

WEST VIRGINIA BOARD OF EDUCATION

Capitol Building 6, Suite 600
1900 Kanawha Boulevard, East Charleston, West Virginia

MINUTES

January 16, 2026

I. Call to Order

The emergency meeting opened with the Pledge of Allegiance led by General Counsel, Kelli Talbott. President L. Paul Hardesty called the meeting of the West Virginia Board of Education (WVBE) to order at 9:00 a.m. on January 16, 2026, in Capitol Building 6, Suite 600, 1900 Kanawha Boulevard, East, Charleston, West Virginia. As stated in the meeting notice filed with the West Virginia Secretary of State's Office, the purpose of the emergency meeting was to discuss the imminent material financial shortfalls present in the Hancock County School system that pose an immediate threat to the ongoing operation of the schools in Hancock County; and to consider whether such financial shortfalls should cause the WVBE to declare that extraordinary circumstances exist justifying immediate intervention into the operation of Hancock County Schools pursuant to the WVBE's authority under Article XII, Section 2 of the West Virginia Constitution and West Virginia Code §18-2E-5.

The following members were present: President Hardesty, Vice President Victor L. Gabriel (via remote), Robert W. Dunlevy (via remote), Cathy L. C. Justice (via remote), F. Scott Rotruck (via remote), Nancy J. White (via remote), Gregory F. Wooten (via remote), and ex officio member Michele L. Blatt, State Superintendent of Schools, West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE). Dr. Christopher A. Stansbury and ex officio member Sarah Armstrong Tucker, Chancellor, West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission and West Virginia Council for Community and Technical College Education, were absent.

II. Approval of Agenda

President Hardesty called for a motion to approve the agenda. Mr. Wooten moved, and Mrs. White seconded, that the agenda be approved. Upon the call for the question, the motion carried on a voice vote.

III. Hancock County Schools Report

Mr. Jeffrey Kelley, WVDE Associate Superintendent, explained that the WVDE had been supporting Hancock County Schools and conducting continuous financial monitoring, including, but not limited to, cash flow projections, student enrollment, Hope impact analysis, and restoring fiscal balance through staffing season planning. Mr. Kelley stated that Hancock County Schools' financial situation had escalated from a monitored concern to a fiscal emergency. As conditions deteriorated, Hancock County Schools formally requested emergency state aid to meet payroll obligations. According to Mr. Kelley, WVDE has been monitoring the process and has engaged with

stakeholders by recently presenting at a Hancock County Board of Education meeting to respond to citizen concerns and emphasize a need for transparency and decisive corrective action.

WVDE School Finance Office Uriah Cummings then provided a summary of the needs and assistance that the WVDE had provided to Hancock County Schools over the past few years. As of October 2025, the Hancock County Board of Education has been on “needs assistance” status for financial issues after being on “watch” status for three consecutive years. Prior to that time, there was nothing to suggest fiscal issues existed in the county. Mr. Cummings also noted that Hancock County Schools always had a fairly clean audit report on the county's financial statements submitted by the county to the WVDE and that the first knowledge of a real financial crisis occurred in September 2025 when the district contacted the WVDE explaining that they were not going to meet payroll in September unless there was a state aid advance or some other action. After Mr. Cummings explained that three or four days was not sufficient time to complete a state aid advance, the county decided to shift funds from the Career and Technical Education Center (CTE) to the board office to cover payroll, which has since been transferred back to the CTE Center. Mr. Cummings explained that Hancock County Schools has been operating with more than 140 positions over the funding formula in Fiscal Year 2025 and Fiscal Year 2026, equating to approximately \$10 million. Reportedly, the county also overspent on construction projects and sports facilities.

Next, Hancock County Schools Superintendent Dan Enich addressed the Board regarding the financial situation in the district and answered questions. Afterward, President Hardesty took a moment to address the issue and reassure the employees of Hancock County Schools that they would get paid. President Hardesty then recognized Superintendent Blatt for a recommendation, which was as follows:

- 1) the State Board find, based upon information from the WVDE's Office of School Finance, that extraordinary circumstances exist in Hancock County Schools;*
- 2) the State Board assign Nonapproval status to Hancock County Schools;*
- 3) the State Board declare a state of emergency exists in Hancock County Schools based upon the information presented;*
- 4) the State Board find the conditions precedent to State Board intervention in a county school system exist and delaying the intervention would not be in the best interests of the students or the staff of Hancock County Schools;*
- 5) the State Board find that the county board failed to act on a statutory obligation which will imminently interrupt the day-to-day operations of the school system;*
- 6) the State Board limit the authority of the county board in areas that compromise the delivery of a thorough and efficient education to its students as designated by the State Board by rule, which may include delegating decision-making authority regarding these matters to the State Superintendent;*

- 7) *the State Board declare the Office of the County Superintendent of Hancock County Schools to be vacant at the end of the business day at 4:00 p.m. on January 16, 2026, and that any existing contracts be voided, if necessary;*
- 8) *the State Board appoint Walter Saunders to be the Superintendent of Hancock County Schools starting at 4:01 p.m. on January 16, 2026, at a salary to be determined by the State Superintendent;*
- 9) *the State Board declare the positions of personnel who serve at the will and pleasure of county superintendent to be vacant on January 16, 2026, at 4:00 p.m. and that any existing contracts be voided, if necessary;*
- 10) *the State Board declare the position of the Assistant Superintendent of Hancock County Schools to be vacant, and any existing contracts voided starting at 4:01 p.m. on January 16, 2026, and that such position shall not be filled or replaced in order to conserve resources,*
- 11) *that the State Board allow the WVDE to provide additional support to assist the Superintendent of Hancock County Schools and staff to address the deficiencies in the operation of the school system;*
- 12) *the State Board delegate to the State Superintendent the authority to fill positions of administrators and principals with individuals determined by the State Superintendent to be the most qualified for the positions;*
- 13) *the State Board grant the State Superintendent the authority to take action necessary to correct the extraordinary circumstances;*
- 14) *the State Board limit the authority of the Hancock County Board of Education as to the expenditure of funds for purchases, the establishment of instructional programs, the operation of federal programs, the delivery and operation of special education, the establishment of policies, county board governance and operational relations, and any other areas designated by the State Board by rule and delegate decision-making authority to the State Superintendent regarding those matters;*
- 15) *the State Board delegate to the State Superintendent, or his/her designee, the authority to conduct hearings on personnel matters, the referral of investigations to other agencies as necessary, amendment of the Comprehensive Education Facilities Plan (CEFP), school closure or consolidation matters and subsequently to render the resulting decisions, and the authority to appoint a designee for the limited purpose of conducting hearings while reserving to the State Superintendent the authority to render the resulting decision, if needed;*
- 16) *the State Board limit the authority of Hancock County Board of Education as to the ability to conduct real estate transactions and delegate to the State Superintendent the authority to act in lieu of Hancock County Schools in a transfer, sale, purchase, or other transaction regarding real estate;*

17) the State Board delegate to the State Superintendent the authority to replace administrators and principals in low-performing schools and to transfer them to alternate professional positions within the county at her discretion;

18) the State Board direct the Hancock County Superintendent and the State Superintendent, after consultation with the Hancock County Board of Education, to jointly develop and present to the State Board at a future meeting a set of standards and/or a strategic plan that must be implemented in order for the Hancock County Board of Education to regain control of the school system; and,

19) that the State Board direct the Hancock County Superintendent to provide written and/or oral progress reports to the State Board as requested.

President Hardesty asked if there was a motion to approve the recommendations made by Superintendent Blatt. Mr. Wooten moved, and Mrs. White seconded, that the recommendations be approved. Upon a call for the question, the motion carried on a voice vote.

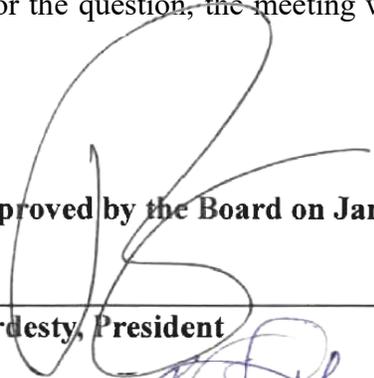
IV. Future Meetings

President Hardesty announced that the next regular meeting of the West Virginia Board of Education would be on February 11, 2026, at 9:00 a.m. in Charleston, West Virginia.

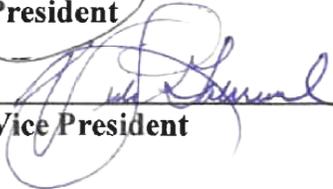
V. Adjournment

President Hardesty called for a motion to adjourn. Mr. Dunlevy moved, and Mr. Wooten seconded, that the meeting be adjourned. Upon the call for the question, the meeting was adjourned at 9:31 a.m. on a voice vote.

Minutes approved by the Board on January 14, 2026



L. Paul Hardesty, President



Victor L. Gabriel, Vice President

NOTE:

All agendas, attachments, materials distributed during the meeting, and audio recordings are available through the WVBE website or office pursuant to Policy 1241, Notice and Conduct of Meetings.

Minutes were recorded by:

Tina Payne, Board Secretary

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