

Minutes of **Wednesday, March 12, 2025, Public Board Meeting**
of the Orange Board of Education held at 6:00 pm.

President Shawneque Johnson is presiding over tonight's meeting.

Ms. Shawneque Johnson
Ms. Fatimah Turner, Ph.D. - Absent
Mr. David Armstrong - Late
Ms. Samantha Crockett
Ms. Sueann Gravesande
Mr. Tyrone Tarver - Late
Mr. Siaka Sherif - Absent
Ms. India Williams
Mr. Jeffrey Wingfield

ROLL CALL (5) PRESENT (0) LATE (2) ABSENT

ALSO PRESENT:

- Mr. Jason Ballard, School Business Administrator/Board Secretary
- Mr. Dwayne Ortiz, Assistant Business Administrator/Board Secretary
- Ms. Jessica Kleen, School Board Attorney Substitute with Machado Law Group

FLAG SALUTE

Ms. Johnson motions to move into Executive Session.

Moved by Mr. Jeffrey Wingfield and Seconded by Ms. Sueann Gravesande
ROLL CALL (5) YEA (0) NAY (0) ABSTAIN (4) ABSENT

Ms. Johnson motions to close the Executive Session and move into a Public Meeting.

Moved by Mr. David Armstrong Seconded by Ms. Sueann Gravesande
ROLL CALL (7) YEA (0) NAY (0) ABSTAIN (2) ABSENT

Ms. Johnson opens the Orange Public School District Board meeting, noting the absence of student representative Ms. Lopez, who will be acknowledged upon arrival. She then introduces Dr. Fitzhugh for the Superintendent's Report.

Dr. Fitzhugh recognizes Women's History Month and expresses gratitude for the contributions of women. He acknowledges the presence of two school principals, Dr. Loftin-Cook from Forest Street School and Ms. Halstead from Orange Preparatory Academy.

Scholarship Updates from The Office of Guidance - Dr. Fitzhugh provides an update on scholarship achievements, reporting that students have earned over \$24 million to date this year. He commends school leaders for their dedication to student success and highlights the district's ongoing progress in securing scholarships for graduates.

Participation in Verizon Innovative Learning - Dr. Fitzhugh announces the expansion of the Verizon Innovation Program to two additional schools, joining Rosa Parks Community School and Cleveland Street School. He celebrates the national recognition of Orange Preparatory Academy and the STEM Innovation Academy of the

Oranges, commending the dedication of school leaders, staff, and student ambassadors. He highlights Ms. Halstead and her team's contributions and expresses appreciation for the Board of Education's unanimous support in approving the resolution to apply for the grant, emphasizing the importance of strong partnerships in creating opportunities for students.

School Security Drill Guide & Bus Evacuation Requirement - Dr. Fitzhugh provides an update on the district's required safety drills, emphasizing compliance with 18A Statutory Law. He commends school leaders for their diligence in ensuring consistent communication with families regarding emergency procedures. He highlights the importance of bus evacuation drills and urges parents to review notifications and discuss safety measures with their children.

Additionally, he outlines the fire and security drill requirements, which mandate that schools conduct one fire drill and one security drill each month, including during summer sessions. He also details the annual requirement for active shooter, evacuation, bomb threat, and lockdown drills. Acknowledging the district's preparedness efforts, he expresses confidence in staff and students' ability to respond effectively to emergencies and encourages families to remain engaged in school safety discussions.

ELA Fall to Winter Reading Standards Achievement Data – Ms. Harris presents detailed fall diagnostic data for K-2 literacy assessments, noting a positive trend in early literacy development. The Acadience assessment, used for kindergarten through second grade, measures foundational reading readiness skills and becomes more complex as students' progress. In kindergarten, 46% of students are performing at or above benchmark, marking a 10% increase from the previous year.

For grades 3-12, the focus of assessments shifts from word recognition to reading comprehension skills. In third grade, 59% of general education students met their expected growth based on national norms, while 39% of multilingual learners and 28% of students with disabilities achieved their growth targets. Ms. Harris emphasizes the importance of continued support for multilingual learners, particularly noting significant progress in sixth grade, which she attributes to targeted efforts for consistent classroom attendance and in-class support. The district has transitioned from the pullout model to providing support for multilingual learners within the classroom. This approach allows students to acquire English through peer interactions and in the context of their regular learning environment, leading to promising results, especially in sixth grade.

Ms. Harris also highlights the success of seventh-grade students, especially those with disabilities, asserting that they can succeed despite their challenges. She stresses that the data presented is raw and unaltered. As the assessments become increasingly challenging in eighth grade, students continue to perform well, maintaining strong results in the "exceeds" and "meets" categories. For grades 9-12, the data reflects a decrease in student numbers due to the inclusion of students in dual enrollment and AP courses, who take separate, specialized assessments.

Ms. Johnson addresses Dr. Fitzhugh, requesting recognition of the Student Representative before proceeding. She introduces Ms. Diana Lopez and invites her to share any updates or reports.

Ms. Diana Lopez raises concerns about pedestrian safety near Park Avenue School, noting that cars often fail to stop, creating a hazard for children. She suggests improvements to enhance safety. Ms. Johnson acknowledges the issue as a longstanding concern and agrees to investigate potential solutions.

Dr. Fitzhugh announces the recent passing of Mr. Matthew Pacino, a retired principal of Heywood Avenue School in Orange. He invites everyone to observe a moment of silence in his honor and expresses his wishes for Mr. Pacino to rest in peace.

Attendance for the Month - Dr. Fitzhugh presents the February attendance report, noting that the district consistently maintains low to moderate chronic absenteeism. He highlights the success of attendance committees, family engagement, and home visits in improving attendance. The early childhood program shows growth, with parents prioritizing school attendance. Instructional strategies support students who miss lessons, ensuring continued learning. The district's 96% attendance rate exceeds the state average of 95%, demonstrating collective efforts in fostering student success.

Facilities Update - Mr. Vasquez provides an update on facility improvements, highlighting increased cleaning efforts, preventive maintenance, and ongoing repairs to steam boiler valves and pipes for better classroom temperature control. The work order system is now fully operational, and staff members are being trained to ensure efficient tracking of maintenance requests.

Dr. Fitzhugh announces the opening of Forest Annex for grades K-2 in the 2025-2026 school year, with Dr. Lofton-Cooke overseeing both Forest Annex and Forest Main. Renovations at Forest Annex include painting all classrooms, hallways, and stairwells, as well as refinishing hardwood floors and upgrading gym and major flooring areas.

The installation of smart boards is also planned, ensuring a fully equipped learning environment. Additionally, Mr. Ballard and the facilities team are overseeing the completion of high school and Cleveland Project punch lists, maintaining a strong commitment to health, safety, and operational excellence in all district facilities.

Mark Your Calendars - Dr. Fitzhugh makes the following announcements regarding upcoming events and important dates for families and staff.

- Monday, March 24 – Parent-Teacher Conferences for grades 8 through 12 from 1:15 PM to 4:00 PM.
 - Students in grades 8 through 12 will have a half-day session.
 - Elementary and early childhood students will follow a full-day schedule.
- Tuesday, March 25 – Parent-Teacher Conferences for grades 8 through 12 from 5:30 PM to 7:30 PM.
 - All students will follow a full-day schedule.
- Wednesday, March 26 – Parent-Teacher Conferences for grades Pre-K through 7 from 5:30 PM to 7:30 PM.
 - All students will follow a full-day schedule.
- Thursday, March 27 – Parent-Teacher Conferences for grades Pre-K through 7 from 1:15 PM to 4:00 PM.
 - Students in Pre-K through 7 will have a half-day session.
- Saturday, May 3 – The Honor Education Foundation will host a Jazz Brunch at Hanover Manor.
 - Further details will be included in the weekly update.

Additionally, for pre-kindergarten families, kindergarten informational sessions will begin in early May. Details about moving-up ceremonies have already been shared, and notifications will continue to be sent via email, the district website, and social media.

Ms. Johnson motions to approve the February 12th, 2025, Public Board Meeting Minutes.

Moved by Mr. David Armstrong Seconded by Ms. Sueann Gravesande
ROLL CALL (5) YEA (0) NAY (2) ABSTAIN (2) ABSENT

Ms. Johnson motions to approve the February 12th, 2025, Closed Session Public Board Meeting Minutes.

Moved by Mr. Jeffrey Wingfield Seconded by Ms. Sueann Gravesande
ROLL CALL (5) YEA (0) NAY (2) ABSTAIN (2) ABSENT

Ms. Johnson extends an invitation to Mr. Armstrong to present the Special Education Committee Report.

Special Education Committee Report – Mr. Armstrong announces that he will not be delivering his report tonight. He commends Ms. Harper for her efforts in keeping the group informed and progressing. He confirms that he will present his report next month.

Ms. Johnson confirms that the curriculum and facilities reports have been completed. However, the board members responsible for presenting them are absent. As a result, the meeting will move directly to public comments.

Ms. Johnson motions to motions to open Public Comments.

Moved by Mr. David Armstrong Seconded by Ms. Samantha Crockett
ROLL CALL (7) YEA (0) NAY (0) ABSTAIN (2) ABSENT

Public Comments

Councilwoman Quantavia Hilbert addresses the board to support her Girl Scout troop's request for meeting space in a school district facility. She highlights her mission since taking office in 2022 to provide opportunities for youth empowerment and education. Founded in late 2024, her citywide troop has grown to 21 members, currently meeting at the Orange Public Library, which may no longer be a suitable space. Hilbert reassures the board that her troop operates like any other Girl Scout troop and is open to all ages. She acknowledges an inquiry regarding their request but is unsure of its nature, offering to provide clarification. She concludes by urging the board to approve the request, emphasizing the need for a safe, dedicated space for the Girl Scouts to meet.

Lisa Canan, President of the OEAI, addresses the board to express the staff's dedication to maintaining school buildings and ensuring student safety. She highlights ongoing issues, such as fire door problems and a persistent sewer smell in the cafeteria and explains that staff are actively working within board protocols to resolve them. Ms. Canan emphasizes that staff go above and beyond for the students, even providing personal resources like clothing and shoes. She invites the board to visit classrooms to see firsthand the care and commitment the staff shows toward the students.

Mr. Williams raises concerns about the vetting process for coaches in the Orange Basketball League. He mentions that while he, as a certified substitute teacher with security clearance, went through the necessary process, other coaches may not have been properly vetted. He requests clarification on the requirement for board approval for coaches, as he hasn't seen it in writing. Ms. Johnson clarifies that the city runs the program, but the school district oversees the use of its facilities. She directs him to Ms. Masoud to address the concerns about the fingerprinting process for the coaches. Mr. Williams emphasizes the need for fairness, and Ms. Johnson reassures him that all coaches are being treated equally.

Mr. Dacheler Evra, a student at Rosa Parks Community School, thanks the district for addressing issues with the school's lighting. He then raises concerns about the quality of school lunches, citing reports of students getting sick from undercooked or spoiled food. He notes that many students do not enjoy the lunch options and are forced to eat them due to limited alternatives. Mr. Evra suggests offering better-cooked and more diverse food choices in the cafeteria. He also proposes allowing students to use microwaves to heat their food, while understanding the district's safety concerns. He concludes by thanking the board for considering his suggestions.

Ms. Johnson motions to close Public Comments.

Moved by Mr. Jeffrey Wingfield Seconded by Ms. Sueann Gravesande
ROLL CALL (7) YEA (0) NAY (0) ABSTAIN (2) ABSENT

Ms. Johnson motions to approve the consent agenda, excluding item L-1 under the facilities use request.

Moved by Mr. Armstrong Seconded by Mr. Crockett
ROLL CALL (6) YEA (0) NAY (1) ABSTAIN (2) ABSENT

Mr. Tarver raises concerns about the district's fingerprinting policy for individuals involved in programs, mentioning he was informed that individuals who work for a certain number of hours (at least 10) must undergo fingerprinting. He questions why principals are responsible for vetting head coaches if the program is not directly managed by the district. Ms. Johnson explains that only head coaches, who are stipend positions, are vetted by principals because they are district employees.

Mr. Tarver seeks further clarification about whether head coaches for the city's recreation program are receiving stipends from the school district. Ms. Johnson confirms that they are, which is why principals vet them. Jessica Kleen suggests that there is confusion regarding stipends between elementary and high school programs and proposes verifying the information before responding publicly. She reassures Mr. Tarver that they will gather the correct details and share them.

The discussion moves to the procedural handling of items L-1 and L-2 on the agenda. Mr. Tarver asks about the status of L-2, which he believes was tabled. Jessica Kleen clarifies that a motion to un-table an item is needed during the same meeting, but since L-2 is listed as a new resolution, there is no need to un-table it. She advises the board to approve the consent agenda, excluding items L-1 and L-2, which will be dealt with separately afterward.

Ms. Johnson motions to approve the consent agenda, excluding items L-1 and L-2.

Moved by Mr. David Armstrong Seconded by Mr. Jeffrey Wingfield
ROLL CALL (7) YEA (0) NAY (0) ABSTAIN (2) ABSENT

Mr. Ballard inquires if there are any comments from the board members.

Mr. Tarver questions the timing of the resolutions for district travel and field trips, noting that some trips have already occurred or are ongoing, despite requests being submitted months ago. Dr. Fitzhugh explains that some trips were pre-approved and that system delays can cause a lag. Mr. Ballard adds that a prior resolution allows for travel up to \$1,500, and the board approves specific destinations. Mr. Tarver asks about the approval process for destinations, and Dr. Fitzhugh offers to assist with further clarification. Ms. Gravesande verifies the dates and confirms no trips have occurred before the listed months.

Ms. Johnson motions to un-table L-2, a resolution to approve the facilities use request from the Girl Scouts of America.

Moved by Mr. Jeffrey Wingfield Seconded by Mr. David Armstrong
ROLL CALL (0) YEA (0) NAY (0) ABSTAIN (2) ABSENT

Ms. Johnson motions to approve a consent agenda that includes resolutions L-1 and L-2.

Resolution L1

Moved by Mr. Jeffrey Wingfield Seconded by Mr. David Armstrong
ROLL CALL (4) YEA (1) NAY (2) ABSTAIN (2) ABSENT

Resolution L2

Moved by Mr. Jeffrey Wingfield Seconded by Mr. David Armstrong
ROLL CALL (7) YEA (0) NAY (0) ABSTAIN (2) ABSENT

Mr. Ballard inquires if there are any comments from the board members.

Mr. Tarver opposes resolution L-1, stating that City Hall should be responsible for the full cost of facility use rather than receiving substantial discounts. However, he expresses support for L-2, which pertains to the Girl Scouts.

Mr. Wingfield emphasizes the importance of prioritizing student needs over financial concerns, advocating for the provision of resources regardless of cost. Ms. Williams and Ms. Johnson discuss financial accountability, with Johnson highlighting the reciprocal nature of the district's relationship with City Hall.

Mr. Tarver shifts the discussion to student achievement, expressing concern over low SAT scores and emphasizing the necessity of allocating all available educational funds to academic improvement. Ms. Kleen responds by stating that state assessments ensure students meet graduation requirements, though Mr. Tarver argues that these assessments do not necessarily indicate proficiency at the 12th-grade level.

Ms. Johnson requests that the discussion remain focused on the resolution. Mr. Tarver reiterates his opposition to using district funds for City Hall programs that have already been budgeted by the city.

Dr. Fitzhugh highlights the district's progress, emphasizing staff dedication, student success, and the strategic implementation of programs. Mr. Tarver clarifies that his concerns pertain to resource allocation rather than criticism of staff efforts.

Dr. Fitzhugh underscores the district's collaborative decision-making process and student achievements, while Mr. Armstrong disputes claims of low SAT scores, citing official data.

Mr. Ballard clarifies that the district is not allocating \$760,000 solely for the program under discussion. He explains that there are three other programs concurrently operating in the same facility, and as a result, the costs are shared. Therefore, the district is not expending additional funds, as the expenses are distributed across multiple programs already in operation.

Ms. Johnson announces the upcoming district's meetings.

Public District Meetings

Public Relations Committee Virtual Meeting – Wednesday, April 2, 2025, at 4:00 pm
Orange Board of Education Public Board Meeting – Wednesday, April 9, 2025, at 7:30 pm at the BOE

Closed District Meetings

Curriculum Committee Virtual Meeting – Tuesday, March 25, 2025, at 3:30 pm
Facilities Committee Virtual Meeting – Monday, March 31, 2025, at 4:00 pm
Special Education Committee Virtual Meeting – Tuesday, April 1, 2025, at 3:30 pm
Policy Committee Virtual Meeting – Thursday, April 3, 2025, at 4:00 pm
Finance Committee Virtual Meeting – Thursday, April 3, 2025, at 5:30 pm
Human Resources Committee Virtual Meeting – Monday, April 7, 2025, at 3:30 pm

Board Comments

Ms. Crockett expresses her gratitude to the district, particularly to the teachers, for the updates in English Language Arts (ELA). She acknowledges the consistent progress made year over year, noting that the district has improved by 9-10 percentage points compared to the previous year. Ms. Crockett recognizes that while the improvements may seem small, they represent significant strides given the size of the district and the challenges faced, especially post-COVID. She thanks the teachers, principals, and staff for their hard work and dedication, highlighting the positive impact on the students.

Mr. Tarver addresses the Planning Board meeting's discussion regarding the Berwyn Street development project. He clarifies that in 2019, the developers proposed purchasing school land to build an eight-story, 200-unit building in exchange for offering some classrooms for the district. However, the school board, including Mr. Tarver and the former business administrator, did not approve the proposal due to concerns about selling school land, overcrowding, and inadequate space for the classrooms. The developers also offered a small courtyard, which would have lacked direct sunlight due to the building's height.

Mr. Tarver explains that the district did not have the funds to equip the classrooms at the time, as they were facing significant budget constraints with several ongoing renovation projects, including Cleveland Street and Orange High School. Despite the board's objections, the Planning Board approved the project, which will still need to be approved by the city council.

He highlights that, currently in 2025, the district faces the impact of over 1,700 new units approved in the area, which will increase the student population near Oakwood Avenue School, potentially exacerbating overcrowding. He emphasizes the need for the district and its leadership to remain vigilant as these developments proceed.

Ms. Gravesande announces that tomorrow at Orange Preparatory Academy of Inquiry and Innovation, the 2025 Essex County Unsung Heroes Award Ceremony will take place. She encourages everyone to attend and support the students, noting that both she and Ms. Johnson have attended in the past and that the emotional stories shared during the ceremony can be very moving.

Ms. Gravesande clarifies her previous remarks made at the last board meeting, explaining that as a board member, she is tasked with addressing difficult issues, even when they may be uncomfortable. She stresses the board's dedication to its work, particularly in approving significant projects, and acknowledges the hard work of students, teachers, and principals. However, she emphasizes that there is always room for improvement, especially regarding student safety and ensuring that students feel supported. She apologizes if her comments were misconstrued or hurtful, affirming that her intention is to advocate for the best interests of the district. Ms. Gravesande concludes by reiterating her commitment to continue pushing for necessary improvements.

Mr. Tarver shares his experience participating in Read Across America, a program organized in collaboration with United Way. He visited several schools, including Lincoln Avenue and Park Avenue School, where he engaged with students in reading activities. Mr. Tarver expresses his satisfaction with the event, highlighting the enthusiastic participation of students and the supportive involvement of teachers. He appreciates the opportunity to return to the schools and contribute in the way he once did. He also looks forward to further collaboration with United Way, especially in future tutoring initiatives with the district, which will be presented by Ms. Harris next month. Dr. Fitzhugh acknowledges the importance of these partnerships, and Ms. Johnson expresses gratitude for Mr. Tarver's involvement despite his health challenges.

Ms. Johnson motions to have the Meeting Adjourned.

Moved by Ms. Sueann Gravesande Seconded by Mr. David Armstrong
ROLL CALL (7) YEA (0) NAY (0) ABSTAIN (2) ABSENT