Douglas County School District (DCSD) Board Report
Date: February 27, 2025

Meeting Overview

The meeting was officially called to order, and the agenda was adopted with flexibility. It was noted that item 17 regarding Board Policy 437 - Political Activities would be omitted from this meeting's discussion.

Following the adoption of the agenda, the meeting commenced with the Pledge of Allegiance, led by the Board President.

Several commenters commended board members, .Katherine Dickerson, Susan Jansen, David Burns, and Doug Englekirk - for their leadership and specific actions taken against "woke" agendas, including Critical Race Theory (CRT), Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, and Trans' Activism. They praised the removal of related training materials and books from the district's curriculum and libraries and highlighted the necessity for increased board action in reversing a decline in academic performance that began in 2017.

The board was applauded for its transparency and integrity in investigating allegations of sexual harassment within the district, reflecting a commitment to addressing such serious issues effectively.

Discussions also touched on the financial burdens imposed by lawsuits against the board and the political nature of the attacks, criticizing the expenses as wasteful and calling for accountability. Concerns were raised about the board's handling of the case that led to significant financial costs.

A specific mention was made regarding the placement of a cell phone tower at a high school, which was slated for further discussion in a future special meeting.

The session concluded with a plea for respectful and civil discourse in future meetings, emphasizing the importance of setting positive examples for students and focusing on constructive community engagement.

Principal Pamela Hill-Gilmartin and Vice Principal Veronica Griffith from Jacks Valley Elementary School delivered a leadership presentation, focusing closely on the social developments made of the school. Many of these developments have been aimed at decreasing absenteeism and fostering student enrollment. They shared insights into the school's demographics, achievements, challenges, and community involvement initiatives.

The school has an enrollment of 364 students, with 58% identifying as white and 33% as Hispanic. Among these students, 163 live in poverty, 85 have disabilities, and 39 are English language learners. A significant focus of the presentation was the notable improvement in attendance rates, with chronic absenteeism decreasing from 21.8% in the 2021-22 school year to 12.6% in 2023-24. The school has implemented creative attendance incentives such as visual displays and "brag tags" to effectively boost student presence.

Despite facing challenges with proficiency levels in English, Language Arts, and Math, where the school holds a two-star rating, ongoing efforts are in place to enhance learning outcomes through various educational strategies. The school offers a wide range of extracurricular activities, including clubs, sports, and tutoring by external volunteers like Costco employees, which enrich the students' educational experience. Family engagement is also a key focus, with events such as Popsicles on the Playground and book tastings aimed at strengthening community ties and fostering family involvement in educational activities.

Moreover, the school has implemented exploration classes—elective classes driven by teacher passions ranging from sewing to engineering, which allow students to engage deeply with varied subjects. Additionally, initiatives like hydroponics and gardening not only teach practical skills but also facilitate participation in external events like farmer's markets, demonstrating the practical application of learned skills and community integration.

The presentation sought to demonstrate Jacks Valley Elementary's commitment to creating a learner-centered environment that prioritizes academic excellence, holistic development, and community integration. A wide array of information was provided to demonstrate the school's efforts in fostering a whole-of-student approach to learning; however, the specifics regarding the Math, Language arts, and Reading curricula were omitted. Further, no specifics regarding test scores or projected outcomes were delivered.

The Board entered a closed session to confidentially discuss. This session was designated for discussion only, with any decisions or votes to be conducted publicly in adherence to transparency and legal requirements. The specific topics discussed during the closed session remain confidential and have not been disclosed at this point.

During the meeting, the board reviewed and unanimously approved the consent items on the agenda.

The Douglas County School Board deliberated on the approval of a training contract for board governance with Dr. Phil Gore, proposing a maximum expenditure of $20,500. This initiative was introduced by Superintendent Alvarado, who emphasized the previous positive engagement with Dr. Gore at a NASB professional development session. Dr. Gore outlined the significance of aligning the board's priorities and goals with the superintendent's evaluation, showcasing methods that have proven effective in other districts.

Dr. Gore's proposed contract aimed to facilitate several key outcomes through structured sessions:

- Session One would focus on building relationships and trust within the board, establishing board priorities, and initiating governance processes that enhance student success.
- Session Two aimed to set measurable goals for the district and superintendent for the upcoming school year, aligning with the district's strategic plan and determining specific evidence for assessing progress.
- Session Three was designed to create and adopt a comprehensive superintendent evaluation process, complete with a performance rubric and calibration exercises.

The financial aspect of the training was addressed, with funds allocated from the superintendent's discretionary budget, which contained sufficient residual funds to cover the training costs. The board discussed the training's potential long-term benefits, noting that the materials and resources developed would be retained by the district, providing a reusable asset for future governance training even as board members are replaced.

Board members discussed the specifics of the training schedule, the number of sessions, and the direct benefits to the board’s operational effectiveness. They also considered the training's adaptability for future boards, ensuring the investment would benefit the district longitudinally.

Public input raised concerns about the cost and the necessity of the training, prompting further clarification from Superintendent Alvarado. He differentiated Dr. Gore's training from other governance training proposals on the agenda, highlighting that Dr. Gore’s focus would be on strategic alignment and operational effectiveness, while other trainings might focus more on board dynamics and procedural operations.

The Board voted unanimously to approve the $20,500 contract with Dr. Gore.

The Board considered a proposal for training on balanced governance with Tom L. Alsbury, founder and president of Balanced Governance Solutions. The contract was not to exceed $10,000 for the current fiscal year and $27,500 for the fiscal year 2025-26. The discussion involved a detailed presentation by Dr. Alsbury, who was available to explain his approach and methodology directly to the board and the public.

Dr. Alsbury outlined that his program focuses primarily on board evaluation, including a self-evaluation component that benchmarks against national standards and practices. This approach is rooted in the research on school boards across the United States, providing a unique and data-backed perspective to board governance training. He emphasized that his service would offer individual coaching to board members, allowing informed and competent governance practices. Additionally, an observational analysis of board meetings would be conducted to provide actionable recommendations for improvement.

The training aims to develop a board handbook and revise governance policies, establishing a robust framework for effective board operations. This foundational work is recommended as a precursor to more in-depth evaluations, ensuring the board has adequate time to adopt and implement new governance standards before being evaluated.

During the discussion, board members inquired about the logistics of the training, including the specifics of the self-assessment process and the potential reluctance of board members to participate. Dr. Alsbury reassured that individual assessments are optional and conducted in a confidential manner, emphasizing the flexibility of his approach to meet the board’s needs. No information was provided regarding the cost differential if board members omit themselves from the evaluation or what accountability board members should have to the public if they decline. This is particularly important as these funds are generated from tax revenue.

Public comments raised concerns about the transparency and public accessibility of evaluation outcomes, to which Dr. Alsbury responded by affirming that all evaluation reports, including comprehensive data and executive summaries, would be publicly available, aligning with Nevada's open document laws.

The Board voted unanimously to approve the contract with Dr. Alsbury for training on balanced governance as presented.

Olive Hamner-Jilson, a senior at George Wittel High School and a student board member, presented her first report to the board. Olive shared her ambitions to positively impact the school district by fostering a cohesive learning environment between the lake and valley schools. With extensive involvement in various school activities—including leadership roles as the vice president of her senior class, president of the National Honor Society and Key Club, and captain of the girls' golf and academic teams—Olive brings a wealth of experience to her role.

In her report, Olive highlighted recent achievements within the district:

- The Wittel boys' ski team placed second in the state for downhill skiing.
- The seventh-grade middle school girls' volleyball team won their small school tournament.
- Wittel hosted a successful poetry competition, with winners advancing to a statewide competition at UNR.

Olive also celebrated a student from Douglas High School who won the Nevada state title for wrestling in her weight class. She expressed a strong desire to enhance school and community spirit across the district and to initiate environmental sustainability practices, specifically targeting recycling and composting at Whittell High School.

She concluded her report by affirming her commitment to ensuring that all student voices are heard and to working towards tangible improvements in school spirit and environmental initiatives across the district.

Ashley Mitchell led the discussion on the proposed school calendar for the 2025-26 year, focusing on the placement of professional development (PD) days. She presented survey results indicating that 71% of families and 58% of staff preferred PD days to align with the end of the first semester. Various community suggestions were discussed, including splitting the PD days or rescheduling them to different months for better distribution throughout the year. Legislative constraints dictate that PD days must fall within the student contact days and cannot be scheduled within the last 45 days of the school year, thereby ensuring that the professional development activities directly benefit the current student body rather than planning for the next academic year.

Mitchell also addressed inquiries about the calendar's structure, noting the necessity of balancing the semester lengths to meet Nevada Department of Education's requirements for academic credit. Each semester must accumulate at least 3,600 minutes to qualify for credit, which the proposed calendar adheres to by slightly adjusting semester days. Changes to the Professional Learning Community (PLC) days from 90 to 75 minutes were made to create a more predictable schedule.

Further adjustments included the introduction of new minimum days at Douglas High School to provide students with protected time for finals and complex assessments, and to allow teachers sufficient time for grading. The discussion also touched upon the impact of starting the school year earlier in August, a practice adjusted due to community preferences for a longer summer break and compatibility with regional school schedules.

After thorough deliberation and with no public opposition, the board unanimously approved the 2025-26 school calendar as presented.

During the meeting to discuss agenda item 13 concerning the Family Life Sex Education Advisory Council members, the board entertained a proposal to potentially add a board member to the advisory council. This arose when it was noted that Erin Miller, although serving on the council as a parent, was not officially listed as a member due to an oversight.

Legal clarification was sought regarding the statutory stipulations governing the composition of the Family Life Committee. The legal counsel recommended that the board could proceed with confirming the current list of members and consider the addition of a board member at a later date after reviewing the relevant statutes.

A motion was put forward to approve the existing list of advisory council members with the addition of Erin Miller's name as a parent representative, which had been previously omitted by mistake. It was also proposed to direct the staff to investigate the feasibility of adding a board member to the council and to bring this matter back for discussion at a future meeting.

After discussion, the board proceeded to vote on the motion. It was approved unanimously with Erin Miller abstaining due to her personal involvement. The board expressed intent to continue this discussion, ensuring that any modifications to the council's composition adhere to statutory requirements. Of note, Erin Miller has expressed during her campaign that DEI has a role in education. Significant concern has arisen regarding Erin Miller’s appointment the Family Life Sex Education Advisory Council as a representative of the Board. More on this to come.

Leslie Peters initiated the presentation on Board Policy 518 concerning graduation requirements, focusing on necessary revisions to the policy. Accompanied by Kira Brown, the graduation coach at Douglas High School, Peters highlighted the substantial groundwork they had laid in refining the policy to better serve the students' needs. Their primary amendment included the introduction of a new "Seal of Civics," which would recognize students achieving beyond standard civic knowledge, akin to existing recognitions like the Seal of STEM and Seal of Biliteracy.

Kira Brown, with her direct experience in handling graduation protocols, identifying outdated sections of the existing policy that needed correction or removal. The presentation detailed the specific changes proposed, such as adjusting elective credit requirements from 4.5 to 5 credits for the Millennium Scholarship eligibility and removing obsolete diploma standards that were no longer applicable.

Additionally, Peters and Brown introduced an Administrative Regulation (AR 518) aimed at clearly delineating diploma requirements for college and career readiness. This move was partly motivated by new educational priorities set by Governor Lombardo, particularly focusing on enhancing the college and career readiness among students. This initiative aligns with state-level monitoring of educational achievements and aims to boost transparency and awareness regarding the pathways to achieving different diplomas.

The discussion also addressed practical changes to physical education credits, where now students can waive up to two credits if they participate in sports or activities like marching band, effective from January 2025. This flexibility is seen as a positive change, providing students who are actively involved in school sports or performance arts a better balance between their academic and extracurricular commitments.

Public comment, which revealed a tone of interaction that some might consider disrespectful and demonstrated the President of the Board's lack of understanding regarding important graduation requirements. A member of the public expressed confusion about the various diplomas and the changes to graduation requirements, reflecting a broader concern that perhaps the complexities of modern educational tracks are not adequately communicated to the public and lack sufficient consideration for the changes students may seek as they are in high school. During this interaction, the President of the Board's responses appeared dismissive and mocking. This tone stood out as particularly contemptuous given the appropriate question aimed at better understanding the significant educational policy changes that impact young members of the community.

The board discussed directing staff to develop a homework policy that aligns with educational goals, student well-being, and best practices. The discussion explored how homework impacts student learning, engagement, time management, mental health, and overall well-being.

At the start of the discussion, it became immediately clear that Board President Wagstaff was ill-prepared for the agenda item. She was confused about the existence of a homework regulations, focusing soley on her experience as a mother of a student. Admittedly she did not understand the policies nor did she have any data to begin the discussion. The Board spent considerable time discussing their own children while failing to consider that more data should be presented to regulate such an important issue, which set a disorganized and scattered tone for the discussion.

The board called on Shannon Brown, Executive Director of Educational Services, to provide insight. Brown explained that four years ago, the board directed the district to establish a grading committee, which included teachers from both elementary and secondary levels. That committee ultimately developed AR-513, a guideline for grading and homework policies. He noted that homework was already addressed in AR-513 and that the board at the time had revoked Board Policy 240, which had previously outlined homework regulations.

Despite this explanation, President Wagstaff continued to struggle to grasp the context, asking if there were ways to limit or eliminate homework over school breaks. Brown expressed his personal belief that students should not have homework assigned during holiday breaks but noted that it was not explicitly stated in the existing guidelines. He indicated that if the board wanted to formally prohibit homework over breaks, staff could draft language to modify AR-513.

Board members Jansen and Miller raised concerns about the inconsistency of how homework is assigned and graded. Some students receive packets of ungraded assignments, while others have little to no homework at all. This led to a larger debate on whether homework should be graded and how it impacts final assessments. Brown referred to AR-513, which states that at the secondary level, homework grading must be consistent across grade levels or content areas and should not unfairly impact student grades. The regulation also mandates that timely and meaningful feedback be provided to students.

At this point, Board Legal Counsel stepped in to correct President Wagstaff, pointing out that the agenda item was only for the development of a board policy and that AR-513 itself was not on the agenda for revision. Despite this clear legal guidance, the discussion continued to veer off track, with multiple board members debating whether grading homework was fair or beneficial without addressing the core issue of whether a policy should be developed.

Trustee Burns expressed a traditional viewpoint, suggesting that homework should be assigned only to students who are underperforming, while high-achieving students should be exempt. Meanwhile, Trustee Miller pointed out major inconsistencies in homework distribution, stating that some students were overloaded with assignments while others had none at all.

Trustee Zinke attempted to bring a data-driven approach, asking whether staff could collect and analyze information regarding how much homework is assigned across different grade levels and subjects, and whether there is any correlation to student performance. He requested data comparing students receiving homework versus those not assigned homework to determine its actual effectiveness.

Trustee Jansen added that homework's necessity may vary by subject, stating that math and science courses likely require more practice-based assignments than other subjects. However, she agreed that consistency was lacking and suggested looking at research on subject-specific homework benefits.

At this point, President Wagstaff once again lost control of the discussion, prompting Legal Counsel to intervene a second time. Counsel clarified that the first step was simply directing staff to research and gather information to inform the potential development of a policy.

A motion was then made by Trustee Burns, directing staff to investigate homework policies further and return to the board with detailed findings. Legal Counsel had to rephrase and refine the motion to ensure it was properly structured, further highlighting the chaotic and unfocused nature of the discussion.

Before the vote, public comment was opened, where a concerned parent, Valerie Luchman, spoke passionately about the unrealistic burden homework places on modern families. She pointed out that many parents today are single parents or work full-time jobs, making it extremely difficult to help children complete homework assignments at home. She warned that excessive homework can lead to student burnout and absenteeism, stating that many children skip school entirely due to stress and exhaustion. She also expressed concern about holding teachers accountable for student performance based on homework completion, since many children lack a supportive home environment for studying.

The motion passed unanimously, directing staff to gather more information on homework policies and return with recommendations for a potential policy.

The Nevada Public Records Act was discussed by Superintendent Alvarado. He began by explaining that the district has received approximately 30 public records requests this school year alone, with nearly 780,000 pages of documents reviewed. Given the extensive time required to process these requests, the district has implemented a public records request form, now accessible on the district’s website. This form helps manage incoming requests by timestamping submissions, ensuring compliance with state-mandated response times, and streamlining the review process.

A key aspect of the discussion focused on the fee schedule for processing public records requests. Under NRS, public entities are allowed to charge a reasonable fee when requests require an unreasonable amount of staff time. The district proposed a $0.10 per page fee for both printed and digital copies, as well as a $20 per hour charge per staff member for review processes exceeding 30 minutes. Alvarado clarified that some requests span hundreds of pages, consuming significant staff time. He noted that when requests are excessively broad, he works with legal counsel to ask requesters to narrow their scope, though they are not legally required to comply.

Board members raised concerns about the burden on high-level personnel, particularly as Alvarado and Executive Director of HR Jeannie Dwyer often handle record reviews. Some suggested increasing the $20 per hour fee, arguing that their time is far more valuable. However, legal counsel explained that fees must reflect actual costs, as any attempt to discourage requests through higher fees would be legally impermissible.

The discussion ended with board members acknowledging that public records requests are often abused, placing a significant strain on district resources. However, compliance with the law remains non-negotiable, and no immediate action was taken since this was only the first reading of the revised policy. While concerns about excessive requests were voiced, the focus remained on ensuring transparency while mitigating undue administrative burdens.

The board proceeded to Agenda Item 20, which involved the first reading of Board Policy 904: Complaint Policy. This discussion was for review and transparency, with no official action being taken at this time. Superintendent Mr. Alvarado turned the time over to Ms. Jeannie Dwyer, Director of Human Resources, to present the policy and explain the updates made to improve the complaint process within the district.

Ms. Dwyer explained that the complaint policy falls under the jurisdiction of the Human Resources Department, as it directly affects staff, students, and community members. Dwyer is attempting to streamline the process and improve response times. She directed attention to the district’s website, where a newly implemented complaint form is now available for public use.

She highlighted the importance of separating transportation-related complaints, explaining that school buses are equipped with video surveillance. However, due to limited storage capabilities, video footage is only retained for two to three days. This makes it crucial for transportation complaints to be reported promptly, specifying the bus number, location, and time of the incident, so administrators can review the footage before it is automatically deleted.

Board members raised key clarifying questions regarding the complaint resolution process. Trustee Ms. Knighting asked for clarification on the term "principal supervisor," inquiring whether it referred to the Human Resources Director or another designated official. Ms. Dwyer explained that each cabinet member, including herself and Superintendent Alvarado, supervises specific schools and departments. For example, she personally oversees Pawaloo Elementary, Carson Valley Middle School, the Transportation Department, Facilities & Grounds, and the School Nutrition Program.

Depending on where a complaint originates, it would be assigned to the appropriate supervisor within the district's administrative structure.

The board proceeded with board reports, where each trustee shared their recent activities and community engagements. President Wagstaff and Mr. Zinke attended a chamber meeting. They discussed developments, including the approval of the Carson Valley Cinema purchase, which will be converted into a performing arts center. Additionally, Mr. Zinke attended various sports events, congratulating the ski team and state-winning wrestling athlete.

Ms. Miller shared updates about her children's participation in skiing and volleyball, highlighting their successes. She also attended a Tahoe Chamber crab feed fundraiser, which raised $1,200 each for South Tahoe High School and a hotel booster program. She announced upcoming events, including a Tahoe Chamber lunch, a "Girls on the Run" initiative for young athletes, a bingo night in March, and a culinary and drama event on April 4th.

Ms. Jansen recounted touring Carson Valley Middle School (CVMS) and Pinion Hills Elementary, as well as the lake schools, which she found particularly insightful. She also attended a safety committee meeting with Trustee Burns, which raised important discussions on school security.

Ms. Gneiting reported her attendance at the Park and Recreation Advisory Committee meeting and a February 6th County Commissioner meeting, focusing on the purchase of the new performing arts center. She toured multiple schools, including CVMS, Zephyr Cove, and Whitell, as well as participated in the Modern Learning Conference, gaining new perspectives on educational strategies.

Mr. Burns provided a lighthearted update about a county budget control meeting, which lasted only seven minutes, where officers were elected. He found the safety committee meeting more engaging, prompting him to think about broader security issues. He expressed noticing a shift in attitude among school staff and administration, emphasizing their renewed enthusiasm and engagement.

President Wagstaff summarized her participation in multiple events, including two Board of County Commissioner meetings, where the performing arts center was approved. She attended various school tours, chamber meetings, and a public affairs meeting, in addition to ELA curriculum review sessions.

Superintendent Mr. Alvarado provided updates on key district statistics and initiatives. He introduced a new section in the agenda for informational items, which included bullying reports, enrollment updates, and district donations.

The district recorded 45 bullying reports in Quarter 2, of which 18 cases were confirmed. Mr. Brown, the Executive Director of Educational Services, continues to work with administrators to address and prevent bullying issues.

Enrollment dropped by 185 students compared to last year, a trend that translates into funding losses for the district.

The community contributed thousands of dollars in donations to various school programs, including

Mr. Alvarado shared his extensive involvement in school and community events, emphasizing his commitment to strengthening relationships and fostering educational growth. He attended Governor Lombardo's State of the State speech alongside Trustee Gneiting, gaining insight into state-level initiatives impacting education. Throughout the past weeks, he conducted school tours at GES, CVMS, Pinion Hills, and Littell, ensuring direct engagement with staff and students. To support student leadership, he met with student board representative Olive to help her prepare for meetings and navigate her role effectively.

In an effort to build stronger communication within the district, Mr. Alvarado launched "Chat with the Superintendent" sessions, creating an open forum for teachers and staff to voice concerns and share feedback. Additionally, he participated in federal finance training and professional development sessions, expanding his knowledge on school funding and grant management. His engagement extended to the arts as he attended both All-State Choir and Honor Choir events, not only as a superintendent but also as a proud parent.

He met with the Washoe Tribe's education director to explore ways to strengthen ties between the district and the Native American community. Furthermore, he played an active role in the Modern Learning Conference, supporting educators and students while highlighting student-led learning progressions, a key focus in modern educational strategies. His engagement across these various initiatives reflects his dedication to fostering a collaborative, inclusive, and forward-thinking learning environment.

The board discussed agenda-setting procedures, clarifying that future requests should be emailed to the board president or superintendent for review. The homework policy discussion will return in a future meeting once staff gathers additional data.

The meeting concluded with no additional public comments or discussion.