



## **Board of Education Work Session - Jul 29, 2025, Minutes**

Tuesday, July 29, 2025, at 6:00 PM

Tooele County School District 92 Lodestone Way Tooele, Utah 84074

***THESE MINUTES WERE APPROVED AT THE AUGUST 12, 2025 BOARD MEETING***

### **1. Executive Session, 5:30 pm (Closed to the Public)**

Board Members Present: Melissa Rich, Elizabeth Smith, Todd Thompson, Robert Gowans, Scott Bryan (via phone call). ValaRee Shields (5:34 pm), Emily Syphus (5:35 pm)

Administration Present: Dr. Mark Ernst, Dr. Jeff Hamm, Terry Christensen, Jackie Gallegos

### **2. Work Session 6pm (A work session is intended to provide opportunities for board members to study issues in depth, gather and analyze information, and clarify situations and potential solutions. The Board will not make decision or take any action during a work session. While open to the public, these sessions are more informal than the regular board meeting.)**

#### **2.01 Welcome and Roll Call**

**Board Members Present:** Melissa Rich, Emily Syphus, ValaRee Shields, Robert Gowans, Elizabeth Smith, Todd Thompson

**District Staff Present:** Superintendent Mark Ernst, Dr. Jeff Hamm, Lark Reynolds, Brett Valdez, Terry Christensen, Heather Castagno, Marissa Lowry, Angie Gillette, Dr. Cody Reutzel, Dr. Sarah Jarnagin, Brad Hranicky, Charles Hansen, Dustin Nelson, and Jackie Gallegos.

At 6:00 p.m., Board President Rich welcomed attendees and provided a brief reminder regarding the purpose of a work session, emphasizing its role in facilitating in-depth discussion and information sharing without formal action being taken.

## 2.02 School District Funding Equalization

Former Senator Howard Stephenson addressed the Tooele County School Board to present on the topic of school funding equalization, with a particular focus on the Voted and Board Local Levy Programs. His presentation highlighted the significant funding disparities that exist across Utah school districts and proposed legislative solutions aimed at addressing these inequities.

Mr. Stephenson began by emphasizing that the Tooele County School District is currently the lowest-funded district in Utah, which itself ranks as the lowest-funded state for public education. Despite this, Tooele maintains one of the highest local tax rates, underscoring the imbalance between local effort and state support.

He discussed legislation sponsored by Senator Fillmore that proposes allocating at least 0.5% of the total appropriated Weighted Pupil Unit (WPU) to the local voted levy program. Stephenson expressed his support for increasing this allocation to 1% annually, arguing that such a move would more effectively address the funding gaps faced by districts like Tooele.

Using comparative data, Stephenson illustrated the extent of the disparity. He noted that peer districts such as Iron, Cache, and Box Elder receive between \$449 and \$1,800 more per student in general fund revenue. For example, Cache receives approximately \$1,386 more per student, amounting to \$20 million in additional funding, while Box Elder receives \$1,800 more per student, totaling \$27 million. These comparisons, he explained, highlight the critical funding challenges Tooele faces, even when compared to districts that are not considered particularly well-funded.

Mr. Stephenson cited research from respected national organizations—including the National Bureau of Economic

Research, the Brookings Institution, and the RAND Corporation—demonstrating that adequate and equitable school funding leads to improved student achievement, particularly in under-resourced communities.

He noted that 43 districts across Utah would benefit from the proposed equalization efforts and clarified that the plan would not divert property tax revenue from other districts. Instead, it would provide a more balanced and fair distribution of state education funds.

During the discussion, Board Member Todd Thompson asked what the best course of action would be to address these disparities. Stephenson advocated for a proactive approach focused on educating legislators about the realities faced by districts like Tooele.

Board Member Syphus also raised a question regarding how the statutory 0.5% requirement has been circumvented, further highlighting the need for legislative clarity and accountability.

Mr. Stephenson concluded by urging the board and community to help inform both taxpayers and lawmakers that the current funding inequities are not the fault of local school boards. Rather, they are the result of systemic issues that require thoughtful legislative solutions.

- 2.03 Review of the Systemic Performance Audit of TCSD by the Office of the Legislative Auditor General
- Kade Minchey, Auditor General, along with Deputy Auditor General Darin Underwood and Performance Auditor Abigail Armstrong, presented the findings of the Systemic Performance Audit of the Tooele County School District (TCSD) to the Board. Mr. Minchey opened the presentation by emphasizing that every organization, regardless of its current performance, has opportunities for improvement. The audit focused on several critical areas, beginning with student achievement. TCSD is currently meeting only one of the state's seven performance targets—K–3 literacy at 60%. Board Member Thompson asked what improvements could be expected, and Superintendent Mark Ernst responded by outlining the district's long-term “moon goals,” which include

achieving a K–3 literacy proficiency rate of 75% or higher, a K–3 math proficiency rate of 75% or higher, and a graduation rate of 90% or higher and no schools with groups in turnaround status. The district has identified specific areas of instructional inconsistency and is implementing targeted excellence plans to address them. Dr. Cody Reutzel, Executive Director of Teaching and Learning, affirmed the district’s commitment to confronting these challenges directly.

The presentation also addressed governance and culture. Board Member Gowans emphasized that when policy is followed, it supports a positive culture and improved employee morale. Superintendent Ernst expressed concern that the term accountability can sometimes feel negative and isolating, and suggested that the system of accountability needs a comprehensive overhaul.

The auditors also addressed the alignment of the district’s Leadership Academy with best practices in school governance and instructional leadership. They emphasized the importance of ensuring that principal development is strategically focused and that area directors are actively engaged in supporting school leaders. Additionally, the audit highlighted the need for improved coordination among key departments—such as Teaching and Learning, Special Education, and Student Services—to ensure their efforts are aligned with the district’s Strategic Model. Superintendent Ernst noted that the district has already begun applying the audit’s recommendations to strengthen governance structures and enhance leadership development across the organization.

Financial oversight was another focus of the presentation. The auditors reviewed TCSD’s past contract with My Tech High (now named OpenEd), noting that the district had not separated accounts related to this contract, which contributed to significant budget deficits. Superintendent Ernst explained that under current rules, the district would have faced similar financial challenges regardless of the contract’s structure. The funds involved are now treated as one-time money rather than ongoing revenue.

Among the key recommendations was the creation of an Assistant Superintendent for Student Achievement to centralize academic accountability and improve instructional outcomes. Superintendent Ernst stated that this position would be created in a full-time equivalent (FTE) neutral manner by realigning his executive staff. The auditors concluded the presentation by noting that they will follow up on the district's progress in implementing the recommendations. Superintendent Ernst confirmed that the audit is already serving as a catalyst for meaningful reform throughout the district. Board members expressed their sincere appreciation to the auditors for their thorough work and thoughtful recommendations. They acknowledged the value of the audit in identifying areas for growth and expressed gratitude for the constructive guidance on how the district can continue to improve.

### **3. Adjourn**

3.01 Adjournment at 8:01 pm  
Adjourn

*Moved by:* Robert Gowans

*Seconded by:* ValaRee Shields

**Motion Carries**