

The League of Women Voters of Manatee County Education Issues Committee observes the **School Board of Manatee County** meetings for items of interest to citizens and to the League, and notes adherence, or lack of adherence, to good governance procedures and the Sunshine Law. The League also provides feedback to school board members.

Following are the major points from the **School Board Meeting on September 15, 2026**.

ITEMS OF INTEREST

The meeting was called to order at 5:30 by Chair Spray followed by Mr. Tatem reading the new Manatee School District's Purpose Statement. Mr. Frank Brunner, former Manatee School Board Member, gave the invocation.

The Southeast High School JROTC color guard presented the colors. The Pledge of Allegiance was led by Veterans Kristin Verlardi and Jayson Wilson, both at HOLA Elementary Charter School. They were accompanied by nine fourth and fifth grade students from the school.

Approval of the Agenda – Approved as amended 5-0

Student Celebrations – Ms. Jamie Carson, Director of Communications, introduced the celebrations.

Hispanic Heritage Month Celebration and Reading of the Proclamation

In celebration of Hispanic Heritage Month, Deb Estes, Director of ESOL, Migrant, and Dual Language Programs put the spotlight on the outstanding work taking place at Braden River Elementary (BRE). Thirty teachers support these students; ten of the teachers are visiting teachers from Spain who will spend three years with us. Five fifth graders from BRE were introduced noting they spoke in both Spanish and English. A video was shown of the BRE students in the Dual Language program singing the names of the twenty Spanish speaking countries. Ms. Spray read the proclamation in honor of Hispanic Heritage Month.

Celebrating a Summer of Champions –

Kaththea Johnson, Executive Director of Teaching and Learning, made a presentation about the accomplishments of students during the summer competitive season. Gabrielle Martinez Reyes of Lakewood Ranch High School, National Southern Region Vice-President and Florida FBLA President, explained the programs. She shared her

previous fear of speaking in front of even small groups, and now with skills gained through FBLA she speaks nationally. Students who placed statewide and nationally were introduced along with their respective principals and organization advisors. Two students at Nolan Middle School achieved fourth place at the HOSA State Conference. Competitors in the Technology Student Association State Conference were recognized. Eighteen students from Braden River Middle School participated bringing home a first in Robotics, second in Mechanical Engineering and fourth in Biotechnology. Braden River High School brought home a first place in Computer Aided Design. A Haile Middle School student was awarded fifth place in Dragster. King Middle School brought home a second in Digital Photography and third in Problem Solving. Mona Jain Middle School was awarded first place in Children's Stories and third place in Structural Engineering. Palm View K-8 was awarded a fourth place in Inventions and Innovations. A list of honorable mentions was displayed showing that Manatee County students accounted for 26 of the 77 top ten finishers among Florida Schools.

She concluded with the Manatee Technical College, Dr. Jodi Kirk, Director, recognizing the students and instructors who won national competitions at Skills USA.

Public Comments

KW reminded that this Friday we celebrate the birthday of the United States Air Force. He represented the Veterans of Foreign Wars who offers writing or oral contests to middle and high school students. He also represented the American Legion, describing a high school contest in January involving an 8-10-minute speech about what the Constitution means to them with a \$3,000 award for the winner.

Reports and Presentations

Visible Men's Academy (VMA) School Improvement Plan

Dr. Valerie Hyer, Coordinator of Charter Schools, introduced Principal Dr. Tami Van Overbeke Sterns, and the school's board chair, Melissa Dunlap to present the school's School Improvement Plan. Mr. Louis Parker, founder of VMA, was in attendance.

VMA received a school grade of "F" from the Florida DOE accountability system, and per Rule 6A-1.099827, must develop and submit a school improvement plan to the Sponsor (Manatee District Schools). The School Improvement Plan (SIP) must include: mission statement; academic data for the most recent three (3) years; student objectives; analysis of performance per subgroup; and a detailed plan for addressing each identified deficiency in student performance, including specific actions, person responsible, resources needed, and timeline. In addition, it must also include barriers to student success with a detailed plan for addressing each barrier.

Link to the presentation slides here: https://manateeschools.granicus.com/services/legistar/download/pdf/4339696/VMA_SDMC_School_Board_SIP_Presentation_v4.pdf

Ms. Spray asked how many students attend the school. The response was forty-seven (47). Ms. Felton recognized with that small enrollment two or three students can greatly affect the outcomes. Mr. Kennedy asked her about the principal's background. She was principal at Manatee Elementary and brought it from a D to a B for several years. She left to go to Pinellas County to open a school for autistic children and adults. She then came back to Manatee to lead VMA. Mr. Kennedy praised her for raising scores of schools she has worked with and recognized it is tough to come before the school board to speak about a school at this status. Dr. Stern said the school is teaching young boys, 62% of whom are homeless, to be upstanding citizens and leaders in their community. Their building is sharing the Just for Girls campus. Mr. Tatem commended Dr. Stern for starting from scratch when she was hired a year ago. If VMA is awarded two consecutive F's, the state can close the charter school.

Superintendent's Presentation of District Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) –

Mr. Jensen, Mr. Chapman, Ms. Sellers, and, Mr. Clark assisted with the presentation of Manatee Momentum KPIs for year one. Dr. Breslin said there would be updates throughout the year. She said her evaluation goals are tied to the end result of the KPIs. She said the presenters will speak to what is currently being done in each of the Priority Areas.

Priority Area1, Student Learning & Support, was shared by Mr. Jensen, Deputy Superintendent for Instructional Services. He stated he was pleased with the clear North Star stated in the Strategic Plan. The first benchmark – Present and Engaged Learners - relates to attendance and behavior. Schools with the lowest attendance are receiving extra support and then plan to scale across the district. Attention is on those who are chronically absent (missing 10% or 18 school days or more) as well as those who are chronically missing a portion of many days. There are data systems developed over the summer deployed through the FOCUS platform to gather those statistics. The second area of focus is out-of-school suspensions. Its aim is not to just suspend students, but to work with Multi-Tiered Support System for behavior to address the students' behavior that is causing the suspensions with positive systems of support. The next benchmark area focuses on Student Learning to elevate the district's overall performance. This includes highly effective instruction implemented in each classroom and working with school leaders to effectively coach their teachers. This would be followed by increasing student performance on learning gains. This is followed with increasing the percentage (to 72%) of schools earning an A or B. Schools are identifying students who are on goal and those who need additional attention. The next benchmark is focused on increasing the graduation rate and each student having career plans from middle school forward – preparing for careers and life. The district is committed to help students find their path and opportunities for enrichment. Each of the key metrics are bolstered by robust data collection, analysis, and sharing the results of the efforts.

Priority Area 2 – Employee Retention and Wellness focus on the district employees. Mr. Kevin Chapman, Associate Superintendent of Administration & Strategic Engagement, indicated that of this morning there only thirty (30) openings. The first Benchmark is focused on Employee Investment Assessment to create a Baseline and working toward a 2% increase in retention. Employees will be asked to fill out anonymous surveys to understand what employees say needs to be improved and then responding to them. When employees are leaving the school district, we need to get data as to why they are leaving and improve the exit survey. The whole focus of Priority 2 is recruitment and retention. It will take this year to generate the baseline data to move forward on strategies to improve retention and recruitment efforts.

Priority Area 3 – Family and Community Engagement involves many departments within the district. Mr. Chapman explained that this year will focus on gathering baseline data, as is being done for Priority 2. Numerous surveys are being created to generate this data. He shared the calendar for each survey and which group will be targeted. The district will use a new platform, “Thought Exchange,” used by numerous districts in the state and around the country. This platform will also house the responses for statistical analysis. Mr. Chapman said that by bringing the information generated by the variety of surveys back to the board, the board will have a vested commitment to the strategies to address the areas identified as needs. He outlined the time line for gathering the information.

Priority Area 4 – Financial Stewardship & Long-term Sustainability. – The Benchmark of Balanced Budget was presented by Ms. Rachel Sellers, Assistant Superintendent for Business and Finance. Financial Transparency and Public Understanding and Maintaining the Sales Tax Budget will begin with surveys to assess the public understanding following audit releases. The Benchmark, Energy and Utilities Management, was presented by Mr. Willie Clark, Assistant Superintendent for Operations. He discussed infrastructure and site management optimization by making financial and data-based decision making. If similar facilities show great differences in usage, it will show we need to do a deeper inspection to determine why and address it. His department will be back in December to give an update. They are going to update operational procedures to improve efficiency.

Throughout the presentations, Board Members asked questions and made statements demonstrating their commitment to achieving the benchmarks described as the district implements the full strategic plan.

Link to the presentation slides here: https://manateeschools.granicus.com/services/legistar/download/pdf/4365752/Manatee_Momentum_Board_Meeting_9.15.26_KPI.pdf

Consent Items – Nineteen (19) items were approved 5-0.

New Business (Non-Consent Items)

Approval of the 2026-2027 Classroom Teacher and Other Instructional Personnel Salary Increase Allocation Plan (No Financial Impact). Mr. Tatem verified this was not the

contract. Ms. Sellers indicated this is a required report to send to the state. There was confusion about when the teacher contract would be voted on, until Mr. Kennedy noted that the “Approval of the Ratification of the Manatee Education Association (MEA) Collective Bargaining Agreement for the School District of Manatee County (Multiple Funding Sources)” was number 19 of the Consent Items. Notation on the supporting agenda item description was that it was “added after publication.” Approved 5-0.

Naming Nomination of the Courts in Park Adjacent to Martha B. King Middle School – DePalmer-Bolletteri Courts. Discussion clarified that these courts are those within the corner park now under management of the Manatee County and not the courts adjacent to King Middle School. Ms. Spray and Mr. Kennedy both acknowledged the two local tennis legends for whom the courts are named. Approved 5-0.

New Business (No Superintendent Recommendation)

Acceptance of the Resignation of Audit Committee Member (No Financial Impact). Mr. Kennedy acknowledged the contributions of Audit Committee Member Ginger Mentzer. He indicated the membership is now at four. Approved 5-0.

Approval of FY2025-2026 – Payroll and Compensation Internal Audit Report and the FY 2025-2026 – Maintenance Work Orders Internal Audit Report (General Fund). Approved 5-0.

Approval of Travel to Tallahassee for Board Member Felton to Attend the FSBA Legislative Platform Meeting in Tallahassee Florida, Not to Exceed \$550.00 (General Fund). Ms. Felton said she would be there just overnight. Approved 5-0

Updates

Instructional: Mr. Jensen said Performance Measurement I (PM1) assessment is almost completed; results are going well. The state released school grade appeals and as a result there will not be an increase for next year. The criteria for state grades will continue to be 65% for an A for elementary and middle, and 70% for high school. High school students are touring the main and east campuses of MTC. Seeds for Success will be Saturday September 24 for teachers to support developing early literacy skills. The Soar In 4 Lab is celebrating its first anniversary reporting more than 16,000 children and families served in the first year. Oct. 15 is tentatively scheduled for elementary parent conferences. Elementary early release days to compensate for this will be September 25 and October 2. The middle School cross country meet took place last week. Middle school athletics will include track, tennis and golf. Homecoming season is already upon us. Fourteen of the district’s high school students were selected for Model Manatee, a new initiative in partnership with the Manatee County Commission.

Operations: Mr. Willie Clark gave a recruitment and hiring update. The next operations job fair will be held Oct. 15 at Wakeland from 9:00 a.m.- noon. A teacher and para virtual job fair is scheduled for Sept 24, 4:00-6:30 p.m. Employee Benefits Open

Enrollment will be from October 26 – November 4. Any changes will take effect on January 1, 2027. A Wellness App will go live on October 1 to provide a new platform to participate in health challenges and support healthy habits. Phase 2 on Veterans School is completed. Phase 3 will be completed around Thanksgiving. Food and Nutrition Services is celebrating Hispanic Heritage month by enjoying Hispanic inspired food items and brightly colored displays – today was Taco Tuesday.

Legal: Mr. Dye had no report.

Superintendent Remarks – Dr. Breslin continues round one site visits with a focus on high schools and instructional rigor. She will have visited every high school by next week. She emphasized it is an amazingly tough job to run a high school. Dr. Breslin acknowledged district-wide recognition of 9/11. At last week's high school games there were pre-game recognitions of first responders, one was a Brooklyn first responder who moved here. She is speaking to the Chamber to talk about what the future holds for students when they graduate in 2036. She thanked the Board for approving teacher salary increases. They are continuing to work on the other contracts. On the consent agenda she noted several important items supporting the strategic plan. September 19 is Usher Syndrome Awareness Day. This was brought to her attention by a parent whose child has this rare genetic condition. Dr. Breslin acknowledged today is Laura Cox's birthday and thanked her for being at the meeting.

Board Comments

Mr. Choate said he appreciated the KPIs being explained tonight as they were not included in the Strategic Plan that was originally presented. He looks forward to the progress toward the benchmarks.

Mr. Kennedy thanked both bargaining teams for coming to agreement so they could approve the contract tonight. He asked the teachers who voted "no" to give it some time. We are one of the first districts in our area to approve a contract and he thinks it will hold up well when compared to others. He believes it is a very competitive package in today's economy and compared to other districts, especially considering Florida's teacher salaries are the lowest in the country. He appreciated the Superintendent's remarks at the Marriott September 11 event. He said with all the deaths, it was incredible that 20 people survived the towers and that is a little-known miracle.

Ms. Felton said, "Happy Birthday, Laura. I could not do my job without you." Ms. Felton reported she has almost completed her school visits and she will finish the initial visits this year with 7 or 8 more to go. Visiting schools is one of her favorite things to do. She thanked the presentations on the KPIs and appreciates all of the hard work. She echoed what has been said about all the amazing students that were at the meeting today. The community turn out for the 9/11 events was uplifting. She said there is light out there and we just have to look for it sometimes.

Mr. Tatem encouraged students to take advantage of the veterans' opportunities to participate in the contests described during public comment. He also appreciated the contract negotiations. His last comment on safety was related to a football trip that was taken. Palmetto High School went to Key West and the delayed game caused them to return at 6:30 a.m. the next morning. He questioned whether there was a benefit to the students being exposed to a greater increase in late night time accidents. He said perhaps there should be a workshop to discuss this issue. He suggested there could be an overnight stay.

Ms. Spray said the Boys and Girls Club event for 9/11 was moving - tears and cheers. She would like the Board members to see the video on 9/11 shown at the Bayshore game. She said the contract was all about sustainability. She thanked the Board for getting through this meeting and the long presentations. There was an overflow attendance and she appreciated so many parents coming with their children.

Adjournment – 8:50 p.m.

GOOD GOVERNANCE

Board members were observed to show compassion and high expectations for Dr. Stern in talking about VMA and the students she is serving, as well as her efforts to improve the school.

Observers noted the Board showed in-depth interest in the Superintendent's KPIs by reinforcing the presenters' information, asking questions, and making suggestions. The observers are seeking specificity regarding actions to be taken to achieve the results desired.

Being consistent in enforcing time limits on public comments is good governance. The public comment in this meeting ran long and the speaker was not required to stop when the time was up.

Even though we know the proclamation for Hispanic History Month was approved in August, the proclamation should have been attached to this agenda item for the benefit of the public. Had it been available, our notes would have included a link for the community to access.