



# BOARD OF VISITORS

THE VIRGINIA SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF AND THE BLIND  
P.O. BOX 2069  
STAUNTON, VA 24402-2069

Senator John J. Bell  
Board Chairperson

June 14, 2022  
Minutes of Meeting

**Call to Order:** Senator Bell called the meeting to order at 11:07 am.

A quorum of members was not present. The meeting convened for the purpose of sharing information.

**Members Present:** Senator John J. Bell, Mike Asip, Daphne Cox and JH Cline, Jr.

**Members Absent:** Delegate Kathleen Murphy, Senator Ghazala F. Hashmi, Delegate Sally Hudson and Judy Sorrell

**Advisors to the BOV Present:** Audrey Burges/OAG and Pat Trice/Superintendent

**Advisors to the BOV Absent:** Wanda Council/VDOE

**Reading and approval of minutes:** The minutes from the Board's March 24, 2022 meeting will be reviewed at the next regular meeting.

## Closed Session

The closed session pursuant to Section §2.2-3711(A)(8) of the Code of Virginia pertaining to a Title IX matter was postponed until the Board's next regular meeting.

## Reports

**General Assembly Update:** Senator John J. Bell, Chair, shared that the General Assembly will reconvene in a Special Session on Friday, June 17th, to discuss the Governor's amendment to the budget. If a bill is presented and passes each chamber for three readings, it is sent to the Governor for approval. If legislation does not pass, it is added to a docket. If a bill has not been presented to the Governor, it is sent to Special Session.

The \$224 billion two-year spending budget that recently passed in the General Assembly included a \$600,000 budget amendment, submitted by Senator Bell, to upgrade VSDB's Information Technology (IT) system. An updated IT plan will need to be approved by the Board by October 2022 to be sent to the Governor.

Ms. Trice thanked Senator Bell for his work on this significant legislation.

VSDB continues to face ongoing challenges with staff's salaries and the rising cost of inflation. Across the state, individuals are struggling to keep up with the cost of living. Inflation rose to 8% this year. A two-year 5% retention bonus was approved on Monday to assist with this issue; however, VSDB is not able to compete with compensation that is available in the private sector. In an effort to raise salaries,

positions will need to be redefined. A Residential Advisor at VSDB requires many additional specialized skills that a Residential Advisor in higher education would not have. Tessy Schlemmer, Human Resources Director, will work on contacting other similar schools across the country to gather information on how they define their unique roles. Senator Bell suggested changing position titles such as Residential Advisors to VSDB Specialist I and VSDB Specialist II and listing the specialized skills that are required for each position.

Ms. Trice shared that recruitment efforts were going better this year than they had in the past. Several open faculty positions have been filled; however, the interest in open residential positions remains low. Vacancies in lower pay bands are much more challenging to fill as potential candidates have mentioned that they would be taking a pay cut to accept a position.

The House and Senate recently passed budget legislation that would allocate \$100 million in funds for university-run and publicly funded K-12 lab schools. VSDB may be able to access some of those funds for security, security resources officers and hiring additional staff. The passing of this legislation marks an investment in education for Virginia. The rise in mass shootings that have targeted schools is of great concern. VSDB's terrain and numerous buildings make it very challenging to defend the school. Senator Bell added that it would be remiss to not take advantage of extra funding for additional safety measures.

Senator Bell shared that it was an honor to attend VSDB's heartwarming graduation ceremony and expressed pride for the students and all that they had accomplished. He thanked the student's families and VSDB's staff for their work behind the scenes and conveyed gratitude to the Board members that were able to come to the event. Mike Asip added that he was thankful that he and his wife, Leslie, were able to attend and shared how moving and special the ceremony was.

**Superintendent's Report:** Pat Trice, Superintendent, reported on the close of the 2021-2022 school year and shared appreciation to VSDB's staff for finishing one of the most challenging years to date. An email was sent to all employees yesterday acknowledging the staff's hard work and dedication with an end of the year employee recognition bonus.

The first year of the pandemic added additional stress and fatigue. Last year, VSDB struggled with an ongoing staff shortage. Staff worked in collaboration across departments to assist in areas that needed help. Ms. Trice shared pride for the staff's commitment to the students and their families. Pay is not the driving force that keeps the staff working so diligently; however, Ms. Trice shared that she was looking forward to working towards potential salary increases and thanked the Board and legislators for their support.

A combined Prom for the Deaf and the Blind departments was held on May 11th at the pavilion at the Frontier Culture Museum. The Cinderella project provided outfits at no cost to the students for the event with several staff jumping in to coordinate. The Prom is typically held in VSDB's Chapel; however, in order to provide additional air and circulation due to COVID concerns, the outdoor pavilion was used. Students enjoyed having the event in a new space and many parents came from across the state to watch. The interagency cost to rent the pavilion totaled \$250. Students have already begun planning for next year's Prom and have requested to travel to the event in limousines.

Several end of the year events including 8th Grade Graduation, a Senior Trip to the trampoline park in Richmond, Graduate Night and the annual Employee Recognition Luncheon were able to happen for the first time in two years. Delegate Hudson came to the Employee luncheon and recognized the staff for their efforts. Ms. Trice shared appreciation to Delegate Hudson for attending the event.

Planning for next year is currently underway with a high priority on recruitment. Keith Van Fossen, Principal, has taken a position at South Carolina's School for the Deaf and the Blind. Ms. Trice shared that Mr. Van Fossen will be missed. With changes to the school's administration, reviews to system overviews will be made to help make processes more efficient.

Several campus projects continue with Main Hall's exterior renovation scheduled to be completed by October. The Foundation has purchased furnishings for the Superintendent's House, which will house interns and hold space for entertaining small gatherings, and Battle Hall which will provide accommodations for families whose children will attend residential TEMP weeks.

Next week, the first Blind Soccer Educational Summit in the nation will be held at VSDB. Coaches from blind schools across the country will travel to VSDB to learn how to establish a blind soccer team at their school. This camp will also support the development of a national league for the 2028 Paralympics. The National Blind Soccer Team planned to hold a camp at VSDB following the summit but it was cancelled. Ms. Trice thanked the Foundation and local community for their support in starting the blind soccer program at VSDB. The total cost to build a professional grade soccer field is \$70,000. Several items including soccer equipment, an 18-wheeler to store five-a-side panels, and a large portion of the labor to prepare the field were donated. Local vendors will be recognized at VSDB's first blind soccer game.

Senator Bell requested information on how many students were expected to graduate next year. Ms. Trice shared that in March 2022, enrollment totaled 64 students. 11 students graduated in May, lowering the current number enrolled to 53. After graduation each year, the number of students drops and then rises again in the fall with the enrollments for the new school year. 20 students are expected to enroll this fall. More information on the number of students expected to graduate next year will be shared at the Board's next meeting. Admissions continues to receive a record number of applications and inquiries from across the state.

VSDB plans to open normally in the fall without COVID restrictions. Masks will be optional for staff and students. An alternative plan including mitigation health and safety strategies will be made and can be adjusted should the number of cases in the state become concerning. Staff will return to campus at the end of July. Ms. Trice will reach out to the local Virginia Department of Health (VDH) at the end of June for additional guidance.

Mr. Asip requested information regarding the enrollment that was projected for July. Ms. Trice shared that 13 applications had been received as of June 1st. Students are scheduled to return the first Sunday in August. In order for students to enroll after they apply, they need to complete an admissions interview and begin the TEMP process. VSDB is looking forward to reinstating the preschool program next year, with families of two preschoolers submitting applications. Teachers are being moved to other areas based on the number of applications that have been received for the elementary program. Admittance to the residential program depends on staffing levels and if the students will be able to return to two to a room.

Ms. Trice has been working hard on filling open positions on the Board of Visitors. Applications have been submitted for approval to the Secretary of the Commonwealth's office. Two vacancies remain for parent positions from the east and the west.

**Budget and Grants Report:** Janice Rankin, Director of Operations, provided a budget handout for the FY2023 budget. The figures represented in the budget were determined based on the executive bill drafted by Governor Youngkin. The budget is temporary and will be adjusted once the bill is signed by the Governor. The FY2023 budget will be voted on at the Board's next regular meeting.

A copy of VSDB's Deficit Provision Acknowledgement Form was shared with the Board in their meeting materials. VSDB will not have a deficit at the end of the year. A surplus of \$130,000-150,000 will remain. Ms. Rankin was hopeful that the remainder would be able to be rolled over to the next year. A portion of the remaining funds was intended to be used for end of the year employee recognition bonuses; however, the Governor issued restrictions on how the end of the year funds could be used. The total amount of employee recognition bonus was reduced to 25% of what was intended. Ms. Trice reached out to the Governor's office for special approval, but has been unable to receive a response.

Ms. Rankin presented four title grants to the Board.

Title I, in the amount of \$84,475, improves basic programs, provides tutoring throughout the year, online subscriptions and magazines, professional development, tuition reimbursement, library materials and supplemental materials for classrooms.

Title II, totaling \$2,964.65, is used for tuition reimbursement for faculty.

Title III, in the amount of \$1,708.88, is utilized for language instruction for English learners, online subscriptions, materials and training.

Title IV, totaling \$10,000, aids with Student Support and Enrichment. VSDB has been working towards providing photography as a job skill. In the past, this grant was utilized for developing a 3-D printing area. Many of VSDB's students are interested in graphic arts and photography as a career choice. The approval will allow the photography equipment to be updated as well as enriching the job and career readiness skills.

Audrey Burges, Assistant Attorney General, shared that the title grants did not need to be voted on as they were part of an annual process that had not changed. The Board members that were present for the meeting reviewed the copies of the grants and gave general approval for Senator Bell to sign.

Tessy Schlemmer shared appreciation to Ms. Rankin for all of her hard work behind the scenes with grants, salaries and the budget.

**Human Resources Report:** Tessy Schlemmer, Human Resources Director, reported that recruitment is going well with nine new hires for faculty positions set to start in July. Four teachers left at the end of the school year, one due to retirement and three that were burned out. Recruitment efforts continue for a counselor, three teachers, an accountant, two housekeepers, an intervener, a principal, nine residential assistants, four teaching assistants and a cook. Residential advisor positions are critical positions that need to be filled. If the school is unable to open with two students to a room in the residential halls, it will be very difficult. Virtual Job Fairs have offered great success with recruiting faculty but have not been as successful with classified staff. A few applicants that had scheduled interviews cancelled due to not wanting to relocate. Housekeeping also has a great need for additional staff. Erich Roscher, Director of Facilities and Engineering, has been actively looking into other options for how to fill the housekeeping positions. 10-month positions are not typically recruited during the year due to new hires not being able to earn very much during their first couple of months with retain pay.

Overall, staff are happy and dedicated to the school and the students despite non-competitive pay. Several concerns have been raised recently regarding the change in gas prices and the cost of living.

Sign on bonuses are offered for all full-time positions ranging between \$2,000-\$3,500. Ms. Schlemmer shared that it was difficult to tell if applicants were drawn to VSDB by the bonuses. Most faculty sought out positions at VSDB. Classified staff are looking for openings based on what is posted. After the school year begins, a review on the efficacy of the sign on bonus will be made. Employee referral bonuses have been going well. Several employees will be receiving a \$1,000 bonus, half after the new hire completes three months, with the second half being received after six months. VSDB jobs are now listed on LinkedIn, with open positions being advertised on Facebook. Advertising efforts for open positions continue.

Demographic reports will be presented at the Board's September meeting.

Additional structure will be added to VSDB's onboarding and orientation processes with intention to have some restructuring in place for the new school year. The 5% retention bonus approved by the General Assembly will raise all of VSDB's positions above minimum wage.

The Annual Service Award Ceremony recognized staff with 1-50 years of service to the Commonwealth. Ms. Schlemmer thanked Delegate Hudson for attending the event.

Human Resources will be very busy the next few months working to transition to the new Cardinal system. Training reporting will be intensifying this year. Recruitment will continue for classified positions with much preparation underway for new hires. Susan Cupp, Policy and Training Manager, is getting the training schedules ready for the employees return.

A printed handout of a proposed Teacher Salary Scale for the 2022-23 school year was shared with the Board. The information gathered in this report is compared with salaries offered at Waynesboro, Staunton City and Augusta Schools. Ms. Schlemmer calculates \$100 over the salaries that are provided at those local school systems. Senator Bell asked if information could be gathered from other deaf and blind schools to identify how VSDB's salaries compare. Ms. Schlemmer shared that VSDB's staff are recruited from all over the country; however, due to the cost of living being different it is difficult to compare. Mr. Asip added that school divisions are able to differentiate pay for special skills. VSDB needs to look at how we are differentiated for Special Education and the unique skills that we are able to provide. Ms. Cox suggested checking the salaries from mainstream programs in Richmond and Roanoke to compare it to what is being paid at VSDB. Senator Bell agreed that with all of the specialty positions at VSDB, a 5% raise was not enough.

### **Continuing Business**

**Policy Updates:** Policies will be reviewed for approval at the Board's next regular meeting.

**Strategic Plan Update:** Ms. Trice shared that the Strategic Plan did not have any changes other than the number of students that graduated this year. Mr. Asip added that the plan would need to be reviewed with stakeholders to revise the plan and start the process over again.

**VSDB Foundation—Operating Agreement:** The Operating Agreement between the Foundation and Board of Visitors will be discussed at the next regular meeting.

### **Adjourn**

The meeting adjourned at 12:23pm.