



MINUTES
CHARLOTTESVILLE CITY SCHOOL BOARD MEETING
Booker T. Reaves Media Center, Charlottesville High School
Thursday, January 8, 2026 (6:00 PM)

A Closed Meeting of the Charlottesville City School Board was held on Thursday, January 8, 2026, at 4:30 p.m., in the Division Annex Exceptional Education Conference Room, 1400 Melbourne Road, Charlottesville, VA.

PRESENT: Ms. Bryant, Ms. Burns, Ms. Cooper, Ms. Dooley, Mr. Meyer, Ms. Richardson, and Ms. Torres

ABSENT: None

STAFF PRESENT: Dr. Royal A. Gurley, Jr., Superintendent; Maria Lewis, Director of Human Resources; and Leslie Thacker, School Board Clerk

Call the Closed Session to Order: Dr. Royal A. Gurley, Jr., Superintendent, called the closed session meeting to order at 4:30 p.m.

1.1 Closed Meeting: at 4:31 p.m., Ms. Burns offered a motion to go into a Closed Session as authorized by Section 2.2-3711 (A) (1) of the Code of Virginia, for the discussion of personnel matters. Ms. Cooper seconded the motion, and the motion passed with Ms. Burns, Ms. Cooper, Ms. Dooley, Mr. Meyer, Ms. Richardson, and Ms. Torres voting aye. 6 ayes, 0 nays. Ms. Bryant was absent for this vote.

1.2 Closed Meeting Certification: At 5:27 p.m., Ms. Burns offered a motion that the board certify by recorded vote that, to the best of each board member's knowledge, only public business matters lawfully exempted from the open meeting requirements of the Virginia Freedom of Information Act and identified in the motion authorizing the Closed Meeting were heard, discussed or considered. Ms. Richardson seconded the motion, and the motion passed with Ms. Bryant, Ms. Burns, Ms. Cooper, Ms. Dooley, Mr. Meyer, Ms. Richardson, and Ms. Torres voting aye. 7 ayes, 0 nays.

Action: None

The board recessed at 5:27 p.m. until 6:00 p.m.

1.3 Call to Order: Dr. Gurley, Superintendent, called the Charlottesville City School Board meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

2.1 Moment of Silence: Dr. Royal A. Gurley, Jr., Superintendent, asked all present to observe a moment of silence.

3.1 Pledge of Allegiance: The Board began the meeting with the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America.

4.1 Roll Call of Board Members: Roll call was conducted to confirm attendance.

The following Board Members were present:

Ms. Zyahna Bryant

Ms. Shymora Cooper

Mr. Chris Meyer

Ms. Lisa Torres

Ms. Amanda Burns

Ms. Emily Dooley

Ms. Nicole Richardson

Ginger Craighead-Way, Student Representative

The following Board Members were absent: None

The following Staff Members were present:	Dr. Royal A. Gurley, Jr.	Dr. Anna Isley
	Mr. Pat Cuomo	Ms. Kim Powell
	Ms. Carolyn Swift	Ms. Maria Lewis
	Ms. Rachel Rasnake	Dr. T. Denise Johnson
	Ms. Beth Cheuk	Ms. Renee Hoover
	Ms. Julia Green	Ms. Leslie Thacker

The following Staff Members were absent: None

5.1 Elect a Chairperson: In accordance with School Board Policy, BCA, School Board Organizational Meeting, the School Board will elect a Chair of the Board. Ms. Dooley made a motion, seconded by Mr. Meyer, to elect Ms. Torres as Chair of the Charlottesville City School Board. Upon a roll-call vote, the motion carried with Ms. Bryant, Ms. Burns, Ms. Cooper, Ms. Dooley, Mr. Meyer, Ms. Richardson, and Ms. Torres, voting aye. 7 ayes, 0 nays.

Mr. Meyer expressed his support for Ms. Torres's election as Chair, noting her previous great job in the role and stating he looks forward to her facilitation.

5.2 Elect a Vice Chair: In accordance with School Board Policy, BCA, School Board Organizational Meeting, the School Board will elect a Vice-Chair of the Board. Mr. Meyer made a motion, seconded by Ms. Bryant, to elect Amanda Burns as Vice-Chair of the Charlottesville City School Board. Upon a roll-call vote, the motion carried with Ms. Bryant, Ms. Burns, Ms. Cooper, Ms. Dooley, Mr. Meyer, Ms. Richardson, and Ms. Torres, voting aye. 7 ayes, 0 nays.

5.3 Appoint Clerk and Deputy Clerk of the Board: In accordance with School Board Policy, BCA, School Board Organizational Meeting, the School Board will, upon recommendation of the Superintendent, appoint a Clerk and Deputy Clerk of the Board. Ms. Torres made a motion, seconded by Ms. Dooley, to appoint Leslie Thacker as Clerk and Julia Green as Deputy Clerk of the Board. Upon a roll-call vote, the motion carried with Ms. Bryant, Ms. Burns, Ms. Cooper, Ms. Dooley, Mr. Meyer, Ms. Richardson, and Ms. Torres voting aye. 7 ayes, 0 nays.

Ms. Torres shared a personal reflection on her commitment to the school board, acknowledging the "heavy" nature of current global events. She recalled her decision eight years ago to focus her efforts on local service as the best way to make a tangible difference, leading to her tenure with Charlottesville City Schools. Expressing deep gratitude for her position, she stated that she feels honored to serve alongside her colleagues, the superintendent, and the administration. Ms. Torres reaffirmed her dedication to the community, emphasizing that the entire team remains firmly committed to doing their very best to support every student during these challenging times.

6.1 Approval of Proposed Agenda: Ms. Burns made a motion, seconded by Ms. Bryant, to approve the proposed agenda. Upon a roll-call vote, the motion passed with Ms. Bryant, Ms. Burns, Ms. Cooper, Ms. Dooley, Mr. Meyer, Ms. Richardson, and Ms. Torres voting aye. 7 ayes, 0 nays. The motion carried.

Ms. Torres acknowledged the student representative for beginning their tenure and welcomed Ms. Bryant to the board.

Student and Staff Recognition

7.1 Teacher of the Year Recognition: The Teachers of the Year Recognition was presented by Dr. Anna Isley, Chief Academic Officer, and Maria Lewis, Director of Human Resources. Charlottesville City Schools began participating in the Dr. Mary V. Beuveris Teacher of the Year Program in 2023, which honors exemplary educators.

The process involved teachers being nominated and selected by their colleagues at the school level. A reception was held for the recognized teachers and their families before the meeting.

The following teachers were recognized as School Teachers of the Year:

- Greenbrier Elementary: Bri Barnes (Third Grade)
- Jackson-Via Elementary: Jessica Chow (Second Grade)
- Summit Elementary: Kelly Far (Second Grade)
- Sunrise Elementary: Laura Sheay (First Grade)
- Tall Oaks Elementary: Hillary Bradley (Early Childhood Special Education)
- Trailblazer Elementary: Michaela Atkins (Special Education)
- Walker Upper Elementary: Emma Sutman (Sixth Grade)
- Charlottesville Middle School: Cody Logan (Band Teacher)
- Charlottesville High School: Amanda Williams (English Teacher)
- Charlottesville Area Technical Education Center (CATEC): Anthony Smith (ESL Teacher)
- Lugo-McGinness Academy: Nicholas Lyles (History and Social Studies Teacher)

For the division-level recognition, a committee reviewed essays from each candidate. Emma Sutman, a sixth-grade teacher from Walker Upper Elementary, was announced as the Charlottesville City Schools Division Teacher of the Year and will go on to represent the division at the state level.

Comments from Members of the Community

8.1 Comments from Students: The Charlottesville City School Board welcomes comments from students. Speakers were encouraged to keep their comments to three minutes.

- There were none.

8.2 Comments from Members of the Community: The Charlottesville City School Board welcomes comments from community members. Speakers were encouraged to keep their comments to three minutes.

- Sabra Timmins, an English language teacher at Jackson Via Elementary (and former English learner teacher at CHS), thanked the board for moving the meetings to 6 PM to increase community access. She especially thanked the board for its commitment to the K-Tech program, noting her past concern about its future. She stated that K-Tech is often a bridge for English learners to a successful career, and provided a personal example of her son, Max, who was hired as a full-time firefighter for the city of Stanton after his experience with K-Tech and mentorship from Captain Bobby Elliot. She concluded that the board's support for K-Tech has a life-changing impact.
- Jenn Horne, CHS Teacher, thanked the board for the public speaking luncheon, for a meeting with Stacy Reedall, the leadership of Amanda Williams, and for the teacher workday. She made a final plea to rethink Standards-Based Grading (SBG) in the humanities, suggesting a PD day in February for discussion roundtables with humanities educators to consider making SBG optional in their professional disciplines. She argued that while SBG works for the finite standards of math, it is not suitable for the humanities, where mastery is an "ongoing combination of standards" that requires deep dives into literature, original writing, and multiple perspectives. She concluded that for the humanities, standards should be flexible and act as "ingredients for learning," not "the meal," to support the VDOE's five C's: Critical thinking, creative thinking, collaboration, communication, and citizenship.
- Ashley Conn, a parent from Jackson Via Elementary, shared her concerns about resources available to children who are below grade level or need extra support. She personally feels that tutors are needed and suggested that workshops should be presented to parents to help them support their children at home, as she is not a teacher and does not want to confuse her son. She noted that she is very active in her son's schooling, has met with his teachers, and works with him at home, but there is still a need for support.

- Kiara Logan, a parent with a fifth-grade son at Walker Elementary, spoke about the need for more engaging resources and support from the school to help her son with reading at home, beyond the daily 30 minutes of reading. She noted that while his teachers are amazing, her son is not on the correct reading level, and she would like help with more engaging teaching strategies that she could use at home.
- Tyiesha Hill, a parent with children at CHS and Tall Oaks (likely Tall Oaks Elementary), expressed concern about the grading system, noting that grades in Canvas and PowerSchool are often confusing and inconsistent, leading to confusion for parents. She requested that the grades be consistent and updated so parents are not confused about their children's correct grades. Additionally, she mentioned that her freshman son is struggling with Biology and needs more explanation and understanding of the work from the teachers. She emphasized the need for better communication between teachers and parents to help students before they fall too far behind, stressing that communication is key to helping students be successful.

Ms. Torres asked Dr. Gurley for a follow-up with the parents who provided comments.

Student Representative Report Out

9.1 Charlottesville High School Student Representative Report: Ginger Craighead-Way, the Charlottesville High School Student Representative, addressed the School Board, noting her honor to serve and thanking the public and staff. She highlighted a significant concern from students: the inconsistent and restricted viewing of their grades. Specifically, she noted that teachers are not consistently syncing grades to PowerSchool, leaving students uninformed about their overall academic standing. She also pointed out that the end-of-semester grade lock in PowerSchool, combined with the inability to see overall grades in Canvas, causes unnecessary stress as students are completely unable to check their current grades. She urged the board to focus attention on this issue of grade visibility for students.

10.1-3 Adoption of Consent Agenda: The following items were included in the consent agenda: [Personnel Recommendations](#); [Business, Financial, and Routine Report](#). Ms. Burns made a motion, seconded by Mr. Meyer, to approve the adoption of the consent agenda. Upon a roll-call vote, the motion passed with Ms. Bryant, Ms. Burns, Ms. Cooper, Ms. Dooley, Mr. Meyer, Ms. Richardson, and Ms. Torres voting aye. 7 ayes, 0 nays.

Ms. Burns asked for clarity on one of the new grants in the business financial reports: a \$23,676 McKinney-Vento subgrant for homeless students. Ms. Rasnake explained that the grant provides funds to reduce barriers for these students, including transportation, extra funds for extracurriculars, summer school, summer camps, and material support such as hygiene items and help with obtaining new birth certificates. She noted that the division receives the grant yearly and uses the funds specifically for individual students and their families.

Ms. Bryant asked two follow-up questions regarding the McKinney-Vento grant: how many students are identified as recipients, and how families can identify their students for those services. Ms. Rasnake responded that qualifications are made at the school level by social workers, and families who believe they are homeless should reach out to their school, promising to provide the number of recipients later in the meeting. Ms. Bryant then asked what staff outside of guidance counselors or support staff are doing to help identify students and spread awareness. Ms. Rasnake replied that school registrars are a key group, as they receive training and might spot applications in the registration portal to alert social workers or administrators. She also noted that all staff, including special education teachers, receive regular training through Project Hope on how to spot the signs. Finally, Ms. Rasnake encouraged anyone with a need to reach out to their school, even if they may not qualify under the McKinney-Vento Act, as there are other avenues for support, and social workers can connect families with outside resources.

11.0 Items Pulled From Consent Agenda: None

Action Items

12.1 Action - 2026-2027 Program of Studies: Dr. Anna Isley, Chief Academic Officer, Dr. Justin Malone, CHS Principal; Rodney Jordan, CMS Principal; Dr. Stacey Heltz, Principal of CATEC and CTE Coordinator, Dr. Lamont Trotter, Program Administrator for LMA; Aaron Eichorst, Coordinator of Fine and Performing Arts, Jessica Brantley, Coordinator of Health/PE, and Dr. Jeannie Pfautz, ESL Specialist presented the 2026-2027 Program of Studies for Board information on December 4, 2025. The Board was asked for action at this meeting.

Ms. Burns made a motion, seconded by Ms. Bryant, to approve the 2026-2027 Program of Studies as presented. Upon a roll-call vote, the motion passed with Ms. Bryant, Ms. Burns, Ms. Cooper, Ms. Dooley, Mr. Meyer, and Ms. Torres voting aye. 6 ayes, 0 nays. Ms. Richardson was absent for this vote.

Discussion/Questions:

- Ms. Bryant expressed her support for approving the Program of Studies, but inquired about future entry points in high school performing arts, such as orchestra. She asked if creating that entry point would require an additional Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) position, noting this would be a consideration for the future, not for the current approval. Dr. Isley confirmed that this is a goal moving forward and that the topic will be a priority when they begin planning the next Program of Studies later in the spring.
- Ms. Burns advocated for the inclusion of more languages relevant to the community (Dari, Pashto, and Arabic) in the Program of Studies to offer course credit and foster community with the student body. She also echoed Ms. Bryant's concerns about creating entry points and pathways into band, orchestra, and strings after middle school, especially a new pathway at the high school level.
- Regarding the JROTC program, Ms. Burns asked for an update and suggested exploring a partnership with UVA. Dr. Gurley confirmed the division's interest in establishing a strong ROTC program as a leadership pathway, but noted that initial exploration indicates it requires a significant commitment of at least 150 students expressing interest to be executed in a sustainable manner due to the resources and equipment involved. He expressed interest in potential partnerships to help launch the program.
- Finally, a discussion on the theater program's CTE status took place. Dr. Gurley noted that the division currently lacks a state-recognized CTE pathway and a formalized industry-recognized credential for the production and entertainment design area. Dr. Heltz clarified that there is no longer a recognized industry credential for that single course (other than workplace readiness), and the existing CTE pathway includes carpentry (at CATEC) and an engineering course, while the drama stage craft course is considered Fine Arts, not CTE.
- Ms. Torres inquired about how the elementary schools' music program would be supplemented or supported following the changes to band in the fifth and sixth grades. Mr. Eichorst, Coordinator of Fine and Performing Arts, responded that they are using Professional Learning (PL) days to align the general and instrumental music curriculum to ensure students are prepared for instrumental music decisions. They are also expanding field trip opportunities to all fifth graders, including attendance at performances, to increase instrumental music awareness. Non-repairable instruments are being placed in classrooms for students to handle and touch. Finally, beginning instrumentalists in the sixth grade will now have their classes every day instead of every other day to compensate for lost instructional time.

Items for Discussion

13.1 Adoption of High Quality Instructional Materials: Math Curriculum: Melissa Mitchem, Coordinator of Math, presented the High Quality Instructional Materials recommended for adoption by the School Board for the 2026-2027 school year. The presentation followed a thorough curriculum adoption process, and the materials were aligned to the 2023 Standards of Learning for Mathematics, which the Virginia Board of Education had approved in March 2025, marking the end of the 2024-2025 school year's curriculum adoption cycle. Information presented included:

- Strategic Goals and Context

- Strategic Alignment: The adoption supports the 2023-2028 Strategic Plan to increase academic achievement, ensuring all learners have access to rigorous, relevant learning and demonstrate mastery in math to eliminate achievement gaps.
- Current Need: The 2024-2025 school year marks the end of the previous curriculum cycle. The Virginia Board of Education approved new materials in March 2025 aligned with the 2023 Standards of Learning (SOL).
- Curriculum Change: The previous elementary curriculum, *Math Investigations 3*, was not submitted for approval by its publisher, necessitating a new choice.
- Adoption Process and Timeline
 - Spring 2025: The Math Leadership Team developed a "Theory of Change" and narrowed the list of approved materials to three for elementary and three for secondary schools.
 - Fall 2025: An Adoption Committee of 14 secondary and 22 elementary members (including educators and community members) was formed to review and score the materials.
 - Teacher Review: Over 100 elementary teachers and the secondary department reviewed physical and online resources through presentations and focus groups.
- Secondary Recommendations (Grades 6–Algebra II)
 - Preference: Mathspace was the overwhelming favorite, receiving 92.3% of the preference vote over EDIA.
 - Rationale: It is adaptable, aligns with the 2023 SOL rigor, and has been adopted by over 50% of Virginia school divisions.
 - Cost: Estimated at \$169,905.66 for 5 years, covering digital access, an AI-powered tutor, and professional development.
- Elementary Recommendations (Grades K–5)
 - Dual Model: The committee recommends a split approach: Bridges in Mathematics for K–3 and STEMscopes Math for 4th and 5th grade.
 - Bridges (K–3): Chosen for its visual, hands-on approach and "Number Corner" component which builds strong conceptual foundations. It shows high SOL alignment in Kindergarten (93.4%) and 1st Grade (89%).
 - STEMscopes (4th–5th): Favored for its "5E Lesson Model" and inquiry-based real-world scenarios. It is highly aligned to the 4th (83%) and the 5th (76%) grade standards.
 - Cost: Bridges is estimated at \$190,415.75 total, while STEMscopes is estimated at \$129,018.55.
- Financial Impact and Next Steps
 - Total Investment: The estimated 5-year cost (2026–2030) for both levels is \$489,339.96, funded through the division textbook fund.
 - Community Review: Physical samples are available for community review at the Division Annex from January 9 through January 30, 2026.
 - Final Approval: School Board approval is anticipated for February 5, 2026, with implementation planning to follow.

Discussion/Questions:

- Ms. Dooley asked about the cost of the new program relative to the old curriculum, specifically whether it was budget-neutral. Ms. Mitchem responded that for the previous curriculum, **Math Investigations 3**, a flat fee was paid seven years ago out of the textbook fund for a seven-year adoption, which included workbooks and online access. She provided an example, stating that to continue **Investigations** for one year recently, the division had to make an à la carte purchase of approximately \$45,000.
- Ms. Richardson expressed interest in reviewing the hard copy math materials as a parent to see the changes and how the format might appeal to students. Ms. Mitchem confirmed that the materials available for community review are primarily student-facing, which aligns with how the student would interact with the curriculum.
- Ms. Cooper asked for clarification on the new math curriculum, expressing concern that it seemed like a lot of "online tutorials" and asking about the balance of screen time versus actual teacher-led, hands-on

instruction. Ms. Mitchem responded that the elementary recommendations (Bridges and STEMscopes) are very much hands-on, with manipulatives and physical modeling to ensure students are not excessively on screen time. For the secondary product (Mathspace), which is more appropriate for teachers with more students, she explained that while it includes an AI-powered tutor for immediate feedback, they are emphasizing balance, and still want students doing mathematics on paper and modeling with manipulatives.

- Ms. Cooper asked about the differences between the new and old math curricula and the balance of screen time versus hands-on instruction. Ms. Mitchem clarified that the elementary recommendations, Bridges and STEMscopes, are very much hands-on, using manipulatives and physical modeling to avoid excessive screen time. For the secondary product, Mathspace, while it includes an AI-powered tutor for immediate feedback and a data dashboard for teachers, the emphasis is still on balance, with students doing work on paper. Regarding the differences from the previous curricula, Ms. Mitchem noted that the new secondary curriculum, Mathspace, was written specifically for Virginia's standards, unlike the previous Envision. For elementary schools, Bridges is considered "more digestible" than the old Investigations, aiming for more effective implementation by teachers. Finally, she confirmed that parents could access Mathspace digitally if the student logged in, and she was particularly enthusiastic about the "home connection book" provided with the Bridges curriculum for parental support.
- Ms. Burns inquired about data showing whether the recommended math curriculum is the "best for those students" and addresses the achievement gap with Black and brown students. Ms. Mitchem responded that while the Bridges curriculum was initially not on the short list due to concerns about coverage of 4th and 5th-grade standards, they found data from Campbell County, a district using Bridges for years. She stated that even Campbell County's 4th and 5th-grade students are outperforming Charlottesville students, specifically citing data showing that Campbell County's Black students are outperforming Charlottesville's Black students. This data, coupled with a desire to build foundational mathematical fluency early, informed the recommendation.
- Ms. Bryant expressed her support for the curriculum adoption but had a follow-up question regarding the equity component. She acknowledged the data from Campbell County but noted she would need to research their demographics, including socioeconomic status, to see if their Black students are truly comparable to Charlottesville's Black students before making a comparison. She also expressed interest in reviewing the physical materials and seeing how the curriculum could be implemented in parent training to help build bridges between home and school, as requested by earlier speakers.
- Ms. Mitchem responded by confirming the need to consider different demographics, noting that Campbell County is more rural. She added that they also spoke to an instructional leader in Nashville, Tennessee, who is using the recommended STEMscopes program. She stated that while Nashville's proficiency levels are not yet where they need to be, their students are showing "exceptional growth" according to Tennessee metrics.
- Mr. Meyer first asked for clarification on whether secondary students (6th grade through 12th) would receive physical textbooks or if the curriculum would be entirely digital. Ms. Mitchem confirmed that while the core product is digital and allows for content adaptability, they still have the option to purchase textbooks, and this would be a future decision after consulting with teachers, families, and students.
- Mr. Meyer then asked how concerns regarding screen time and educational results were considered. Ms. Mitchem explained that even with the digital curriculum (Mathspace), students are not learning math exclusively on screen. The teacher still leads instruction, and students continue to use manipulatives, pencil, and paper. The online component is primarily used for independent practice, online assessments, and providing data for the teacher, emphasizing a balance between digital and physical work.
- Finally, regarding the AI-powered digital tutor mentioned in the quote, Ms. Mitchem confirmed it was not piloted but is included in the estimated cost. She stated that the next step would be to research its use in other school divisions. She differentiated it from the current basic error-prompting feature in Mathspace, noting the full AI tutor would provide more in-depth support and is similar to the robust, multi-language translating tutor in the EDIA product that was piloted at the high school.
- Mr. Meyer expressed his skepticism about the heavy digital component of the curriculum, citing past poor results with screen-based learning during COVID and noting that the digital option seems to be at

the teacher's, not the family's, determination. Ms. Mitchem addressed his concern by differentiating between online learning and online practice, emphasizing that the digital component (like Mathspace) would be used as a tool for immediate feedback for 20 minutes of an 80-minute block, not every day, and not for the core instruction, which remains hands-on with manipulatives and paper. She also confirmed that the system can generate weekly minutes of student use. Mr. Cuomo added that the division has filtering tools, Classwise and Linewise, which allow teachers to turn off computer access, limit windows/tabs, and monitor student activity to prevent off-task behavior like playing video games. He also mentioned a home tool available for parents to set hours and parameters on student devices.

- Ms. Craghead-Way expressed concern that the AI-powered digital tutor in the Mathspace curriculum could be manipulated or undermine the bond of teacher-led instruction, asking if it was similar to previously tested tools that provide feedback on errors. Ms. Mitchem confirmed that the core technology is similar, learning from student mistakes to prompt and redirect, but stated they would work with the technology department to ensure it is within AI guidelines. Ms. Mithead clarified that Mathspace only goes up to Algebra II, and because the full AI tutor component had not been piloted, they would need to meet with math teachers and department chairs to ensure it is a necessary tool before purchasing. Ms. Craghead-Way then asked if a package without the AI tutor could be purchased. Ms. Mitchem concluded by noting the general importance of online supplements and tools like Desmos for student learning.
- Ms. Cooper asked if the digital feature offered a read-aloud voice option to assist students and parents with reading difficulties. Ms. Mitchem responded by confirming that the division has a Chrome extension that will read any screen and translate it into different languages.
- Ms. Torres asked why the Bridges curriculum for second grade only meets 65% of the standards. Ms. Mitchem explained that it is likely more closely aligned with Common Core, and that Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOL) have unique requirements that other states do not, such as introducing certain geometry concepts in second grade that Common Core introduces in third. She noted that other products were also "weakly aligned" in second grade and confirmed the division would need to continue to supplement with existing resources to maintain the necessary rigor.

13.2 Community Schools: Dr. T. Denise Johnson, Supervisor of Strategic Initiatives; Dr. Sherica Jones-Lewis, Community School Director; and Abigail Ferguson, Family Engagement & Outreach Specialist, presented "Better Together: Advancing Family and Community Engagement," an update on the Charlottesville City Schools Community Schools framework.

Information presented included:

- Community Schools Overview: Defined as public schools that provide neighborhood-specific services and supports, created and run through collaboration between the people who know the children best.
- The Four Pillars of Community Schools:
 - Pillar 1—Integrated Student Supports: Coordinating academic, emotional, health, and basic-needs supports for easy access.
 - Pillar 2—Expanded Learning Time & Opportunities: Using student voice to shape enrichment after school, on weekends, and during the summer.
 - Pillar 3—Active Family & Community Engagement: Building authentic partnerships where families and organizations co-design school supports.
 - Pillar 4—Collaborative Leadership & Practices: Aligning leaders around shared goals, data, and continuous improvement.
- Division-wide Progress:
 - Engaged stakeholders (via an Advisory Board and Working Groups) around the common priorities of literacy, attendance, and student connection.
 - Centered student voice by collecting feedback on belonging and barriers to engagement at CMS, CHS, and Lugo-McGinnis Academy.

- Aligned existing literacy and mentorship efforts to reduce fragmentation and is currently purchasing a van for student/family transport.
- Strengthened relationships by positioning schools as hubs for mentoring and academic reinforcement.
- Confidence & Comprehension Club (Grades K-6):
 - Ranked schools by literacy need to guide a phased rollout of literacy mentors and kits.
 - Identified school-level contacts and volunteer point persons to coordinate literacy hubs.
 - Initiated partnerships with organizations like the Boys and Girls Club and Abundant Life to serve as community-based hubs.
- Bridge Builders (Grades 7-8):
 - Implemented "Real Talk Circles" in partnership with Charlottesville Human Services to train staff.
 - Focused on integrated cultural enrichment and real-world problem solving through the Innovation Hub.
- The Lab (Grades 9-12 + Alt Ed):
 - Aligned planning with the Virginia 3E Framework (Enrollment, Employment, Enlistment) and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.
 - Collaborated with PVCC to explore a student connection survey based on Network2Work's pre-employment survey to track student goals and needs.
 - Conducted student focus groups and questionnaires to understand needs before beginning family engagement.
- Sustainability:
 - Focused on building systems by aligning resources, relationships, and responsibilities at the Federal, State, and Local levels.
 - Noted that local coordinators could be built into future budgets, though existing personnel can also be leveraged for these efforts.

Discussion/Questions:

- Ms. Craghead-Way expressed interest in connecting Charlottesville High School students to the program and requested further details regarding literacy kits and mentorship models. Dr. Jones-Lewis clarified that the initiative utilizes two types of mentors: relationship mentors, who focus on social-emotional support, and literacy mentors, who receive specialized training from partners like UVA to provide direct reading instruction. To ensure student engagement, the program often trains staff from existing partners—such as the Boys and Girls Club and Abundant Life—as literacy mentors because they already possess established trust with the students. Dr. Jones-Lewis further explained that literacy kits are not assigned by grade level but are strictly differentiated; reading specialists develop an individual literacy profile for each child to curate a series of books tailored specifically to their reading level. The program focuses on "academic middle" students to prevent them from falling behind while ensuring support is differentiated across schools to meet the specific needs identified by building administrators.
- Mr. Meyer referenced public comments made earlier in the meeting regarding the necessity for increased support within the home and inquired if the community schools framework—specifically the Confidence and Comprehension Club (Triple C)—would facilitate connecting parents with those resources. Dr. Jones-Lewis confirmed that while the Confidence and Comprehension Club is tailored for younger learners, the division is committed to finding ways to support and connect with parents across all grade levels.
- She acknowledged that improving parent involvement and opening "two-way communication" are primary areas of focus, particularly for families whose students are most impacted by a lack of resources and support. To address the specific needs identified by the parents who spoke during the meeting, Dr. Jones-Lewis noted that the division plans to connect with the City of Promise. The ultimate goal of this partnership is to move beyond merely disseminating general information and instead provide the specific resources and support that parents are actively requesting.
- Mr. Meyer inquired about the vetting and review process for community-based organizations (CBOs), specifically whether these partnerships would be managed through formal or informal relationships. Dr.

Jones-Lewis explained that the division is currently utilizing a combination of existing Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs), "trials" with new partners, and ongoing relationship-building efforts. She emphasized that a recent Bridgebuilders planning meeting demonstrated a high level of "deep listening," allowing organizations to identify existing services and "open up that pipeline" for referrals rather than duplicating efforts.

- Dr. Johnson further clarified that the division has created a standardized MOU and data agreement process. As these community relationships continue to evolve, this formal process will be used to put agreements in writing, ensuring that goals are aligned and that the division can effectively measure and analyze the impact of these partnerships over time.
- Ms. Bryant thanked the staff for the presentation but emphasized the need for "tangible care" and institutionalized access to resources within the division. Drawing from her experience as a former student, she expressed concern that despite the presence of numerous community organizations, significant gaps remain in addressing the achievement gap and basic student needs, such as housing and food security. Ms. Bryant advocated for a centralized "resource hub" located within school buildings to provide students with direct, rapid-response access to services and advocacy rather than simply routing them to outside partners.
- Dr. Gurley sought clarification on how the division could "move differently" to support this vision. He noted that identifying gaps—such as service availability during snow days or after typical business hours—presents an opportunity for all community partners to rethink their operational models. Ms. Bryant concluded by stressing that the School Board has a unique capacity to advocate for city funding and infrastructure in ways private nonprofits cannot; she urged the division to leverage its "ear of the city" during joint budget sessions to hold the city accountable for providing the rapid-response measures students and families require.
- Dr. Jones-Lewis expressed complete agreement regarding the necessity of meeting students' basic needs, referencing Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. She noted that the first pillar of the community schools model is Integrated Student Supports, which specifically addresses foundational requirements like food and housing to ensure a child is fully supported for learning.
- She emphasized that the success of this model relies on a deep partnership, stating that community schools cannot exist without the mutual involvement of both the schools and the community working together to problem-solve. Regarding financial sustainability, Dr. Jones-Lewis is currently exploring "sustainable grant funding" and other long-term monetary pathways rather than relying on one-time grants to ensure the longevity of this work.
- Ms. Burns commended the dedication of the team and Dr. Gurley, expressing her confidence that the passion behind this "tremendous undertaking" will lead to meaningful change for families. She emphasized that while schools are often expected to handle every aspect of student support, the success of this initiative depends on enlisting every facet of the community. Specifically, Ms. Burns highlighted the University of Virginia as a vital partner, noting their strategic commitment to being good community members and their current involvement in literacy mentorship. She suggested exploring avenues to train parents as literacy coaches so they can provide academic support within their own homes and neighborhoods. Ms. Burns concluded by urging the community to "answer the call" when the division reaches out, stressing that this work should not rest 100% on the school division alone.
- Ms. Cooper shared that bridging the gap between the community and schools was a primary motivation for her joining the School Board and expressed her excitement to see this work in progress. She specifically highlighted the importance of seeking long-term grant partnerships with community organizations, noting that many struggle with funding due to federal budget cuts. Ms. Cooper suggested that by identifying organizations producing excellent outcomes, the division can pursue collaborative grants to sustain their work.
- Additionally, she commended the use of listening sessions to bring various partners together. She noted that because many organizations perform similar tasks, these meetings allow them to "capitalize" on individual strengths, minimize duplication of efforts, and foster a "power within numbers" approach to problem-solving.

- Ms. Richardson expressed her gratitude for the community-based work being done, specifically highlighting the importance of the partnership with First Baptist Church and the necessity of ensuring students' basic needs, such as housing and food, are met to support their academic success. Following her remarks, Ms. Richardson inquired about the specific steps and processes involved in the upcoming literacy training. Dr. Jones-Lewis explained that the district is currently collaborating with representatives from UVA to finalize the program's structure, including deciding between a universal training model or a "train-the-trainer" approach to build long-term capacity. The initiative plans to utilize a combination of UVA and PVCC students, along with staff from community-based organizations, to serve as mentors as the program moves forward
- Ms. Dooley emphasized the importance of ensuring that community-based organizations align their missions directly with student needs rather than general philanthropic goals to ensure meaningful impact. She requested the development of a visual tracking tool, such as a web or map, to organize institutional memory and identify existing resources for issues like food insecurity and parent support. Ms. Dooley also expressed a need for a strategic overview of grant progress that clearly distinguishes between completed tasks, in-progress initiatives, and upcoming goals. Dr. Jones-Lewis confirmed that all project data is currently tracked on a detailed Trello board, including timelines and personnel responsibilities, and she agreed to find a more accessible format to share these updates. She further explained that the district is collaborating with the UVA School of Education on a comprehensive evaluation plan, which includes using existing social-emotional learning survey data to measure year-over-year impact and refining student engagement formats to better facilitate necessary referrals.
- Ms. Lisa Torres initiated a discussion regarding the evaluation of literacy kits, specifically questioning how their impact would be measured for home use and whether they were being paired with students on identified reading plans. Dr. Jones-Lewis clarified that the literacy kits are currently intended for students in the "academic middle" to avoid overwhelming those who already have intensive reading plans in place. Regarding the evaluation rubric, Dr. Jones-Lewis explained that the district will use a control group method to compare the progress of students receiving the kits against those who do not, emphasizing the importance of showing correlation while acknowledging that hundreds of external factors, including basic needs and teacher relationships, influence a child's academic performance.
- Ms. Torres further emphasized the value of using this initiative to bring diverse community partners to the same table and suggested that the effort should continue to be fine-tuned based on feedback. She inquired about the specific supports provided to families to ensure they understand how to use the resources and whether the "community school" model allows the district to tap into other groups when non-academic needs are identified during family outreach. Dr. Jones-Lewis confirmed that an open, bi-directional pipeline exists between the district and its partners, allowing for a flexible exchange of support for issues like housing stability and food insecurity. Finally, Ms. Torres expressed hope that a snapshot of this work could be shared with the City Council to highlight the program's success and remind local leaders of the importance of supporting both the schools and their community partners.
- Ms. Bryant suggested that leaders from community-based organizations (CBOs) be invited to join future district presentations to provide more in-depth insights into their work. Dr. Johnson clarified that the specific goal is to have these partners deliver presentations directly to the School Board to discuss their activities and the measurable impact they are having on the student population. Ms. Bryant further requested to see a sample or example of such a presentation in the future to better understand the format and depth of information being shared.

Board Response to Written Reports

14.1 [School Board Member Committee Reports - Written Report](#): Board members shared updates on recent activities in this written report.

14.2 [Chronic Absenteeism - Written Report](#): Rachel Rasnake provided a written report on Chronic Absenteeism.

- Mr. Meyer highlighted the value of the district's written reports and shared an update on attendance trends across the division. He noted that while elementary schools are performing well and trending toward positive levels, chronic absenteeism remains a significant concern at the secondary level, with the middle school at 25% and the high school at 28%. Mr. Meyer observed that while the high school's figures show improvement over the previous year, middle school attendance has declined. He credited new initiatives, such as automated parent notifications regarding student absences, as helpful tools in addressing these challenges.
- Ms. Bryant advocated for innovative incentives to combat middle school chronic absenteeism, suggesting rewards like a traveling trophy or "Friday Night Live" dances. She proposed that access to these "hangout opportunities" be contingent on students being in good standing and meeting specific attendance levels. Ms. Bryant encouraged partnering with community organizations to host these events if the district lacks capacity, ensuring that external community events also require good academic standing.
- Highlighting middle school as a critical period for K-12 education, she linked attendance to academic equity. She noted student concerns that the same groups are often funneled into AP and Honors classes while others are excluded. Ms. Bryant argued that addressing absenteeism is vital to empowering students to take agency over their education and ensuring they are prepared for advanced high school opportunities
- Ms. Burns reminded the board that the community and the nation are currently in the midst of a significant flu season, which may cause a temporary increase in chronic absenteeism numbers. She noted that community viral illnesses often cause fluctuations in attendance data and expressed confidence that the students and the facilities team are prepared to manage the current health challenges
- Ms. Richardson suggested adding monetary incentives to the discussion on improving attendance, noting a program she saw on the news where a school division provided \$30 gift cards to students for achieving perfect attendance. She proposed including this idea for consideration if it aligns with the district's budget.

14.3 [2025-2026 Recruitment Report:](#) The 2025-2026 Recruitment Written Report, prepared by Maria Lewis, Director of Human Resources, and HR Staff, was presented for Board information.

- Mr. Chris Meyer commended Ms. Lewis and the HR team for their progress on teacher retention and qualifications. He noted that retention is trending toward the district's 90% target and that the division has nearly reached 100% licensure for all classroom teachers, which he described as a significant improvement from the levels seen during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mr. Meyer expressed confidence that these staffing successes would lead to improved student outcomes in the near future.

15.1 Comments from Members of the Community: There were none.

16.1 Board Member Comments:

- Ms. Dooley reminded the board that the Virginia General Assembly session was scheduled to begin the following Wednesday. She advised board members to remain mindful of upcoming legislative updates from Richmond that may impact the school division.
- Ms. Richardson concluded her remarks by wishing everyone a happy New Year and expressing her pleasure at seeing the board reconvene. She offered congratulations to fellow board members Ms. Bryant, Ms. Burns, and Ms. Torres, and stated that she is looking forward to serving for another year.
- Ms. Cooper shared her experiences from recent student engagements, starting with her visit to Ms. Horne's public speaking class. She expressed being deeply moved by the students' ability to articulate their points and offer thoughtful solutions, urging the board and division to actively listen to student input and take action on recommendations within their power. Additionally, Ms. Cooper attended a pre-break celebration for "New Pathways," where she connected with families and students to better understand community needs. She concluded by thanking staff members Ms. Webb and Ms. Warren for facilitating these connections and wished everyone a happy New Year.

- Ms. Burns opened her remarks by expressing her enthusiasm for the new semester, noting the positive energy she observed while visiting students at both Summit and Lugo-McGinness. While celebrating the "success stories" of the district—such as a former student now serving as a local firefighter—she pivoted to a call for action as the division enters budget season. She emphasized that because the school board does not control its own funding, it is vital for the community to "lean in" and advocate directly to the City Council. Ms. Burns urged parents and residents to attend upcoming meetings and share their students' stories to ensure Charlottesville City Schools receives the financial support necessary to provide opportunities for every learner.
- Ms. Bryant shared her gratitude for the evening's presentations, noting their value to her as a new board member before highlighting several key community opportunities. She strongly encouraged residents to participate in the city's upcoming participatory budgeting workshops, where they can engage directly with school board members to help shape the division's financial priorities. Shifting focus to student success, she reminded families that the second semester marks a critical window for scholarship applications, urging them to tap into the many local resources available for post-secondary education. Finally, Ms. Bryant emphasized the need to amplify student voices and ensure that both students and staff feel tangibly supported, citing this culture of care as a "crucial piece" of staff retention and a reflection of the district's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Mr. Meyer welcomed the board to 2026 and specifically greeted Ms. Bryant before pivoting to several high-priority policy and fiscal concerns. He urged the board to revisit and refine the student retention policy early in the year to ensure any changes are in place for the upcoming academic cycle. Additionally, following earlier discussions on math curriculum, he requested a broader evaluation of the district's screen time policy, questioning how "pedagogical experts" are balancing technology as a tool versus a distraction. Turning to the budget, Mr. Meyer delivered a sobering reality check. With the city projecting only a \$6 million total revenue increase and the schools potentially receiving half of that, the math does not currently align with the costs of negotiated union contracts. He warned that "harder conversations" are ahead and echoed his colleagues' calls for public engagement, noting that significant community advocacy will be required to honor those contractual commitments in a tightening fiscal environment.
- Ms. Craghead-Way expressed gratitude for the opportunity to serve and thanked all of the evening's presenters. She praised the quality of the information shared, describing the presentations as "amazing," and noted that she looks forward to hearing more as the board continues its work.
- Ms. Torres concluded the meeting by thanking the board for their varied perspectives and providing specific details on the upcoming city budget forums hosted by City Manager Sanders. She encouraged community members to attend one of the three sessions—Tuesday at CitySpace, Wednesday at Walker, or Thursday at the Middle School—describing them as an opportunity to understand the "big picture" of municipal funding through interactive activities. Emphasizing the importance of representation, she noted that school board members would be present at these forums to answer questions and advocate for Charlottesville City Schools, reinforcing the evening's consistent theme of community engagement during a challenging budget cycle.

17.1 Superintendent's Comments: Dr. Gurley concluded the meeting by reflecting on a recent state-level conference with the Virginia Association of School Superintendents (VASS), where funding and accountability were the primary focus. He highlighted a "very eye-opening" JLARC study regarding the state's accountability system, noting that current standards often have a disproportionately adverse impact on marginalized students, particularly Black and brown learners. Dr. Gurley expressed hope that the General Assembly would advance legislation to overhaul these systems and reduce negative impacts on schools. On a local level, he shared his enthusiasm for the district's shift from discussion to "tangible next steps," emphasizing that central office meetings are now focused on concrete products and student pathways. He closed by thanking community partners like City of Promise and Mount Zion for their boots-on-the-ground support during the winter break, reinforcing the district's commitment to collaborative, action-oriented leadership.

18.1 Work Session Wrap-Up: There was one request from the Board:

- Information on the AI-powered digital tutor feature (adoption of high-quality instructional materials for the math curriculum)

19.1 Upcoming Meetings: Ms. Torres read the list of upcoming meetings.

20.1 Adjourn: The meeting adjourned at 8:34 pm.

A video of the January 8, 2026, meeting can be located at:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1kurmDoS1VLpII-NMLgwsPi_Kt2Z7cxLW/view?usp=drive_link

Lisa Torres, School Board Chair

Leslie Thacker, School Board Clerk