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School Board Meeting

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Agency: Akron Board of Education

Date: March 10, 2025

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Summary

- The Akron Public School (APS) district is facing a funding deficit. This was highlighted in the meeting with discussions of APS funding and potential drops in federal and state funding. Treasurer Stephen Thompson said APS will have to cut 29 positions this year.
- There is a teacher and staff shortage, especially in the [Early Learning Program](#) (ELP) and special needs classrooms. This Signal Akron [article](#) highlights the needs expressed through public comment by several teachers and parents.
- There was a lot of discussion around bullying and promoting a culture of belonging in schools. During the board meeting, it was mentioned at several different points:
 - A senior from Ellet CLC spoke about bullying among her peers.
 - There were references to the [news release](#) of a lawsuit regarding a student who had been bullied at an APS school.
 - An I PROMISE parent spoke about her daughter's experience of being bullied without action taken by the school.
 - During the president's report, Carla Jackson mentioned her concerns

regarding bullying in the school district.

- At several points during the meeting, a big communication disconnect happening between APS admin and staff was discussed. This includes decisions being made top-down as well as the experiences and frustrations of students and teachers trying to communicate with the administration.

Follow-Up Questions

- How will the district address budget and staffing concerns? Will they be able to retain staff? Will students begin to fall behind in the classroom? Will special needs students continue to be put aside at the federal, state and local levels?
- Why is there so much disconnect with communication at the board, administration, teacher, and student/family levels? Teachers said they are not learning of classrooms closing by supervisors, and Superintendent Michael Robinson said he had not heard about the problems in the preschools.
- Are schools not following through with consequences for bullying? Is every school in the same situation or do some have a better handle on addressing this behavior issue?

Notes

- The livestream of the meeting can be found [here](#).
- The agenda can be found on the [Akron Public Schools'](#) board documents [website](#). Go to the “meetings” tab and select the meeting date. The agenda and minutes can be found there.
- All [board members](#) were present:
 - Carla Jackson, president
 - Bruce Alexander, vice president
 - Diana Autry
 - Summer Hall
 - Rene Molenaur
 - Gregory Harrison
 - Barbara Sykes
- The [meeting started](#) at 5:30 p.m., led by Jackson with roll call and the Pledge of Allegiance. Superintendent Michael [Robinson](#) and CFO Stephen Thompson were also in attendance, along with several APS district staff. The seats were full, with at least 50 people in attendance. Several community members, parents and teachers were present with signs to protest the Early Learning Program issues with understaffing and the threat of classroom closures.
- Recognitions were presented by Chief of Staff Angela [Carter](#).

- G.O.A.T. award: Celebrating a commitment to cleanliness and head custodians. This month was Jennings CLC.
- Board member reflections ([7:35 into video](#))
 - A senior student school board member from Ellet CLC spoke on behalf of her peers, saying that not all feel a sense of belonging at school. Bullying remains a very significant issue that needs to be addressed, she said. Many students speak up but feel that nothing changes, and that affects student attendance. School must be a place where students feel supported and their voice is heard. She asked the board to strengthen anti-bullying policies and consequences, create a student advisory council to elevate student voices, and make attendance about belonging and addressing root causes rather than punishments.
 - Several board members spoke in support of her appeal and praised her confidence and presentation.
 - Hall, Harrison and Autry spoke about events they attended. Autry said she attended a community meeting on one of the four APS cornerstones on academic achievement and she was the only person in attendance. Molenaar also commented that the media coverage of the school board talks about division on the board but not the ways the board is working together and collaborating. She also said she recently realized emails from community members had gone to her spam folder.
- Public comment ([28:45 into video](#)): Six educators and five parents spoke to advocate for more support for the preschool programs and to keep the early learning classes open. One community member advocated for better communication and prayer in schools. One parent spoke about persistent bullying happening at [LPROMISE](#) School and said no actions are being taken to stop it.
 - The first speaker was an early childhood educator at Helen Arnold CLC. They had a deep concern for the integrity of the district's early learning program. While they support early learning, they said there is an unsafe level of staffing, children go too long in soiled diapers, and paraprofessionals are being pulled from other classrooms to help, leaving those classrooms understaffed. The program teachers often miss lunch and are burned out, they said.
 - Another early intervention specialist advocated for the youngest learners. The expansion of the early learning program could have been a step forward, but the rollout was rushed, they said. The speaker asked why the administration is opposed to collaboration when anyone raises concerns.
 - Another teacher with the ELP who had been at Essex for 10 years spoke. They complained about the lack of collaboration with stakeholders. There

is retaliation against dedicated employees who speak up and teacher's ideas are dismissed, they said. Experienced educators are walking away from APS. They feel they are being asked for blind loyalty. Do not dismiss the professional educators on the front line, they said.

- The next early learning educator had been at Case CLC for 10 years. They said the Case CLC early learning program had been outstanding. They found out at the last board meeting that their class was being closed next year. There is a lack of communication from the leadership down, they said. There are medically fragile students who need support, and often one adult is left to supervise. This is not sustainable, they said. The preschool program was expanded without collaboration and without resources needed to have a successful program.
 - Jackson apologized that she heard about her classroom closing from the last board meeting.
- An ELP staff member at Harris Jackson and Helen Arnold CLC spoke next. She said that the ELP classroom is unsafe. Teachers often go without a lunch break, without a planning period, and beyond their contracted hours. They are often left alone with no way to use the bathroom, she said. Teachers step up because they care about their students. It is unfair, unsustainable, and unacceptable, she said. The administration refuses to work with teachers to find a solution, and they are asking for action now, she said.
- A parent of a student of the ELP spoke about her son with high needs. He had an IEP and support was taken off his IEP, she said. Without accommodations, her son may not be able to continue at APS, she said. The possible closures of the ELP programs at Case and Essex will be harmful, and APS needs to hire and retain more paraprofessionals, she said.
- Harrison made a motion to suspend the rules to allow all those who signed up to speak to do so.. Motion carries 7-0
- A grandparent of a student at Case CLC spoke next. They thanked the board for pausing and considering the [diversity, equity and inclusion](#) policy to make sure APS gets it right rather than closing the policies and [programs](#). They also asked the district to continue to fight for the Fair Funding that is in the Statehouse right now. APS needs to be in the forefront to make sure funding is adequate, he said. He also asked the district to lift up the ELP students and teachers so the program succeeds.
- A parent whose children attended the ELP had concerns about the proposed closing of the Case and Essex programs. These programs

currently have eight classrooms and have the potential to eliminate 140 slots in the Firestone cluster, they said. Families want access to the ELP. Investments were made, but the top-down decision-making is not working, they said. Teachers need resources to succeed with changing tables and more teacher support. Paraprofessionals make less than a living wage, and the parent asked that seats not be slashed but, rather, better investment be made into the programs.

- A school psychologist with APS who had been with the ELP program for 17 years spoke next. The preschool was rated gold by the state in 2023-2024, but this critical foundation now has a lack of resources, poor planning, and poor implementation, they said. Currently, there is little to no gross motor curriculum play. Changes are not developmentally appropriate, and more collaboration was needed, they said. The APS [Blueprint for Excellence](#) of communication, relevance and trust was not used to implement the program, and they demanded real solutions.
- A mother of a child at the I PROMISE School said her child has been bullied for two years. The mother said she has spoken with several people but gotten no response. She is concerned about her daughter's safety at the school and the lack of communication. She said she was coming to the board today because she does not know where else to go. She was told if her daughter fights back, it is not considered bullying. She said her daughter needs help.
- At the end of the public comment period, Jackson said this is a lot and she doesn't want to give empty words but many issues addressed today are state-regulated things that need to be addressed. The board was told that because of lack of enrollment, they are closing classrooms. Jackson said this may not be accurate and it may be staffing issues.
- Superintendent's report ([1:16:29 into video](#))
 - Robinson began his report by recognizing Felicia Ferguson, who passed away on Feb. 25. Ferguson was a secretary with Akron Public Schools.
 - Sykes asked Robinson for a general overview of the ELP.
 - Robinson said this is the first he has heard about some of these issues. Sykes interrupted and said she was very concerned. Robinson said he knew about some of the issues at the beginning of the year. He will meet with the director to solve some of these problems. Sykes said this is a breakdown of communication.
 - Jackson also asked about the lack of breaks and lunches for teachers. Robinson said there are not enough paraprofessionals and APS is prioritizing hiring. There is a shortage of special education

teachers and paraprofessionals. Jackson said teachers don't know about classrooms being closed and the superintendent doesn't know about the problems in the classrooms. There is a lack of communication.

- Hall was concerned that teachers were told to just make it work. What level of supervisor told the teachers this?
 - Alexander said maybe there is a lack of communication. There is a chain of command and teachers can't skip it.
 - Autry wanted to clarify about the 140 seats that will be lost. There is a shortage of teachers and paraprofessionals around the country. Does APS not have the staff for certain needs or are the classrooms being closed because there is not a need? Robinson said if APS had the staff, the classes could stay open, however, the board voted to close Essex a couple of years ago, so that is another reason they are trying to close the school.
 - Robinson asked Supervisor of Early Learning Jennifer [Douglas](#) to speak. About 20 people in the audience stood up in support of her. She said they are not necessarily losing 140 students. Douglas said she would have to follow up with Robinson on these issues. Chief Academic Officer Tamea [Caver](#) also spoke and said that, this year, APS had 748 available seats for ELP students and 599 are currently attending. This may be where the 140 number came from. She believes APS can accommodate about 716 students next year.
 - Harrison said APS can't get paraprofessionals, and one public commenter mentioned APS is not paying a living wage to paraprofessionals. Robinson said this gets into contracts and he can't discuss that at the board meeting. It has to go through negotiations for teachers and paraprofessionals.
 - Hall said to Douglas that the audience's teachers and parents were standing up in support of her. The board knows that staffing is a continued concern. The board didn't realize so many things were not addressed.
 - Jackson said she is confident the ELP can move forward to do what's best for students.
- Treasurer's report ([1:54:23 into the video](#)):
 - Thompson: Ohio school funding remains a top priority for the state. There is a budget bill for Fair School Funding in the House of Representatives. Significant changes appear to be happening. This would affect fiscal year 2026.

- Thompson said the reduction of the Fair School Funding formula is dropping from 100% to 95% and the following year to 90%. Schools will be expected to find a larger share of funding from their local community.
 - The formula is based on data that is three years old. The formula tells us what it costs to educate a child including Pre-k and special needs. This creates disproportionate funding gaps.
 - Recent budget proposals reallocate funding from public schools to the voucher program.
 - Many schools are advocating and messaging to get all school districts behind fully funding schools. The State of Ohio is mandated by the state constitution to fairly fund schools. \$28 million is going to local private and alternate schools.
 - Thompson asked for everyone who could write, call, or ride along to advocate. APS needs to be loud and public.
 - Autry said the website fairschoolfundingplan.com had sample letters parents and teachers and community members can use to tell their story and advocate.
 - Robinson communicated by email with families and employees to write to local legislators.
 - Sykes said that even with factoring in the fair funding dollars, APS still needed to pass the levy in Akron. The state is using the passing of the levy as an excuse to drop funding. However, without the full funding from the state, APS will lose a lot of money.
- President's report ([2:08:40 into the meeting](#))
 - Jackson said she is deeply troubled by bullying in the district. She is fully committed to making meaningful changes. She mentioned the tragic incident of an [11-year-old student who took his own life](#). Bullying requires a Level 3 discipline, and she is continually hearing that bullying was reported and no action was taken.
 - Jackson also said she received an email from a paraprofessional saying students are hitting them in the classroom and there are high levels of staff call-offs and understaffing issues. Jackson said there are systems and policies in place and asked if they are not being acted on and enforced. She asked how the board can support teachers.
- Committee report ([2:15:13 into the meeting](#))
 - Legal, Contracts & Board Policy
 - Alexander spoke about the third and final reading of 5511.01 on school uniforms.

reclassification of a position and whether it was under the DEI or Labor and Relations Office. Robinson said this is a new position not in the budget but is being paid out of other positions that are not filled. Robinson said that schools have some flexibility so they don't lose good employees. Harrison said that APS is \$4.4 million over budget this year. The focus should be on filling the needs in the school buildings, not the main office. Carter said APS is actively trying to recruit for vacancies in the schools. Sykes asked if APS will still have a functioning Office for Equity and Robinson said that he is hoping to hear more but he will not dissolve anything until the board makes a decision.

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- Molenaar said that APS does not have the money as expenses have been greater than budgeted.
- Thompson handed out a document about the budget and then explained it. It is the budget approved this year, and in July the board will approve appropriations for a temporary budget. In September, the board will approve the budget. There is a deficit, so if something is added, something else will be taken away. Harrison said this is creating a new position when APS knows the district will have to make cuts.
- Molenaar asked three questions of Thompson: if APS is in deficit spending, if APS is planning to cut 29 staff members and if the addition of this position will mean APS will need to cut 30 staff members. Thompson answered yes to all the questions.
- Molenaar made a motion to move item 15.3 to the finance committee. Harrison seconded. Hall abstained from the vote. Autry, Alexander and Jackson voted no. Sykes, Molenaar and Harrison voted yes. With the votes at 3-3, the motion fails.
- Personnel recommendations: Robinson recommended the board accept items 10-20 and remove 15.3. Alexander made a motion. Autry seconded. Motion carries 7-0
- Board letters and consent agenda ([3:43:35 into the video](#))
 - The board members were confused at this point if they could discuss items 22-24 or if they were voting on the consent agenda and needed to pull the items out to discuss. After discussion, they were able to discuss items 22-24 and then vote on the consent agenda.
 - Board Letter: Legal, Contracts, & Board Policy
 - Harrison asked on 22.1 if the board had the money on hand to tear down and build Pfeiffer and Miller South. Director of Facilities Services Steven [Keenan](#) said the board has already voted on this.

Thompson said APS has \$55 million on hand and there are avenues APS is working on for the last \$8 million needed. Thompson said it could come from a levy, the general fund or other methods.

- Molenaar said that the board needed an ad hoc committee to address these issues for all of the three new buildings. Jackson said she would consider it.
 - Hall asked if the new buildings would be CLCs and Robinson said he did not know yet.
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- Resolution & Motions - consent agenda was approved 7-0 with Hall abstaining on 23.2 and 23.5.
 - Executive session ([4:23:47 into video](#))
 - The board went into executive session. Sykes voted no but the motion passed 6-1.
 - The board returned to the public meeting [5:21:05 into video](#). No action was taken after the executive session.
 - Board meeting adjourned at 10:47 p.m.