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Albemarle County School Board Public Hearing, Thursday, September 17, 2026

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Place Albemarle County Public Schools / School Board meeting, Virginia
Length 36m (video)

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[00:01:02] - Good evening, thank you all for being here. Today we have our public hearing on our at-large school board vacancy. So for those of you who are used to kind of longer meetings, this will be a pretty short meeting. We won't have any spotlight on schools or any general school business.

[00:01:23] We'll just do our traditional start and then we will move into, if the board approves our agenda, we'll move into our public hearing. So the way we always begin our meetings is as introductions for those people who are here to match names with faces, as well as those people who are watching online.

[00:01:40] So, Mr. Grant, would you start? Jason Grant, Chief Communications Officer. Kate Acuff, Jack Jewett District. Judy Lay, Rymanna District. Ellen Osborne, Scottsville District. Rebecca Berlin, Whitehall District. Jim Dillenbeck, Ryo District. Bob Beard, Samuel Miller District.

[00:01:57] Chandra Hayes, Acting Superintendent. Josiah Black, Chief Legal Officer. Dan Redding, Chief HR Officer. Tanisha Thompson, Coordinator of Office Operations and Office Management. Thank you so much. And thank you to our officers who are here to protect us and serve us every day in our community.

[00:02:15] We will now stand for the Pledge of Allegiance.

[00:02:39] And before we begin tonight, we will pause for a moment of silence.

[00:02:53] Thank you so much. The next item on our agenda is the approval of tonight's agenda.

[00:03:10] Do I have a motion for approval of tonight's agenda? I move we approve tonight's agenda. Second. Move by Ms. Osborne, second by Ms. Ley. All those in favor? Aye. Any opposed? We will now move forward with today's agenda.

[00:03:26] So again, I wanted just to take a moment to thank everyone who applied for our at-large vacancy. Just as a reminder, we had 23 initial applicants, 22 were qualified, one was living in the city of Charlottesville, so was not qualified.

[00:03:42] I believe we had 14 people who spoke during the interview process, and I believe we had one person who, two people actually, I think that recused themselves or pulled their names since then. So tonight what we will be doing is having an open hearing so that the public can provide support for candidates.

[00:04:06] And then we will, the board together, in closed session, will discuss and make a candidate selection on the 24th, and that will be announced in open meeting, and then that person will be sworn in on October 6th, October 8th, and keep doing that, October 8th, thank you, Ms.

[00:04:25] Osborne, and will be seated beginning on the meeting of October 8th. So I will begin, as usual, reading our public comment guidelines, because these are considered public comments in a hearing. We have nine people today signed up. One person just let us know that they weren't able to be here, so we will have eight, so everyone will have three minutes.

[00:04:47] The Albemarle County School Board welcomes public input on matters related to school board governance and division operations. Members of the public may sign up during public comment in the following ways. Online sign up opens at 9 a.m. on the Monday of the meeting week and closes at 2 p.m. on the day of the meeting by telephone by calling the school board clerk's office to sign up until 2 p.m. the day of the meeting and then in person for meetings held in person sign up is available at the meeting beginning at 6 p.m. and will remain open until the chair begins public comment. Public comment is not provided at special meetings unless included on the meeting

[00:05:22] agenda. When there are 13 or fewer speakers each speaker will have three minutes and when there are 14 or more speakers each speaker will have two minutes. When recognized speakers should come forward and state their name and and magisterial district for the record.

[00:05:39] Public comment should be addressed to the school board as a body and should relate to school board governance or division operations. Speakers may refer to individual board members, division leaders, or staff when their comments concern official actions, decisions, or matters within the authority of the school board or the operation of the division.

[00:05:55] All comments should be made in a professional and respectful manner. Public comment is not a forum for debate or for questions directed to individual board members or staff. threats, profanity, assenity, disclosure of confidential student information or private personal matters and conduct that disrupts the orderly operation of the meeting are not permitted.

[00:06:12] A timer will be used to track each speaker's time. When time has expired, the speaker should conclude promptly. Written comments and supporting material may be provided to the clerk for the board's consideration. To help maintain order and allow each speaker to be heard, please do not clap, boo, or otherwise audibly express support or opposition during public comment.

[00:06:32] Those wishing to show support may raise a hand or stand. The board will not engage in a discussion with speakers during public comment, and board members may address matters raised during public comment later in the meeting under other business as appropriate. Use of the projection system is reserved for staff presentations.

[00:06:50] So our first three speakers are Andrew Berman, Jimmy Ballou, and Kurt Burkhart. When you come forward, we just ask that you pull the two mics close to you. We have some people who are a little shorter like me, a little taller like Mr. Dillenbeck, and just always ask that you speak clearly and slowly so that the audio can pick up and everyone can hear you both in the auditorium and online.

[00:07:15] Thank you, sir. Good evening, Chair and members of the school board. My name is Andrew Berman. I am a senior at Albemarle High School and live in the Ravana District.

[00:07:32] Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak regarding the at-large appointment. I was originally going to view this meeting from its live stream as an assignment for my AP government class. However, upon further research and discussions with multiple teachers, I decided that it was important to both attend this meeting and make a public statement after viewing a particular candidate.

[00:07:51] I'm here to support candidate Mr. Mike McDermott. I've known Mr. McDermott for the past two years through his role as my blue and gold officer for the Naval Academy. And through that experience, I have seen his genuine commitment to helping local students and families. He has taken the time to understand our community and has demonstrated a strong commitment to serving Albemarle County.

[00:08:14] I believe that local knowledge and commitment would make him a valuable addition to the school board. Mr. McDermott understands that this position isn't just about having opinions on education. It is about listening to families, understanding the needs of our schools, and making responsible decisions with local resources, and also working collaboratively with the existing board.

[00:08:35] At a time when Albemarle County Public Schools is working to rebuild trust and prepare for an important superintendent search, I believe this board needs someone who will listen carefully, ask difficult questions, and work collaboratively and remain focused on what is best for students.

[00:08:51] I've wrestled with the ethical dilemma of speaking here in today's capacity. There exists a power imbalance in the relationship between Mr. McDermott and myself. One of the main reasons we are all here this evening is because students and parents were unable to effectively advocate for themselves when bad things were happening.

[00:09:10] I have not coordinated this with Mr. McDermott and I do not seek any in favor. In fact, I am sure he may be surprised that I am here. But I am here to advocate for students based on my experiences so that some good may come of this. I found Mr. McDermott to be thoughtful, professional, and genuinely interested in helping students succeed.

[00:09:29] I believe he would bring those qualities to the school board and would approach the position with integrity and a strong commitment to Albemarle County. I respectfully ask the board to consider Mr. McDermott for the at-large seat. Thank you. Thank you so much, Mr. Berman.

[00:09:46] As always, as everyone in the audience knows, the board appreciates all public comment, but particularly appreciates when students come forward. So thank you so much. Thank you, ma'am. Jimmy

Ballou. Good afternoon, Madam Chair, members of the board, Superintendent Hayes.

[00:10:18] First, I want to say I believe there were a number of great candidates wanting to serve on the school board. Each brought different experiences, different strengths, and a different perspective to the table. And I respect anyone willing to step forward and serve the community.

[00:10:34] But as the board makes its decision, I hope it isn't based on who will simply fall in line or who will always agree with the people currently sitting on this board. I hope the decision is based on what the school board and the community needs right now.

[00:10:50] I believe we need change, we need accountability, and we need transparency above all. A strong school board doesn't require everyone to agree. In fact, I believe good government requires different perspectives and people who are willing to respectfully ask the difficult questions.

[00:11:06] There's nothing wrong with supporting the superintendent and administration when things are going right. But there is also nothing wrong with asking questions when something doesn't make sense or demanding answers when something goes wrong. That's not being difficult. That's being doing the job.

[00:11:22] Whoever is selected should remember that the seat doesn't belong to the administration. It doesn't belong to the school board or any one individual. It belongs to the community. So I hope the board chooses the person they truly believe will best represent their students, families, employees, and taxpayers.

[00:11:38] Someone who will listen, think independently, and have courage to speak up when necessary. there were strong candidates willing to serve now I hope the board chooses the same independence accountability transparency and what and what we should expect from someone who ultimately fulfills the seat we all know I won't be the chosen one of course there's I've been too outspoken there have been too many differences but I would highly recommend there were three that I think did a wonderful job since we know I'm not going to get the job Heidi Gilman Bennett Daisy Roehlitz or Woodrow. I'm sorry, Wilson Woodrow. Any of those three, you could not go wrong. So do what's right.

[00:12:17] Appoint someone that would do a good job. Stand up. Take responsibility. Accept accountability for things that you have missed, things you did not do, and things you should have done. Thank you. Thank you very much, Mr. Ballou. Kurt Burkhardt. Good evening, Chair Berlin, members of the board,

[00:12:57] Dr. Hayes, and the Albemarle community. My name is Kurt Burkhardt. I live in the Breivana district and i appreciate the opportunity to speak tonight we must acknowledge while we were here when our neighbors cast their ballots in november 2023 they trusted their elected representative to fulfill her contract with the public because that timeline has changed a heavy responsibility now rests on this board to rebuild public trust at every step an interim appointment is not a

[00:13:33] a mandate. It's not a mandate to advance any political agenda. True mandates are received only at the ballot box. I'm calling on the board to choose governance over politics. Seek out an independent, non-aligned candidate who is not beholden to political factions. While the former board members, while there are former board members in this applicant pool who are to be commended for their dedication to our community, they also carry a history of past party endorsements.

[00:14:08] Because of that, the risk of turning this interim appointment into a political proxy battle remains incredibly high. We want to prevent that battle by eliminating any ideological bend or structural bias. We need someone focused entirely on the business of governance, not on positioning themselves for a future campaign.

[00:14:32] This board needs a neutralizing, stabilizing presence to help steady this body for what lies ahead. The safety of our students and the operational integrity of our schools demand an independent leader who will put our students first, uphold our academic standards, and govern with integrity.

[00:14:54] Thank you. Thank you very much. Our next three speakers are Megan Nabb, Jim Newman, and Bill McCaskill. Hello, I am Megan Nabb.

[00:15:22] I live in the Scottsville District and am a current parent at Monticello High School. I'm also speaking on behalf of my husband, Keith Nabb, who could not be here tonight. We support Heidi Gilman Bennett's nomination for the position of at-large school board representative.

[00:15:39] She has served in K-12 systems as both an experienced teacher and a consultant, with special attention to helping disadvantaged groups and removing barriers that stand in the way of student success. Why has she volunteered for ACPS for the past seven years? Because she cares about our schools and she cares about the community.

[00:15:58] She understands there is nothing more important than the success of students. I know few other community members who could embrace the multitude of responsibilities of this position. She understands that taking this position means supporting and celebrating students, students, their desire to learn, their academic curiosity, their accommodations and special needs, their physical safety and emotional well-being, their extracurricular commitments.

[00:16:22] She currently is a parent to a student in ACPS. She understands that taking this position means supporting teachers, demanding a rigorous curriculum, maintaining high expectations, supporting teachers when support is needed, and closing the achievement gaps.

[00:16:38] She understands that taking this position means supporting the administration and listening to parents. She is experienced in school board governance and policy, and she has a strong record of asking the right questions, the difficult questions, considering the input of others, diffusing conflict, and reaching resolutions.

[00:16:57] On a more personal note, I met Heidi several years ago through our kids' extracurricular activities. She has encouraged me since then to take an active part in ACPS by joining family council and attending school board meetings. I haven't attended nearly as many as she has, but I've been to a few.

[00:17:13] i recognize most of your names her passion for this work is contagious heidi gilman bennett is the best person for the job we appreciate your consideration thank you very much jim newman is jim newman here i'm just going to do it one more time jim newman if jim

[00:17:44] newman is not here um bill mccaskill hello and thank you i want to thank the school board for taking public comment um i also want to thank god that we live in a country where we can still express our opinions without fear of being arrested, imprisoned, or even executed because there are many countries like that in the world. So we need to be extremely thankful that God chose

[00:18:18] us to be born here or to move here if we moved here. So that's the first thing I want to thank you all for taking public comment. Pray that you continue to do that. I'm going to give three names that I think would be very qualified.

[00:18:38] And I've really appreciated all the comments that have come so far because they kind of reiterate what I'm thinking, is that you need to select someone, not just someone who is going to agree with everything that you all already agree with, but maybe bring some outside thoughts.

[00:18:59] One of the thoughts that came to me when I left after hearing all the candidates give their speeches, Because it's too bad that we can't maybe take some of the \$300 million budget and hire all of them and make them into some kind of an adjunct committee that would come up with thoughtful and creative ideas that perhaps could be useful for the board to consider.

[00:19:25] So the three names that I want to put forward in no particular order, because I think all of them would be extremely qualified because of their past work experience and what they have been able to demonstrate in their lives so far, and they're certainly not applying for the job for the pay or the glory of it, and that would be David Tattman, William Woodrow, and Mike McDermott.

[00:19:56] I think you would do well to choose one of those three. Thank you. Thank you so much. Our last two speakers tonight are Nancy Koenig and Emily May Thon. Happy Constitution Day. I'm Nancy Koenig from Scottsville. I have listened to the interviews of the candidates for the at-large seat and I believe many of them have important

[00:20:34] qualifications for this role. I ask that you select the new member based on not on politics but on the candidates understanding of the following principles the mission of the schools requires a focus on academic excellence and rigorous expectations strong partnerships between parents and teachers are essential no candidate or plan will be perfect so sound judgment and adaptability matter experience with fiscal responsibility is valuable different schools

[00:21:12] have different needs and those differences should be recognized in my opinion an effective board member should also demonstrate the following qualities seek truth from facts operate in accordance with the law understand that the board's role is to oversee the superintendent not simply to rubber stamp recommendations provide equal opportunity for all students Listen actively and respectfully.

[00:21:46] Evaluate whether adopted plans are working for students and be ready to adapt when they are not. Work towards specific, measurable, and achievable goals. Have the courage to vote against proposals that will not lead to well-educated, civic-minded graduates.

[00:22:11] Evaluate the superintendent's work in relation to division goals. recognize that statistics can be presented in ways that support particular biases. I further suggest that you review the code of conduct before selecting the new member with particular attention to integrity, policy decisions based on available facts, and appropriate public input, legal and ethical procedures for bringing about change,

[00:22:48] and the responsibility to uphold state regulations. Thank you very much. And again, happy Constitution Day. - Thank you very much. And our last speaker tonight is Emily Maython.

[00:23:07] - Good evening, members of the board and Superintendent Dr. Hayes. My name is Emily Maython and I am in the Rio District. Four and a half years ago, Heidi Gilman Bennett reached out to me

when I was PTO co-president at Agner Elementary.

[00:23:23] She was involved with Families Helping Families and wanted to support our teacher appreciation efforts being a school and pto with fewer monetary resources in that initial call heidi demonstrated warmth solution finding collaboration community outreach innovation and energy we have continued to work together since that first call and heidi consistently brings all of these attributes to the projects we've worked on later heidi and i collaborated on successfully writing a grant application to start the race matter series run run by the Counseling Alliance of Virginia with Jean Cash and Latasha Edwards, which we wrapped up our third cohort in May this year.

[00:24:00] Heidi's organization, deep thinking and technical writing enabled the success of that award. Since that time, Heidi has mentored me, although she probably wouldn't call it that, as I stepped into an officer role with family council, where I'm now the chair.

[00:24:15] I trust Heidi Gilman Bennett with the massive responsibility that the at-large school board position involves. She brings her brilliant mind to solve problems. She takes responsibility for the heavy lifting on projects without recognition or thanks. She leads the way when the path is unclear or has obstacles.

[00:24:33] She communicates clearly in agreement or disagreement. And she's connected with families and school leadership throughout the county. I believe the clear choice for the at-large school board member position is Heidi Gilman Bennett. And I'm also going to be reading on behalf of Christina Ra, who cannot attend tonight.

[00:24:49] And she is in the Rybana district. Please appoint Heidi Gilman Bennett to the at-large seat. I'm the parent of three children with 12 years ahead of them in ACPS. I took over Heidi's family council engagement role this summer. I speak for myself, not the council.

[00:25:06] I already knew how tirelessly Heidi advocates for students, families, teachers, and administrators. But inheriting her family council Gmail and Google Drive, years of emails, research, and documentation stopped me in my tracks. I was overwhelmed to tears by the breadth and depth of her work.

[00:25:24] I've never seen anything like it from someone who is not in public office, not paid, not expecting recognition. Heidi does this work because she cares and because she knows how to turn that care into action. You've heard concerns about underrepresented voices across our district.

[00:25:39] She does the work of listening, understanding what families need, and turning those concerns into informed action. ACPS is rebuilding. Heidi would come to this board already knowing the history, understanding the issues, and prepared to do the work. Thank you. Thank you so much. And I apologize.

[00:25:56] Some people were waving at me, and Mr. Dilhugbeck let me know. I was so focused on the speakers. I did not turn to the second page, so my mistake and my apologies. We have two more speakers, Joellen Tsarek and Sidney Martin. Thank you so much.

[00:26:18] I'm Joellen Whitehall. Last week, the board asked at-large candidates to describe how they would balance competing interests and address deep division in the community. Insightful questions, for sure.

[00:26:33] I think the answer lies in uniting to appoint the most qualified nonpartisan candidate on the slate. Forge ahead with an outsider with all the skills to steer you through ongoing legal issues and the superintendent search.

[00:26:51] Get your arms around complex budgetary responsibilities, fix the culture, and turn things around. I believe that the scale of the candidate's experience should be comparable to the scale of the district's 2,800-plus employees and 14,000 students across multiple learning sites.

[00:27:13] I think your needs assessment should include financial expertise commensurate with the oversight of \$308 million budgetary dollars. Depth of experience matters. Legal compliance and strategic planning that aligns financials, performance metrics, instructional delivery, and data-driven decisions. Team building, negotiation and conflict resolution, including, of course, union matters. Objectivity, independent and critical thinking to solve problems and avoid the common traps of silo and groupthink.

[00:27:51] emotional intelligence under public scrutiny and two-way communication skills a few of the candidates before you meet all these criteria I think stripped strict objectivity will lead you to consensus and I thank you very much good luck Sydney Martin good evening a public school system has one job putting children first and keeping them safe breaking laws and hiding behind privacy excuses should never be this board's agenda but that is exactly

[00:28:28] what you were doing special education teacher kelsey de sabor who had no legal relationship to my son falsely signed her own name i'm sorry i'm gonna have to stop you i'm looking so this is a this is oh i'm getting there it's just at the end okay because i just want i just need to repeat just because i understand that this is a public hearing regarding um school board appointments okay not about anything else so the the just the the way kind of feeds into it but okay so i just need to make sure that you are focused on um uh characteristics or recommendations for a school

[00:29:06] board um at large candidate thank you the silence tells every parent in this county that you approve of corruption and that you will always protect the system over the family this can this community deserves better our children deserve better i believe that jimmy blue or heidi gilma bennett would be an asset to this board community and our children thank you very much that concludes our public comment for our public hearing for the open position do we have any i just want to make sure i

[00:29:42] did not miss any other speakers um do we have any motions before us i just need to take one second um so just to kind of explain to people so again because there's no other business tonight we will have um we will have um closed business um tonight um and we will uh also have a closed session prior to the uh september 24th and that is when we will make an announcement about the

[00:30:13] school board position because of the way um the uh the the kind of the legal um precedent i guess around um public hearings is you you're not allowed to do a public hearing and make a decision tonight so the the school board will make a decision on the 24th and that will be announced on the 24th and my next is do we have any motions do you have everything you need or do you need something else to apologies i'm just getting something else for um mr dylanbeck

[00:30:59] do i have any motions before me yes chair berlin i have a close meeting motion i move that the School Board of Albemarle County, Virginia, go into a closed meeting as authorized by the Virginia Freedom of Information Act, Section 2.2-3711A of the Code of Virginia under number 1, subsection 1, which authorizes the discussion, consideration, or interviews of prospective candidates for employment

and the assignment, appointment, promotion, performance, demotion, salaries, disciplining, or resignation of specific public officers, appointees, or employees

[00:31:39] of any public body. Purpose of this item is to review and discuss the candidates to be the at-large representative on the school board and a recent personnel issue involving a school staff member. And number two, section 1.5, for discussion of the award of a public contract involving the expenditure of public funds, including interviews of bidders or offerers, and discussion of the terms or scope of such contract where discussion in an open session would adversely affect the bargaining position or negotiating strategy of the school board.

[00:32:16] Purpose of this item is to discuss the selection of an executive search firm to conduct a nationwide search for a permanent superintendent of Albemarle County Public Schools. Do I have a second for this motion? Second. Moved by Mr. Dilligbeck, seconded by Ms. Lee.

[00:32:31] All those in favor of moving into closed session? Aye. Any opposed? We will now move immediately into closed session. We will reconvene. It's always hard to give an estimate about this. I'm going to estimate an hour, but it could be more.

[00:32:47] And again, we will not be doing a candidate selection tonight. We may have a motion around the second point, subsection 15, around if the board comes to a consensus on the selection of an executive search forum.

[00:33:04] Thank you so much.

[00:33:14] Thank you all very much.

[00:34:35] Do we have a certification coming out of closed? Yes, Chair Berlin, we do. I move 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 in the closed meeting.

[00:34:56] Second. Moved by Mr. Dillenbeck, seconded by Ms. Lay. All those in favor? Any opposed? We are fully certified our closed meeting. Do I have any motions coming out of the closed meeting? Yes. Chair Berlin, I move that we direct the division staff to pursue a contract with Firm A to execute a superintendent search. Do I have a second? Second. I'm sorry.

[00:35:24] Moved by Mr. Dillenbeck, seconded by Dr. Acuff. All those in favor? Aye. Any opposed? that motion clearly passes do I have any other announcements or school board business seeing none just a reminder we have a meeting again on the 24th in that at that meeting there will be announcement there will be a closed meeting to discuss and then an announcement about the at-large candidate thank you all very much and we are adjourned



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