



### **Sarasota County School Board Report Card**

The League of Women Voters of Sarasota has established an Observer Corps to monitor the Sarasota County School Board meetings. The goal of the Observer Corps is to objectively evaluate meetings for ethical, legal and professional conduct on the part of the board and Chairperson with respect to the public comment session and the meeting agenda. This evaluation will be shared with the Board and the public following each meeting.

**Meeting Date: 10-21-25**

**A = Consistently    B= Frequently    C= Occasionally    D= Rarely    F= Not at All**

<b>Board follows and advances a written agenda.</b>	<b>A</b>
<b>Board limits citizens' comments only to opinions on topics that are in the Board's purview.</b>	<b>B-</b>
<b>Board Chair reminded commenters and the audience at the beginning of the meeting and any time it became necessary, to speak with courtesy and respect and refrain from personal attacks and abusive language.*</b> <i>*This is new wording to acknowledge court rulings that prohibit the Chair from stopping almost any comment and merely allow the Chair to request for decorum or pause a speaker in extreme cases.</i> The Chair started the meeting with the expectations for decorum and courtesy. However, she did not explicitly remind speakers to "refrain from personal attacks." One commenter used strong language to single out a board member for her remarks on special needs parents. The Chair warned her about inappropriate language but by that time the microphone had been cut off and most of the audience did not hear the language. Twice, when the audience began to murmur challengingly, the Chair reminded them to listen courteously to other speakers and herself.	<b>B</b>
<b>Board Chair treats speakers equitably.</b> Because of the over-flow crowd, commenters were standing outside and the Chair allowed them extra time to come to the microphone. While the Chair and two other board members appeared to be listening politely, they seldom made eye contact or even looked at the speakers who did not seem to share their views. The Chair did thank each speaker no matter what they say.	<b>B</b>
<b>Board adheres to Robert's Rules of Order.</b>	<b>A</b>

<p><b>The Board Chair runs an orderly meeting.</b></p> <p>The meeting was both chaotic and contentious. The chaos resulted from several factors:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The number of attendees was far more than anticipated and left community members frustrated and angry. Many of the people standing out in hot sun for two hours were elderly. Some left because they began to feel ill. No one made any effort to find a spare room where the overflow could wait. Again, as with the time change, it sent a message to the public that their input wasn't welcome and the Chair was indifferent to their difficulties.</li> <li>2. An Executive Session was scheduled this same evening, at a specified time. It had to be obvious to the Chair and to the entire board that due to the number of speakers, there was going to have to be a recess in order to have the Executive Session at the scheduled time. Before the meeting even began, every effort should have been made to change the time of the Executive Session. We understand that it had already been changed once (maybe twice) and we are not certain why it was illegal to change it again.</li> </ol> <p><b>The meeting was also particularly contentious.</b> Public comments often began with agenda items, but would shift to non-agenda items that were of great concern to the public, especially the board meeting time change, the number of people standing out in the hot sun waiting to get in, Schools of Hope, Wilkinson, Suncoast Polytech etc. Many Suncoast Poly students and their parents were at the meeting. The Chair challenged one speaker who started out addressing an agenda item but quickly veered into commenting on the scandal of a board member. However, there were at least ten similar occasions of commenters moving from agenda items relatively quickly to address other issues. Repeatedly hearing the same concerns may have made the public even angrier.</p> <p>The public was clearly irate when the Chair announced a recess for the previously scheduled Executive Session, delaying comments of many speakers. The Chair did not give a projected time for re-convening nor offer an apology to the many students and families who came from Sarasota Polytechnic High School who were affected by the change.</p> <p>Board members were also nasty to each other, further exacerbating the chaos and ill-will in the boardroom. The Chair should seek ways to promote constructive dialogue and manage conflict among board members.</p>	<p><b>F</b></p>
<p><b>Board delegates operational and educational decisions to the professional staff.</b></p> <p>The Chair and one board member did respond to the issue of standardizing excused absence policies at all schools. The Chair said although the district policies are set, interpretation has been different. She asked Superintendent Connor to address the issue. Discussion of and public comments related to the new policy on student journalism was an excellent example of the staff responding to an issue from a previous meeting. We appreciate the efforts of Pineview High School students and staff on their school publication, "The Torch."</p>	<p><b>A</b></p>

**Recap of key issues discussed at this meeting:**

There was an overflow crowd for this contentious and chaotic meeting. Many, including some of those signed up to speak, stood outside watching the meeting on their phones. 27 people spoke

to agenda items. 57 people spoke during general comments, 21 before the meeting recessed for the scheduled executive session and 36 after. Even more signed up to speak but had to leave due to the length of the meeting. Many families and students from Sarasota Polytechnic High School attended to advocate for keeping the school where it is, adjacent to Suncoast Technical College, despite the 10 a.m. meeting time,

The board approved three primary items: the motion to advertise a change to begin board meetings with an invocation; establishing a week in April for schools to celebrate the 250<sup>th</sup> birthday of the U.S.; and the re-naming of Booker High School's football field to Fred Gilmore Field.

A fourth issue that evolved was a challenge to the agreement between Sarasota County Schools and two apartment developments offering priority to school district employees who qualify for affordable housing. One concern was using the district for marketing, and another was a potential conflict of interest concerning the investment of a public official in one of the properties. The item was removed from the consent agenda for clarification and to be brought up at a future meeting.

Many spoke to the proposal to start meetings with an invocation. They called it a distraction at a time when the district is facing serious challenges. Others said it is a violation of the separation of church and state. Some felt complicated lottery system for selecting those to give the invocations requires district staff time needed for more important work. Some suggested a moment of silence would be as effective as an invocation, less divisive, and would not add to staff time. Those supporting the invocation said they favor bringing religion into public life.

The Board comments at the end of the meeting were argumentative, with the exception of those made by Liz Barker who noted that all the remarks students and parents made about Sarasota Poly were the best testimonials to the good things being done in public education.

Tom Edwards challenged his treatment at a prior meeting, saying Roberts Rules of Order were not followed with regard to allowing him to speak. He also asked for a clarification from Superintendent Connor on the district policy for creating and running school clubs. His concern stemmed from a school board member's husband promoting Team America Clubs. While not opposed to the clubs, he worried they should be student initiated, not pushed by adults. He spoke to his engagement with school board members around the state to create a parents' coalition to fight for public education in the face of threats like Schools of Hope. Mr. Connor confirmed that clubs at district schools needed to be student-initiated.

Karen Rose spoke to the remarkable turn-out of Sarasota Polytechnic students and parents, but also suggested toning down reactions to Schools of Hope. She said it does not represent a crisis but needs to be addressed by staying focused on instruction and monitoring student progress. She criticized board members whom she said seem to be attacking other board members for what they do themselves.

Bridget Ziegler spoke of Sarasota Poly as a special school, one she would consider sending her children to but did not take a position on its re-locations. She offered her thoughts on why students are leaving to attend charter schools, contending that culture is the number one issue and that schools need more traditional values. She said public schools have a branding issue and "A trans person outside on a bull horn this meeting hurts our brand." She said her husband's work with Club America has nothing to do with her and Mr. Edwards is in error. She said there is an issue of cyberbullying around Club America and she wants the district to investigate that. She then said she personally believes in Club America positions. She also defended the 10 a.m. meeting times.

Robyn Marinelli spoke assertively about audience comments that suggested three board

members don't do anything with regard to threats to public education like Schools of Hope, and only two do. She offered they were all blindsided by the Schools of Hope notice and she has personally talked with all our legislators about the issue. Then she addressed Mr. Edwards directly about saying one thing and doing another and called him a perennial victim. She said he is not nice to the women on the board. She complimented Liz Barker for being positive even when they disagree.

#### **Additional Comments:**

Public comments from a large number of students were well-conceived and eloquently delivered. Students were able to learn how to be engaged in governmental action and how to advocate for what they held dear. Subsequent to the meeting, the Superintendent issued a statement that the proposed changes would not be considered any longer. The students learned a positive civics lesson from this activity. Unfortunately, they needed to take time away from other classwork since the time of the meeting was during the day.

Other students were present to thank the Board for recent changes to student Journalism policy (which they had helped author). Again, the lessons learned were very valuable but at the expense of needing to be released from classes to attend the morning meeting.

Many speakers addressed issues of trust with the Board. Several mistrusted in the board for their political agenda that had no place in public schools. Several commented on the board's fiduciary responsibilities and the need to include loyalty to the organization—in this case public education. The overall tone of meetings is guarded and the board, as a public entity, should be concerned with the lack of public trust.

#### **Recommendations**

During this time when the district is dealing with unprecedented threats and challenges, it is recommended that the board offer more frequent opportunities for public input and dialogue. The community has demonstrated an informed willingness to assist the district and the board should be welcoming of that talent and support. That cannot happen without more frequent meeting opportunities. We would suggest the board resume the practice of having two meetings a month, have those meetings in the evening so that more people (especially students, parents and teachers) can attend, and looking for another venue that could accommodate at least two hundred people. We were told the current venue has 120 seats. At the meeting on October 21, every seat was taken and there were approximately 40 people standing. And additional 40 people were outside waiting to enter.