



School Board

August 31, 2021

**AN OPEN LETTER TO THE VIRGINIA BEACH SCHOOL BOARD FROM
MEMBER VICTORIA MANNING**

Reference 9/1/21 Special School Board Meeting

The Chair's stated purpose of the meeting: *“reviewing, making recommendations or taking actions regarding how the School Board conducts meetings, accepts public comments at certain meetings, prepares for meetings and handles decorum, order and safety or health mitigation protocols for meetings. The School Board reserves the right to address related matters that arise during the Special Meeting.”*

Due to an important family obligation, I will not be able to attend the special school board meeting called on 8/30/21 by the Chair. However, I am offering my input on the topics that may be discussed in the meeting.

I call on my colleagues to respect the people we serve. Encourage public participation and in-person access to our meetings. Rather than starting our agendas and meetings with two pages of rules for the public, perhaps we should begin the agenda/meeting with appreciation of the sacrifices of families and students, as well as the hard work of our teachers. Acknowledge that people are upset and want to be heard. These children who are impacted by the decisions we make are not ours. They do not belong to the government. They belong to loving and caring parents who know what is best for their children and the community deserves to bring their passionate voices to our meetings.

My specific input:

- 1. Public meetings should be open to the public:** The Board should be able to offer seating for a minimum of 50 people. Students in classrooms will be 3ft (or less in some cases) yet in our last Board meeting the seating arrangements were more than 6ft apart and only allowed for approximately 8 people. City Council does not have mitigations or social distancing requirements in place and they have been welcoming the public. If City Council can do it, then we can also.
- 2. Time limits on public speakers:** Suggestions have been made by some Board members to reduce the amount of time the public has to address the Board (their elected representatives). Just a few years ago when we voted to increase the time limit from 3 to 4 minutes, it was overwhelmingly supported. One of the reasons mentioned was that the public could only speak once for all items (both agenda and non-agenda). Speakers at city council meetings have an opportunity to speak multiple times during the same meeting and could easily have 15 minutes or more to speak at each meeting. We have had more speakers than we typically have had in the past due to the public feeling unheard regarding decisions being made



by the Board. People are upset about decisions made by this Board and they have the right to speak. As a reminder, by-law 1-30 does not permit changes to by-laws unless it is first presented as “information” at one meeting and then voted on at the following meeting. Therefore, no action should be taken on by-law changes at this special meeting.

3. Respect the public and one another: Practice what you preach. If the Chair and Vice-Chair want to shut citizens down for harsh speech and being off agenda then they should consider doing the same when Board members do it. The law protects a citizen’s rights to disagree, be angry and to offer harsh speech to their elected officials. School Board leadership never sent “warning letters” to members of the public when harsh speech was levied at me, it is only done when it is pointed at members of the majority. I believe the Board is violating the First Amendment by censoring speech based on content and I ask for that to end immediately. The members of the public who have come to speak have been peaceful and have attended our meetings out of passion and true concern for the children of the City of Virginia Beach Public Schools. Still members of this Board have tried to paint these parents, grandparents, Pastors, community leaders, etc as a “violent mob” and that false narrative needs to end. When the NEA grim reaper was walking through the parking lot of our administration building scaring people and angry protestors lined the parking lot blowing their horns they were hailed as heroes. The double standard being applied needs to end.

4. “Warning letters” to the public: These letters sent out by the Board Chair recently were not authorized by the Board. Additionally, at least one of the letters was not factual and quoted statements made by the recipient that were absolutely false. Under no circumstance do I support “warning letters” being sent to members of the public. If someone violates a law, then follow the proper procedures to address those issues. The Chair did not send warning letters to other Board members when they acted inappropriately in meetings and the citizens of this great City certainly should not be “reprimanded” by their elected representatives.

5. Following proper meeting procedures and advanced preparation: School Board leadership should be well versed in the Board By-laws and Roberts Rules of Order. The Board chair often has to refer to the school board attorney on meeting procedures which takes valuable time. The Board and Public should also be provided with supporting agenda documents well in advance of the meeting in order to have time to prepare. Often, we have not seen any of the information being presented to us until the meeting begins. Being able to review and prepare in advance saves valuable time during the meeting

Sincerely,

Victoria Manning

School Board At-Large, City of Virginia Beach