

Anderson County Board of Education
907 North Main Street, Suite 202, Anderson, South Carolina 29621
March 16, 2020

Call to Order: Chairman David Draisen called the meeting to order and Rev. Dr. Rufus Mitchell gave the invocation after which everyone joined in the pledge of allegiance to the American Flag.

Board Members Present: The following board members were present for the March 2020 meeting: Dr. Gary Burgess, Mr. Nakia Davis, Mr. David Draisen, Mr. Jim Haning, Rev. Dr. Rufus Mitchell, and Joey Nimmer, Ex Officio.

Board Members Absent: Ms. Brenda Bradberry, Mr. Mike Brock, Mr. John Martin, and Mr. Mike Upton were unable to attend.

Approval of Agenda: Dr. Gary Burgess made a motion to strike number seven for consideration of a bond request from Anderson School District Three as they have some changes they would like to make prior to bringing it to the board at the April meeting. Mr. Nakia Davis seconded the motion. With a unanimous vote, the agenda was approved.

Approval of Minutes: Rev. Dr. Rufus Mitchell made a motion to approve the February 17, 2020 minutes and Mr. Nakia Davis seconded the motion. With a unanimous vote, the minutes were approved.

Recognition of Media and Patrons / Public Comment Period: Ms. Gloria Lowe, a former teacher/administrator from District Two spoke on behalf of Richard Rosenberger, Tara Brice, and Beth Dabney as a result of what happened at their last board meeting. Julia Barnes made a motion to demote Tara Brice, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum & Instruction, and Beth Dabney, Instructional Technology Coach, to classroom teaching positions without a recommendation from the superintendent. Dr. Rosenberger objected along with three other board members, the audience, and the effected personnel. Ms. Lowe stated it is the superintendent's responsibility to nominate, recommend, and appoint personnel, not the board. Brenda Cooley, Bonnie Knight and Stu Shirley voted in favor of the motion made by Julia Barnes. The other three board members and Dr. Rosenberger were blindsided, and she believes this was not even discussed in executive session. Ms. Lowe requested that the County Board send a letter to the Belton-Honea Path News Chronicle for publication in their next issue to help the community understand what was done is illegal.

Secondly, because the County Board oversees school budgets, Ms. Lowe requested an investigation into the wasteful spending of taxpayer's money regarding payments made to Attorney Ken Childs for his legal fees amounting to \$80,000 to \$100,000. She asked that the findings be reported back to the taxpayers.

Lastly, Bonnie Knight has requested sheriff deputies, which intimidate the audience, instead of school resource officers at the school board meetings even though the school board voted 4 to 3 to use school resource officers. How does Bonnie Knight get to pick and choose which board policies she follows? Is she responsible to reimburse the district for the use of deputies since she took it upon herself to order them? Ms. Lowe read board policy ethics as evidence which states a board member should maintain a desirable relationship with the superintendent of schools and his staff as well as abide by the recommendation of the superintendent in matters of employment of personnel.

Ms. Lowe then showed the front page of this week's Belton News (Honea Path Chronicle) which stated Tara Brice threatened to sue the school district which is totally untrue. Mr. Draisen asked if she had contacted the paper about this. Ms. Lowe said that the editor has been publishing anonymous letters to discredit the district administrators for the past five years. The problem is the editor is Brenda Cooley's daughter. Ms. Lowe then discussed another page of the same paper showing a large photo of Kathy Hawkins who is a retired teacher/administrator after 30 years in the school system. Her late husband, Danny Hawkins, was a principal and board member in the district. Ms. Hawkins made a request to speak at the board meeting after following the requirements of registering by noon the day before. However, when she tried to speak, the gavel was wielded and banged because they thought she was going to ask to stop the harassment and abuse she is taking on social media from Brenda Cooley's daughter. Under her picture, it states that Kathy Hawkins was escorted out of the school board meeting by deputies. Ms. Lowe said this did not happen.

Ms. Lowe encouraged the board members to watch a video online showing that board member, Ken Craft, was not allowed to talk when he mentioned the \$80,000. He then provided what he intended to say on handwritten notes.

Mr. Buddy Ferguson spoke next. He is a lifelong resident of Belton, former service member, and has grandchildren in District Two. Mr. Ferguson is disgusted with and ashamed of the way the school board is handling themselves at the monthly meetings: to have the chairman of a school board wave a gavel in his face prior to the meeting, before anyone says a word, and say "if anyone of you make any kind of comments, I will have you removed by these deputies!" This is not the kind of country I fought for. We have freedom of speech! We have a school board taken over by four people with their own private agenda that does not have the best interest of our students or community. Mr. Ferguson stated that Brenda Cooley has been serving on the board for 20 years and had always thought she did a good job. However, after the last election, she appears to have turned 180 degrees in the opposite way with threatening the audience. She is supposed to control the meeting in an impartial way, allowing everyone the right to speak. Not only did she not allow Ms. Hawkins, who followed proper policy signing up the day before the meeting, to speak, Ms. Colley interrupted her, belittled her, and then threatened to have her removed by the two officers.

Mr. Ferguson has not been able to find who has the authority to rein in these people who violate their own regulations on a day-to-day basis. Where is the chain of command? Mr. Ferguson believes laws are laws and they should be followed; if you don't like the law, work to change it. After some back and forth with the other school board members, Ms. Hawkins was allowed to talk for a very short time and then they called time on her.

The demotion of two administrative employees is a direct violation of Anderson County School District Two policy Mr. Ferguson continued. The policy states that the school superintendent is to establish the board's vision of the role of the superintendent. We view the superintendent's position in the school system in a triple capacity. The executive officer of the school district, leader, and accountable officer for all personnel in the system. The liaison between those personnel and the board. The superintendent is the only person in the system with whom the board normally needs to be directly involved in decisions regarding appointments of personnel because we believe the total responsibility for the administration of the school system should rest with the superintendent. The board has the responsibility for developing a systematic means of evaluating the superintendent's effectiveness in implementing the objectives expressed in the policy. The superintendent has the responsibility for evaluating the effectiveness of all other district personnel. This was adapted in March, 2003 and revised in June, 2013. On Monday night, four of our school board members violated that policy. Not only did they refuse to accept the recommendation of the superintendent to renew the contracts of Tara Brice and Beth Dabney, they voted to demote them to the role of classroom teachers. Julia Barnes made the motion and Bonnie Knight seconded it, and this was not during executive session but in the open session.

Mr. Ferguson would like to get direction from the County Board. He asked where he can go to find the person/agency responsible for enforcing the policies of the District Two school board. Mr. Draisen told Mr. Ferguson he appreciates his concern and reassured him that the County Board hears what he is saying, however, our hands are tied with the litigation being held up in court. We are all caught in the middle and are at the mercy of the court system. In the meantime, Mr. Ferguson reiterated that it's the students that are suffering the most.

Lastly, he asked how Mr. Childs can represent four members of the board in a litigation and also be the attorney of record for the Anderson County School District Two Board. This is a serious conflict of interest. He is being paid with taxpayer money even though it was said publically that he would be paid by the four board members themselves.

Mr. David Draisen asked the County Board members if they had any questions. Dr. Gary Burgess asked Ms. Lowe if there was any reason given for the demotions of the administrators at the meeting. Ms. Lowe responded that after the meeting Mr. Ashley asked Ms. Barnes what they did wrong, could have done better, or what would she recommend, don't we give them time to correct whatever mistake they are making like we do most people? Ms. Barnes said no, turned around, and walked out the door. Beth Dabney went to Ms. Barnes after the meeting and asked what she did wrong, what could she do better, and she received no answer.

Dr. Gary Burgess asked about the deputies present at the meetings and was told they are there to intimidate. Next he asked why Mr. Kevin Craft, an active board member, didn't go ahead and finish his statement and was told it was because Bonnie Knight stopped him and all discussion. Mr. Craft held back showing tremendous restraint trying to follow the rules as a board member should.

Mr. Draisen again said there are major problems with this school board and the other County Board members agreed. Dr. Burgess suggested they contact the South Carolina Press Association for the newspaper issues.

Mr. Draisen gave Mr. Nimmer the floor and he added that the County Board feels the same frustration that they do as far as sharing the standpoint of how to correct improper behavior. Traditionally and currently the policing of board policy and whether they are following the rules has always been self-policing and that is the challenge. When you get a situation like this, it is very difficult and now more specific laws may have to come about. All the research that Mr. Nimmer has done over the past months, shows the boards themselves are in control of following their own rules. This ties the hands of anybody else trying to intervene.

Mr. David Draisen reminded the group that elections are coming up and this may be a good time for change and some improvements on the school board. Dr. Gary Burgess added if the public is upset about the demotions, the State Attorney General may be a contact for them as well. In closing, the ones that are suffering the most with all this, the children.

Consideration of Request to Liquidate Assets from Anderson School District One:

Mr. Nimmer referenced the letter in the board member's packet from Mr. Robbie Binnicker, Superintendent of Anderson School District One, which was mailed to them previously. The district is requesting permission to liquidate surplus assets and Mr. Robbie Binnicker is here to address any questions you may have. Dr. Gary Burgess made a motion to approve the request and Mr. Jim Haning seconded the motion. It was approved unanimously.

Alternative School Report: The current enrollment is 124 compared to 109 last year at this time and 110 last month. Last month Ms. Brenda Bradberry requested information regarding the normal number of students returning to their home school during the first semester. Mr. Nimmer reported that 5 students returned in January, 2017, five students in January, 2018; 2 students in January, 2019; and 9 students in 2020. There were more students returning this year but several were not considered habitual offenders, therefore, they were able to return.

Dr. Gary Burgess mentioned a conference that will be coming up that he would like to attend and wanted the board to be aware. Dr. Joanne Avery is one of the people conceptualizing the idea of recruiting students to Renaissance Academy. One idea is the school could be a school of choice with two separate tracts allowing the students to earn the right to avoid boot camp. This is still under construction and Dr. Burgess hopes to learn more as time goes on.

Administrator's Report: Mr. Nimmer let everyone know that Ms. Bradberry suffered a bowel obstruction requiring surgery and has had some complications. She is now in rehab and her daughter said she is doing as well as can be expected.

Mr. Nimmer reminded the Board Members that the Statement of Economic Interest must be filed electronically with the State Ethics Commission by March 30th this year.

Next, he mentioned the office staff is in the process of implementing a Covid19 response as recommended by the CDC. We will have very limited public access to the office. All face-to-face conferences primarily in the attendance area have been suspended and we will do some by telephone now. The office hours will be reduced with as many employees working from home as possible.

The April 20th meeting is scheduled to be held at the Anderson One and Two Career and Technology Center. As you remember we visited the Anderson Institute of Technology which serves Districts Three, Four, and Five back in the fall. We decided then that we would like to have a meeting at the Career and Technology Center in Williamston and Hollie Harrell, the director, has been working with us to make that happen.

There are several of you that have expressed an interest in attending the 2DAC on April 22nd which is our day to attend providing it isn't pushed out with the coronavirus. It will be held at the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center. This is an opportunity for our voices to be heard at the State House for meetings with House and Senate lawmakers to advocate for education issues.

Financial

A. Tax Collection YTD vs. Budget: Mr. Nimmer reported the tax collections year to date for all the districts are consistent and still trending between one half to two percent ahead of where they were last year at this time.

B. Assessment Totals: Mr. Nimmer stated for the third month in a row, there has been very little change. We had a very slight uptick, about \$200, in the value of a mil county wide. It is currently at \$794,469.00 which is the total mil not the net value of a mil. That number could rise with the sale of automobiles which usually coincides with tax refunds.

C. Education Sales & Use Tax: Mr. Nimmer referenced the sales tax report in the packets. We are through the month of February, 2020 and have collected \$114,124,918.05 countywide. As a reminder, 20% comes off the top to roll back property tax millage and 80% is used for capital projects.

Old Business: No old business was discussed.

New Business:

A. ADM Accounts Payable

B. SFS Accounts Payable

Dr. Gary Burgess made a motion to pay the bills as presented. The motion was seconded by Rev. Dr. Rufus Mitchell and was followed by a unanimous vote.

The meeting was adjourned by Mr. Draisen.

Respectfully submitted,

Dr. Gary Burgess, Secretary of the Anderson County Board of Education
This is a true and correct copy of notes taken at the meeting.