



**MINUTES**  
**SPECIAL MEETING OF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION**  
**Washington County School District**  
**121 West Tabernacle, St. George, Utah**  
**September 22, 2025**  
**2:00 p.m.**

*Present: Board President David Stirland, Board Vice President LaRene Cox, Board Member Craig Seegmiller, Board Member Burke Staheli, Board Member Ron Wade, Board Member Craig Hammer, Board Member Heidi Gunn, Superintendent Richard Holmes, Business Administrator Brent Bills, Assistant Superintendent Cheri Stevenson, Assistant Superintendent Nate Esplin, Executive Director Susan Harrah, Executive Director Steve Gregoire, Executive Director Rusty Taylor, Executive Director Wade Jensen, Technology Director Jeremy Cox, Communications Director Steven Dunham, Assessment & Research Director Brian Stevenson, Student Services Director Brad Christensen.*

*Minutes: Executive Secretary Kajsia Boyer*

**Reverence by Board Member Staheli.**

**FOLLOW UP FROM PREVIOUS BOARD MEETING**

**Foreign Student Placement – Brad Christensen**

Brad Christensen reported on Foreign Student placement. We only place the J1 visa students and do not place F1 visa students. The J1 visa students are placed with agencies. The state of Utah has a limited number (326) of slots for the state that are divided among all the districts. The students are placed in open boundary schools. Our District generally asks for 2-3 slots per high school. The process is to reach out to the schools in January to see if they are interested in holding a slot for a foreign student. We receive the state WPU amount for those students. The agencies and students do not get to select the school where the students are placed. Generally, we get 10-12 slots for our District. The District represents about 4% of the state, so 12-13 slots align with their proportion. The board discussed allowing foreign students to enroll at closed schools. They feel the message should be that schools have 2 slots and that is all. Brad Christensen mentioned that the agencies can be a little aggressive for the open spots. A situation was shared with several foreign students wanting to transfer from a local charter school. Ron Wade asked what we could do about the charter school taking so many students. Superintendent Richard Holmes suggested maybe visiting with Joann Brinton, Utah State Board of Education, with those concerns. Brad Christensen said the agencies are approved through the state. The agencies must be on the approved list for students to participate in UHSAA activities. David Stirland suggested creating criteria for approved agencies to work with our District. Brad Christensen said his staff is really good at working with the agencies. We will continue with two per school and have approval from principals for any other placements.

Summary:

- There are two types of student visas: F1 and J1
  - The District does not accept F1 visa students
  - The District accepts J1 visa students
    - J1 students are placed through agencies
    - J1 visa students have higher requirements, including English proficiency
- State of Utah has 326 slots for J1 students divided among districts and charter schools

- District process:
  - Around January-February, district contacts high school principals to ask how many slots they want
  - District requests slots from the state
  - Typically receive 10-12 slots total
  - Agencies recruit host families for placements
- Currently only open boundary schools accept exchange students. It was suggested potentially opening slots to all high schools, not just open boundary schools
- Consensus reached on allocating 2 slots per high school, with flexibility to adjust between schools if principals agree, similar to out-of-boundary requests

### **Follow up on Legislative Discussion – Superintendent Richard Holmes**

Superintendent Richard Holmes felt the meeting with the legislators was a positive meeting. Brent Bills mentioned he would need to book flights early, if possible, for the legislative sessions. He also mentioned it helps being there for some of the earlier meetings as they run a lot of bills through in the first couple of weeks. LaRene Cox mentioned that the legislators want information on the bills earlier. Brent Bills said many times JLC has not taken a position. He could get the bill information to the board to start talking earlier. Heidi Gunn said if we wait, we get behind waiting for JLC. LaRene Cox mentioned that there are also times where JLC has not supported us. We need to do what is best for Washington County. David Stirland feels the legislators do respect us and will listen to us but we need to be a little quicker to respond. Heidi Gunn feels that we do learn a lot of good information through JLC that we may not know. Superintendent Richard Holmes said we need to work with our legislators. Some of the bills will start coming out in the next month or so. He suggested having a staff member read and analyze the bills. Joe B. with SEDC tracks the bills and is a good resource. Brent Bills said October 6<sup>th</sup> will be a special session and more will come out then. He said there are some great things that come from JLC and it is good if we can be there. LaRene Cox mentioned it is easier to stop the bills early in committee than later in the process. Brent Bills mentioned that developing relationships with legislators will help. David Stirland asked the Board to look at availability to attend the sessions. He feels we should have two board members per session if possible.

#### **Summary:**

- Importance of building relationships with legislators
- Bills often move quickly in the first weeks of the legislative session
- JLC meetings on Thursdays and Fridays can be too late to influence fast-moving legislation
- Waiting for JLC positions before engaging with legislators can put the district behind
- Board members should schedule legislative visits early (book in November for January-March session)
- Continue to participate in JLC for information gathering, but be more proactive in direct legislator engagement

### **WORK SESSION**

#### **Attendance – Cheri Stevenson and Nate Esplin**

Superintendent Richard Holmes mentioned the legislators report that attendance would be a discussion this year in legislation. Attendance data was shared with the Board including national attendance trends. Our data shows how much our principals do to build relationships. Last year our data showed 94% attendance. Excused absences far outweigh the unexcused. Nate Esplin shared the school level and cone-site attendance data. All of the school levels are near 95%. He shared the elementary trend which shows schools going up in daily attendance. Cheri Stevenson mentioned that some of the schools are going out to get incentives to give students as part of their “Here Now” program. The schools are also meeting with parents when students are absent. Schools are really being intentional. Nate Esplin said there is more of a focus and discussion with students on the importance of being in school. The culture and kids wanting to come to school makes a difference with positive attendance. Cheri Stevenson mentioned they are also working to

build relationships with the most fragile students. Intermediate schools and middle schools show the same trend up. High schools are also showing trends up. Superintendent Richard Holmes said it is a great indicator of our teachers and what they are doing to help create an environment of success. Burke Staheli feels we don't have any schools that we cannot feel the culture. Cheri Stevenson mentioned that many of our schools are doing cone-site activities. Superintendent Richard Holmes mentioned that some of the attendance issues are demographic with students feeling they need to be at home helping. Cheri Stevenson said the number one factor is students feeling they have a trusted adult. Nate Esplin shared a graph showing our percent of consistent attendance with students missing less than 10-days a year. Our District is higher than the state trend for consistent attendance. Brad Christensen mentioned that we are a parent rights state and parents can excuse their student for almost anything. He said they are working with the parents who do not excuse their student. After 10 absences, they meet with the parent. After 10 more absences or trancies, they can involve the courts. Students can also be unenrolled for 10 absences in a row, but the schools still work to find out where they are. Heidi Gunn said if the student is excused it is then up to the teacher to make sure the student has the materials missed. Brad Christensen said the schools are getting good at having conversations with the parents on the benefit for students to be in school. Cheri Stevenson pointed out that we have good parents here and we are not having the same problem as other districts. Craig Hammer noted that even our alternative high school has an 85% attendance rate.

#### Summary:

- The district maintains exceptional attendance rates (94-95% average), significantly outperforming state and national averages, with chronic absenteeism well below the national rate of 26%.
- Factors influencing attendance include school culture, student engagement, and demographic challenges.
- Schools implement various strategies to improve attendance, including positive reinforcement programs, personalized communication with parents, and utilizing technology platforms for efficient attendance management and assignment sharing.
- For elementary schools, Diamond Valley and Riverside have the highest attendance rates, possibly correlated with their high ability programs
- Intermediate and middle school attendance trends are positive and increasing, even during typically difficult transition years
- Desert Hills High School shows remarkable attendance rates of 97-98%
- Some schools (Dixie, Hurricane, Pine View) showed slight decreases, but the differences are minimal (less than 1%). Overall, high school attendance remains strong despite challenges
- School culture and student engagement directly linked to attendance rates
- Demographic factors play a role in attendance patterns
- Positive school environments and relationships with trusted adults are crucial for maintaining high attendance
- Some schools are using reward systems like school store privileges, or business donated items for good attendance
- Some schools have parent conferences for students with both attendance issues and failing grades
- Utah is a parents' rights state, allowing parents to excuse absences for various reasons
- District policy focuses on unexcused absences (truancies)
- After 10 unexcused absences, a letter is sent and a mandatory school meeting is held
- After 20 unexcused absences, DCFS and Juvenile Justice may become involved
- Schools typically contact parents well before reaching the 10-absence threshold
- Students with 10 consecutive unexcused absences may be withdrawn

#### Enrollment Update – Nate Esplin

Nate Esplin shared the growth at Desert Canyons Elementary. They currently have 740 students. He shared a proposed plan to make a boundary change. He would start by initiating the boundary change in the October Board Meeting. He suggested having Desert Color students, approximately 50 students, move to Bloomington Elementary which would put their enrollment at 515. The students north of White Dome

Drive would be moved to Bloomington Hills and the new development north of White Dome Drive to Little Valley. He mentioned some of the developments coming in the area. Craig Hammer mentioned some of the flight vector areas where we cannot have a school. Nate Esplin shared the number of students in the White Dome neighborhoods. The board expressed concern with splitting up the White Dome neighborhood at this time. Nate Esplin reviewed the timeline.

**Summary:**

- Desert Canyons Elementary has reached 740 students, nearing capacity, necessitating immediate action to accommodate students for the next school year.
- Proposed boundary changes include moving students from Desert Color to Bloomington Elementary and potentially relocating 25-30 students from the White Dome area to Bloomington Hills Elementary, with concerns raised about dividing established neighborhoods.
- An additional 30 students from a new development area could potentially go to Little Valley Elementary or Bloomington Hills.
- There are concerns about dividing the White Dome neighborhood.
- There are plans for 3,000 homes in the area, with a road connecting to the existing developments.
- If a boundary change is initiated, the timeline would include:
  - Parent meeting at Desert Canyons Elementary in mid-October
  - Public comment in the November board meeting
  - Public hearing in the December meeting, with a potential vote on changes

**Review of Capital Projects List – Brent Bills**

Brent Bills reviewed the Capital Projects list. We need to get started on some of the projects and is just waiting for the Board to approve the list. He reviewed the work needed at the schools listed. There will be some adjustments and all of the projects will take several years to complete. Brent Bills said the plan is to start by paying from the Fund 10 account. Next year we would change the levy and move them to Fund 132. Rusty Taylor reviewed the MOU plans with Hurricane City. Brent Bills said the approval today is to approve the amount the items will still need to be approved as we go along. The Board wanted to make sure every cone-site is affected and that has happened.

**Summary:**

The meeting discussed several major construction and renovation projects across multiple schools in the district, including:

- Pine View High School: Fine Arts Wing and auditorium renovations
- Elementary school renovations: Washington, La Verkin, Bloomington, Panorama, Sunset, and Santa Clara
- Water Canyon pipeline and pond project
- Panorama and Pine View Middle School area development
- Snow Canyon High School parking lot improvements

**School Safety – Superintendent Richard Holmes**

Superintendent Richard Holmes mentioned the work with our guardians. He said that Utah Tech University wanted information on what we have done as they are considering something similar. Brad Christiansen reported on the guardians. We also have arranged for a couple of floater guardians. Superintendent Richard Holmes mentioned that we are moving forward with the vestibule at Desert Hills High School. Some of the schools will be a little more challenging with the layout of the school.

**Summary:**

- Highlighted the success of the guardian program:

- Recognized the ongoing work of guardians.
- Utah Tech University has shown interest in implementing a similar program.
- The district is willing to share their implementation process with other institutions.
- The district has "floater guardians" to cover when regular guardians are out of the building.
- They can bring guardians from other buildings or use district-level personnel to ensure coverage.
- Vestibule Construction
  - Priority given to constructing a security vestibule at Desert Hills High School.
  - Designs are completed for multiple high schools, including Snow Canyon High.
  - Dixie High School's layout presents challenges for vestibule construction.
  - Hurricane High School also faces challenges, potentially requiring two entry points.

## **PUBLIC HEARING FOR CAPITAL PROJECT APPROVAL**

**The Washington County Board of Education will hold a Public Hearing to receive input from the public with respect to the approval of Capital Projects. The Public Hearing will be held at 4:00 p.m. on September 22, 2025.**

No public comments were given.

## **BOARD ACTION ITEMS**

### **Capital Project Approval**

**Board Member Seegmiller presented a motion to approve the Capital Projects framework of the budget as presented. Board Member Wade seconded the motion that passed unanimously.**

### **LEA Specific License Items**

Brent Bills said the LEA licenses must be in Cactus by October 13<sup>th</sup> to get the state funding. Superintendent Richard Holmes reviewed the teachers listed for approval.

**Board Member Staheli presented a motion to approve the LEA Specific License items. Board Member Gunn seconded the motion that passed unanimously.**

**Board Member Hammer presented a motion to go into a closed session at 3:57 p.m. Board Member Cox seconded the motion that passed unanimously.**

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## **CLOSED SESSION**

### **Property and Personnel Items**

Personnel & School Safety items

**Board Member Cox presented a motion to go out of the closed session at 4:45 p.m. Board Member Seegmiller seconded the motion that passed unanimously.**

**Board Member Wade presented a motion to adjourn the meeting at 4:46 p.m. Board Member Hammer seconded the motion that passed unanimously.**

## **ADJOURNMENT**