if they're confused ... that brings the family into it so the family can address it from a family point of view with licensed therapists."

A teacher reflected on her experience of working with the school's current rules.

"I have been taught to ... if I have a problem with the child, you call the parent and you try to work it out ... but that's not the policy now," she said. "If a kid does not want me to tell their parents that they are changing clothes when they get there, they want to be called 'Billy' when they're 'Julie,' I can't say anything to the parent. I have to ask the child 'what name do I call you when I call your parent?'"

The next speaker asked about the importance of parents communicating with their children.

"For me to even think that my child will have the need to go to someone else and let them know that they have a gender identity crisis. Because that's so personal," she said. "So my thing is, where is parenting?"

She said the lack of communication within families at the dinner table, during prayer, and daily activities is getting in the way of daily conversations with each other, resulting in many children turning to social media for communication.

"It all breaks down to how we communicate as a family, and mostly as a parent," she said. "We need to tell our children and our grandchildren how important it is to communicate with one another and love each other. And when starting [to] having these identity crises. It's more to an identity crisis than just whether I want to be a boy or a girl. It's the most complex thing in our human nature and our sexuality. It's extremely complex."

Along with other topics including the financial cost of counseling, parents choosing to home school, and both distrust and appreciation over school board members, one resident pointed to how those attending the meeting want what's best for their children while noting the need for more positivity when dealing with the issues.

"I actually agree we do need to be more positive because that's what it's all about. Let's keep the big picture in mind — we love our kids, everybody matters. Whether they're transgender, they're gay, they're straight, or whatever, we love them. They are made in the image of God," she said. "I think it would be good to come up with some kind of positive slogan because most people want what's good. Most people do want what's good for our kids."

Following a prayer for the well-being of their children and their educators, Brittingham said she believes the town hall

was successful.

"I really appreciated everyone who came out here and all the comments that they've provided. I am looking forward to being able to take back the comments and the discussion that we have and share it with the board," Brittingham said.

She hopes she was able to provide information on the model policy for those attending to consider when voting.

Brittingham also said she hopes for a public hearing before they vote on the model policy.

"I asked for a public hearing on Aug. 7 when we had our Policy Review Committee Meeting and at that time, I was not granted a public hearing," she said. "I would like to have a public hearing set on the agenda officially before our October meeting so that the public has an opportunity to come and speak on this topic," said Brittingham.

The Suffolk School Board's next meeting is at 7 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 21, at John F. Kennedy Middle School.



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Town Hall reviews transgender policy

BY JAMES W. ROBINSON
STAFF WRITER

Chuckatuck Borough school board member Kimberly Slingluff focused much of her town hall last week pointing to differences in proposed Suffolk Public Schools' and the state's model transgender policies.

During the Thursday, Sept. 7, gathering at the Crittenden,

Eclipse and Hobson Ruritan Club. Slingluff reviewed the draft updates and shared her concerns about possible issues that would arise if the current version is approved by the school board.

"I think that everybody in Suffolk needs to be informed and know about what's going on in our school system," she said. "Even if you don't have

children, it's very important to weigh in on that."

Slingluff said discussion would be on the model policy.

"This is about the safety and the policy for our schools and how we are going to handle the emerging needs for the schools to protect our kids," Slingluff said. "It's not to weigh in on how you feel either way, because that's not the issue."

During the discussion, Slingluff compared the Virginia Department of Education's model policy with draft changes from the proposed SPS policy. Her key focus areas were parental notification, locker rooms and bathroom usage and school sports.

► Proposed SPS draft changes for counseling services reads "Students will be required to

provide signed parental consent before counseling services are offered, unless Suffolk Public Schools is of the opinion that to require parental consent would pose a danger to the student's health and mental wellness."

► VDOE's policy on material information reads "No policy, guidance, training, or other

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written material issued by Suffolk Public Schools may encourage or instruct teachers to conceal material information about a student from the student's parents including information related to gender."

SPS's proposed draft changes adds "unless the student for health and safety reasons has requested that information not be disclosed to the student's parents" and strikes out "including information related to gender."

► Gender identity policy adaptations include "...but must disclose it to the parent of any student" seeing an addition of "unless such disclosure would pose a danger to the student's health and mental wellness..." When one attendee asked if these were for "all policies or just the transgender policy," Slingluff clarified it's only for this specific policy.

"That's why it's important that we look at the parental rights here, because when I read this, I see a slippery slope," Slingluff said. "If the precedence is set here at this point, that in this area we can withhold this and there's subjectivity based upon the interpretation of the teacher or the counselor or the administrator,

then who's to say that it won't leak out to everywhere in the school system."

SPS is also seeking to adjust the VDOE policy in regards to locker rooms and bathroom usage. VDOE's model policy says "Students shall use bathrooms that correspond to his or her sex..." and SPS proposes the language adjusted to read "Students should be allowed to use the facility that corresponds to their gender identity" and "...restrooms and locker rooms that correspond to a student's gender identity will be available to all students."

School athletics also sees a draft change from the VDOE's policy. The VDOE policy states that any school program "... that are separated by sex, the appropriate participation of students will be determined by sex, rather than gender or gender identity."

SPS's draft policy recommends adhering to the current regulations of the Virginia High School League.

"Athletic participation regulated by the Virginia High School League (VHSL) or another organization must be in compliance with policies and rules outlined by those

organizations."

SPS's proposed policy removes language that allows athletic participation to be determined by gender or gender identity.

Other miscellaneous topics were discussed such as counseling services, use of name and gender pronouns and model policy text being stricken, omitted or modified for SPS' proposed policy.

Following the Town Hall, Slingluff said that she was "very pleased" with the turnout while being "encouraged" by the dialogue that took place. She talked about what she hoped people would take away from the discussion.

"I hope that they feel educated and empowered to speak up and to encourage the school board to do the right thing on behalf of all children," Slingluff said.

Slingluff said she believes residents should make their voices heard.

"I am encouraging citizens to reach out to all school board members to express their views regarding the proposed policy and to sign up to

speak during public comment time at the next school board meeting," she said.

Slingluff explained why she believes it is important for residents to be aware of "ramifications" of adopting the proposed SPS transgender policy.

"This policy not only endangers parental rights but jeopardizes student safety at school. It undermines the value of the parental role and threatens to subjectively leave parents in the dark during a critical time when their children need them most," Slingluff said. "Our school board is mandated by law to adopt a policy consistent with Gov. Youngkin's Model Policy released last July. The SPS Proposed Transgender Policy is not in compliance."

She said she believes that if the school board adopts the draft policy, it directly violates state code and the law.

The next school board meeting is at 7 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 21, at John F. Kennedy Middle School, 2325 E. Washington St.



Public

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Tempers rise over Transgender rights

BY JAMES W. ROBINSON
STAFF WRITER

It was a night filled with tension-filled debate, public policy concerns, public outbursts, and community division over transgender rights, as the first 2023-2024 school board meeting saw heated discourse. Held at John F. Kennedy Middle School on Thursday, Sept. 21, the night saw residents come out to voice their

opposition and support to the draft transgender policy updates that will be voted on in October. Before agenda speakers voiced their concerns, Board Member Dawn Marie Brittingham of the Holy Neck borough made a motion after she called for a point of order, stating that the process used for constituents to sign up to speak is “out of order.”

“I make a motion to allow any citizen who is prevented from

being signed up because the form of process being out of order that they may be allowed to speak, if they so choose to still speak, at either the agenda time or the non-agenda time due to the fact that the school board has violated its policy and process by enacting a new form and process without the school board previously adopting it,” Brittingham said.

The SPS School Board Policy states in Article 8 in Section

2-8.1 titled “Early and Late Appearances Defined” that any remaining speakers “will be allowed to speak under the agenda item entitled ‘Late Appearances’ or they may submit their remarks in writing to the Clerk of the School Board to be read during Late Appearances” and that “Any person desiring to be heard under ‘Early Appearances’ must notify the Clerk of the School Board after the release of the regular

meeting agenda to the public, but no later than noon on Wednesday preceding the day of the regular School Board meeting.”

Likewise, Section 2-8.2, titled “Late Appearances Defined; Notice Requirement,” it says that those wishing to speak under “Late Appearances” will “be permitted five minutes for the purpose of presenting their views,”

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Policy: SPS hears from community on Transgender policy

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and that they “shall notify the Clerk of the School Board by no later than 5:00 p.m. on the day of the regular School Board meeting.”

After discussion over the sign-up form, the motion failed in a three to four vote with School Board Members Judith Brooks-Buck of the Nansemond borough, Phyllis Byrum of the Whaleyville borough, Karen Jenkins of the Cypress borough, and Board Chair Riddick voting in opposition of the motion. Following which, the public hearing resumed. Cyndi Petrich voiced her opposition to the policy changes while noting her daughter’s struggle with gender issues. She emotionally reflected on her daughter embracing her femininity following counseling.

“She has said to me numerous times... ‘Mama, thank you so much for leading me to Living Waters. I’m so thankful that I didn’t take hormones that would’ve changed my physical makeup or surgeries that would’ve marred my body for life.’ She would’ve gone through those changes and still have the same issues and challenges,” Petrich said. “So what this policy wants to do is it wants to take away the parents ability to intervene in the lives of their children. And this policy also sends an unspoken message to children that their homes and their parental support is not safe. This disrupts the family unit. Who knows the children better than their parents?”

Theresa Anderson voiced her opposition to the policy changes having a negative impact on girls.

“Many of you on the board have children or grandchildren. I cannot

imagine any of you thinking it is ok for a biological boy to be in a locker room with your daughter or granddaughter,” Anderson said. “I do not know either of you well, but I believe I know you well enough to know that you would’ve felt uncomfortable showering and changing with a biological boy. With that said, why do you feel girls today should have a biological boy in their locker room?”

However, others came out to show their support for the policy as well as supporting transgender students. Patricia Holloman talked about the concerns of the policy and parents being excluded.

“Last month, I heard a lot of comments regarding the transgender policy and how the policy would include an exception for the disclosure to parents in the event that there’s deemed to be a real life threat to the student’s physical or mental well-being,” Holloman said. “I would remind parents that this policy only allows that section for the most extreme situations, and if you’re confident in your relationship with your child and child-rearing skills, you should have nothing to be concerned with.”

Holloman provided words of support to LGBTQ students.

“To any LGBTQ youth that is watching this right now, I am saying to you, as the aunt of a trans person, I will fight for you,” she said as her time ended.

Kirstyn Oneill, who saw the previous school board meeting at home, said she couldn’t believe what she heard.

“I hear a lot of people saying that they’re nervous that ‘the school is not going to contact me...’ I’m not nervous about that because

I’ve raised my children the right way. And I don’t know down the line if they end up trans and I don’t care. And I don’t know if they’re going to end up gay, but I know no matter [what] they bring, they’re going to be able to talk to me. Which means this policy, it doesn’t matter to my kids because they’ll be able to come to me. What matters is the kids who can’t come to their parents and need that protection,” she said. “I would like to remind everybody in this room that these trans children are listening to you talk about them. As you sexualize them and make them sound like sexual deviants...”

She continued, expressing that the policy is worth it if it can save one child’s life.

“If it can allow one child to see the light at the end of the tunnel, then we have succeeded. If you students who are watching at home, please know for every negative voice here tonight, there are 20 of us cheering you on from the sidelines. You’re going to do incredible things, and I am proud to be a part of your story,” Oneill said.

She finished with a quote by 26-year-old transgender woman Ashley Hallstorm, who committed suicide in 2015.

““From a very young age, I was told that people like me were freaks and abominations. That we’re sick in the head and society hates us. This made me hate who I was. I tried so hard to be just like everyone else, but this isn’t something you can change. I can’t stand to live another day, so I committed suicide,” read Oneill.

After the hearing, Suffolk Public Schools Superintendent Dr. John B. Gordon III commented

that the outcry was not as prominent when the original version was put into place.

“I think the biggest challenge for us when this policy was put into place a couple years ago, somebody may have just thought it was too liberal, we didn’t have all this outcry,” Gordon said.

“So why all of a sudden is all this outcry when we’re trying to make sure we’re preserve student rights by also including them in the discussion in talking to the parents,” Gordon said. “The fear mongering, the offensive statements that are made about LGBTQ+ students is ridiculous, and it’s just another way to try to create some divisiveness, and this narrative that Suffolk Public Schools is doing some type of ideology while all we’re really trying to do is protect all kids, regardless of your gender identity, social economic status, neighborhood you live in, whatever.”

Gordon emphasized that parents’ rights are not being taken away.

“Nothing in the policy takes parents rights away. Nothing. But as I stated, the model policies don’t include student rights, and you have to. You have to.”

Likewise, Board Chair Tyron Riddick commented on the heated meeting.

“There’s an organized effort from within to create havoc in the school system,” Riddick said. “Some board members are leading the charge to create havoc, and they’re passing off a false narrative because they don’t fully understand what they’re doing and how policy and procedure work. When you don’t know, and you speak from a place of unknowing, you can misinform people and have people all riled up for

something that’s not really what you’re saying as.”

He continued.

“If you would look at the transgender guidelines, you would see it’s very detailed packed. It’s a lot of requirements that any student who would like to change gender identification would have to go through, and it’s very complex.

Noting that residents and parents are coming to voice their concerns, Riddick expressed his desire to hear more from parents.

“I’m not dismissing the citizens because I am hearing their concerns, but I would like to hear more from parents who have their children here. What are your issues? Because unlike private school, I can’t deny you based off your orientation or your ideology or religion. And because we have a lot of

board members who don’t have experience in a public school setting, you can’t bring private school operations to a public school setting,” he said. “The federal government made the mandate, so who do you follow? State or federal?”

Finally, he expressed the most disheartening aspect for him.

“The major disheartening part for me, is to watch board members weaponize a very delicate topic that affects real people in real-time and have no regard for how the student feels under a false banner of protecting parents rights. But if you would read the policy, you would get a better understanding,” Riddick said.

For more information, go to spsk12.net/domain/445 or spsk12.net/domain/101.

HALLOWEEN CLEANUP!
OCTOBER 21 - 4PM UNTIL 6PM

MEET AT NANSEMOND BREWING STATION.
PRIZES FOR BEST COSTUME & MOST ECO-FRIENDLY COSTUME!

KEEP SUFFOLK Beautiful
NANSEMOND PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Tensions rise as policy is tabled

BY ED PUGH
EDITOR

After hearing more comments from the public and a few tense moments Thursday, the Suffolk Public School Board voted 5-2 to table ordinance 23/24-14, the division's model policy.

Board member Karen Jenkins said she felt more conversation was needed.

"I think there is more room for conversation," Jenkins said. "So, I move that we move this until next month so we can have more conversation because the bottom line is it's about the

students and making sure that everything we can possibly do to make sure our students are heard, our parents are heard, we're not saying we are knocking anything down. We can see there's a lot of things going on. So, I make a motion hopefully that we can have more conversation about this."

Board member Kimberly Slingluff also suggested tabling the motion, adding she wanted to hold a public hearing or work session.

"I, too, would like to postpone this or table it until next month for further discussion,

but with the idea that I would like to hold a hearing and/or work session where we can hash out the details of this policy," Slingluff said. "It is too important of a policy to blindly pass through without going through the details of this policy. We are talking about the students, we are talking about the teachers, we are talking about the families, and I believe we are doing them a disservice if we simply take the proposed policy that was passed to the policy review committee and then passed from

See TENSIONS, 10

SPS settles other business

BY JAMES W. ROBINSON
STAFF WRITER

Thursday saw an extended night of heated tension, outbursts, and continued division during Suffolk Public Schools' School Board Meeting.

Held on Thursday, Oct. 12, at City Hall Chambers, community members came out again to make their voices heard, in both opposition and support, towards draft transgender

See SPS, 10

Tensions: SPS to pick up in December

Continued from page 1

the policy review committee without changes and changes were made without another policy review committee meeting, and then it was presented to the board, and now we are being asked to approve this. I believe as a board, collectively, lay our partiality aside, look at the details of this policy because impacts the children of our school system, and that is why we are here.”

Board member Dawn Marie Brittingham, Ed.D., also agreed to table the vote, pointing out the recent Virginia Beach Public Schools decision and the process it went through before they took action.

“We need much, much more discussion,” Brittingham said. “If you take a look at our neighbors to the east of us,

Virginia Beach, they not only voted their policy in this week, but if you look at their agenda, you can see that they went through a really rigorous process before they even considered voting their policy in ... they had work sessions, multiple work session that we dedicate completely to forging that policy.”

However, board member Dr. Judith Brooks-Buck said the policy had been up for discussion for several months.

“We have had this policy up for discussion since July, August, September and now October,” Brook-Buck said. “We have discussed, we have listened to members of the community, we’ve had members of several communities try to rev up commotion from certain members of communities ... We have been talking

about this for several months. So, it was not that we did not have the opportunity. As a matter of fact, I did not have enough conversation in my borough, my residents were not interested in having a hearing or any discussion, there was no negative feedback from my constituents given to me. I did not get one phone call about trying to table this or stop it because my constituents understood this was policy basically, that we have had since 2021 and had not had a problem with the policy.”

Board members Brooks-Buck and Phyllis C. Byrum opposed tabling the item.

The next Suffolk Public Schools Board meeting is scheduled for Thursday, Dec. 14.

Suffolk School Board votes on model policy

Published 10:08 pm Thursday, November 9, 2023

By James W. Robinson



Editors Note: Board Vice Chair Heather Howell voted virtually. Her vote does not show in the image

The Suffolk School Board made their vote for the proposed transgender model policy.

In a vote of 4 to 3, board members voted to approve ordinance 23/24-14 during their school board meeting held on Thursday, Nov. 9, at City Hall Chambers. Board Members Kimberly Slingluff, Dawn Marie Brittingham and Board Vice Chair Heather Howell voted in opposition to the ordinance. Howell attended the meeting virtually.

The ordinance adopting updates to the school's transgender policy has brought much heated discussion among Suffolk residents. Last updated on Aug. 12, 2021, updates the current transgender policy would now include: "Each school in Suffolk Public Schools will make reasonably available, with available resources, guidance and counseling services to all students as provided in 8-VAC20-620-10. Students may participate in counseling services that may benefit the student's overall well-being. Students will be required to provide signed parental consent before counseling services are offered, unless Suffolk Public Schools is of the opinion that to require parental consent would pose a danger to the student's health and mental wellness. To the extent possible, parents will be given the opportunity to object before counseling services pertaining to gender are given."

Other updates would focus on definitions, nondiscrimination compliance, counseling service availability, name and pronoun usage and more.

Slingluff expressed her opposition to the vote while noting the feedback from parents attending two town halls she held with both Howell and Brittingham.

"I can say without a doubt that not one parent has told me that they would like for children of the opposite sex to share the bathroom with their children. I can also say without a doubt that not one parent has told me that they would like the school to have the subjective option of determining when they are to be informed regarding anything concerning their children," Slingluff said. "Based upon this policy which states that students can use bathrooms according to their gender identity as well as the fact that over five places in this policy there are exceptions to the discretion at the school system to determine whether a child might be put at risk if parents were informed, I can't support this policy, and I recommend to my fellow board members that you also consider the ramifications of adopting this policy."

Brooks-Buck says that she has also talked with constituents of her borough.

"The truth is that students have told us how they feel. You listen to your borough, I listen to mine. People from my borough have come and they have spoken about how they feel. Students from my borough have spoken about how they feel. I listen to mine as well and I have not received calls to say what you have said. I also listen to the fact that we have rules in place. Nobody is forced – and that story will not get out whether you tape it or not – nobody is forced to use a shower with anyone. Any student – and this policy has been in place since 2021 – any student who objects to being in a bathroom, in a shower, in a locker room, anywhere, has the right to just go to someone and say 'I don't want to use that bathroom, with whomever.' That story won't get out because it's *not the truth.*"

Next steps for policy revisions

BY JAMES W. ROBINSON
STAFF WRITER

Suffolk Public Schools Superintendent Dr. John B. Gordon III detailed the next steps for the much discussed SPS transgender policy update. Following the approval of the Superintendent's Model Policy during the Thursday, Nov. 9

See POLICY, 3

Policy: 'Hopefully, this discussion is over.'

Continued from page 1

School Board meeting, Gordon says that the policy changes went into effect "immediately after the board meeting." Likewise, he says that the next steps are "administrative."

"Mainly, the next steps are just administrative where we had to update our regulations and make the tweaks to the policy based on the adjustments from what we had completed in 2021 to make sure that our schools have those updated forms," Gordon said. "And then just to really, to be honest, just to put this whole elongated discussion behind us."

Last updated on Aug. 12, 2021, the policy previously stated that "Each school in Suffolk Public Schools will make reasonably available, with available resources, guidance and counseling services to all students as provided in 8VAC20-620-10 and pursuant to parental notification requirements therein, including that, no student will be required to participate in any counseling program to which the student's parent object. Except with regard to eligible students, parents must be informed and given an opportunity to object before counseling services pertaining to gender are given."

The updates now include: "Each school in Suffolk Public Schools will make reasonably available, with available resources, guidance and counseling services to all students as provided in 8-VAC20-620-10. Students may participate in counseling services that may benefit the student's overall well-being. Students will be required to provide signed parental consent before counseling services are offered, unless Suffolk Public Schools is of the opinion that to require parental consent would pose a danger to the student's health and mental wellness. To the extent possible, parents will be given the opportunity to object before counseling services pertaining to gender are given."

Also included: "All students are entitled to have access to restrooms, locker rooms, and changing facilities that are sanitary, safe, and adequate, so that they can comfortably and fully engage in their school programs and activities. Students should be allowed to use the facility that corresponds to their gender identity. While some students will want that access, others may want alternatives that afford more privacy. Taking into account existing school facilities, administrators should take steps to designate gender-inclusive or single-user restrooms commensurate with the size of the school. When schools have available gender-inclusive or single-user restrooms or private changing areas, these restrooms or areas should be accessible to all students without special codes or keys. Access to facilities such as restrooms and locker rooms that correspond to a student's gender identity will be available to all students. Upon request, single-user or gender-inclusive facilities or other reasonable alternatives will be available to any student seeking privacy."

Other updates would focus on definitions, non-discrimination compliance, counseling service

availability, name and pronoun usage and more. When asked how far the policy changes will go, Gordon said it's "just secondary."

"Everything at the elementary level, students still have to be able to identify with their gender that they were born with. And even though some of those conversations do begin to happen, nothing is really being done, and I think one of the main benefits is, from the stuff that we've already had in place for the last two or three years, having students basically claim or state what their gender is, for at least six months, has always been a key cog for us," Gordon said. "This really helps out with any situations of gender fluidity and students may be switching or changing and not giving their teachers or administrators or their counselors an opportunity to be aware, and also with the parent feedback and parent input, as well as any type of medical documentation that we receive, that also allows that process to kind of be concrete before any adjustments need to be made."

On why six months was the chosen mark, Gordon said it was about wanting something concrete when the policy was created in 2021.

"Mr. [Wendell] Waller, our school board attorney, had some conversations with some of our medical folks. We also talked with our coordinator of school counseling and it's really just to kind of protect everyone involved," Gordon said. "I don't think there was a medical threshold that said, 'It takes six months for this to happen,' but we wanted to do it like that because the school year is about nine months long, and we were kind of thinking about two-thirds of the school year."

Gordon says this allows everyone involved an opportunity to adjust. He also talked about how school counselors are receiving additional resources to support students following the policy changes, including new training measures.

"We have LGBTQ+ groups at all of our high schools and the sponsors of those groups, as well as the administration resources, are coming in everyday. And so part of it is just really just supporting the kid. That's the main thing," he said. "It's not like if a student is suffering from gender dysphoria that a school counselor is going to be the one that's going to diagnose and treat that. No, that would be a recommendation to a clinical professional. So we have to make sure that we were going to be protecting our staff for documentation purposes."

Gordon emphasized that the only aspect SPS staff was involved in was developing the plan. He also broke down how counselors work with children who are having any type of mental health issues.

"The referral can come from anywhere. It could come from the teacher, it could come from the school administrator, it can come from the student just walking into the counselor's office themselves, but then it basically becomes almost a letter layer of confidentiality between what the student is discussing with the counselor and what

the counselor can tell us. But the first call is going to be to the parent, the first communication," Gordon said. "The counselor is also going to take the time to take a look at what's in the file, and then some recommendations could occur because it's our job as a school just to be able to provide resources. If it's Western Tidewater, if it's a clinical therapist, we do have psychologists that are on staff as well, if it's potentially adding that layer. But none of those things can happen without the parents' consent."

There has been much outcry from parents and the school community regarding safety, namely with school restrooms. Gordon says if there will be any safety measures to prevent any sort of incidents, those measures have already been "in place."

"If any student had any type of gender identity questions, part of the conversation that they were having with their school counselor or school administrator is to basically identify what the plan was going to be. Unfortunately, we saw a lot of political ads about people being allowed, you know, biological males going into the female locker room and taking showers. Well, first of all, athletes don't take showers at school. I can't remember the last time they did. They weren't doing it in the 90s when I was in school and in talking to our student-athletes these days, 99% of the kids go home and take a shower. So that was just something that was being used to try to stir up some fear or controversy," Gordon said. "And in some of our gym classes, kids don't even have to change clothes to dress out. So, another opportunity of locker rooms not really being an issue. That was mainly for after-school sports, and that's when you're working with your coach and the administration to, again, come up with a plan."

On any final words, Gordon said this:

"Number one, I'm happy that, hopefully, this discussion is over. And number two, I think my other concern is, I think people were trying to use this for their own political gain. And then number three, I think individuals are going to try to find some type of way to get Suffolk Public Schools into court," he said. "People were citing the Virginia Beach case, and that case was actually what was going to be thrown out anyway. This seems to be the plan here that when individuals don't get the vote that they want on the School Board, their next solution is, 'Well we're just to get him into court,' and I don't understand how that helps the school system or helps the school community or the city. Why can't we just accept what has happened and move on?"

He continued.

"I actually believe that's a lot easier for some of our kids [than] for adults, but when I took my oath of office, it was my job to make sure I was gonna protect all kids, regardless of socioeconomic, race, or in this case, sexual identity. Why is this sexual identity piece such a threat where socioeconomic wasn't a threat? There's really no differ-

ence," Gordon said. "If a kid is different, a kid is different, but you're still supposed to do whatever you can to support that student regardless. If our kid is going to accept it, why can't we as adults who have the full development brains and that was mentioned so many times, why can't we as adults show and model how that acceptance is supposed to look?"

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