

**MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE  
BOARD OF EDUCATION, ZION-BENTON TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL  
DISTRICT 126, LAKE COUNTY, ILLINOIS  
TUESDAY, MAY 20, 2025 – 6:00 pm.  
ZION-BENTON TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL  
BOARD OF EDUCATION BOARD ROOM**

The Board of Education of Zion-Benton Township High School District 126, Lake County, Illinois, met in Regular Session in the ZBTHS Board of Education Board Room, One Z-B Way, 3901 W. 21<sup>st</sup> Street, Zion, Illinois, commencing at 6:01 p.m.

Board President Nordstrom presided.

**ROLL CALL**

Members present: President Nordstrom, Vice-President Champine, Secretary Benitez, Member Stephen, Member Cook, and Member Fortenberry.

Absent: Member Idleburg

**PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE**

**STAFF, STUDENT, AND COMMUNITY CELEBRATION**

Principals Bonnie Felske of Zion-Benton Township High School and Kevin Wiland of Zion-Benton East led a heartfelt celebration of staff, student, and community accomplishments through the ZB Pride Awards.

Principal Felske opened the celebration by reflecting on her first year and the significant strides made in increasing student involvement and school pride. She highlighted the leadership of the eight senior class officers, three of whom were present at the meeting, for their initiative and impact on student life throughout the year. Felske expressed appreciation for the collaboration between students and the Student Services team, particularly in advancing postsecondary initiatives tied to Goal 721. She also recognized the outstanding contributions of support staff, noting the powerful development of the College & Career Center as a hub for student success.

**Students Recognized:** Senior Class Officers:

- Sidney Carlson
- Moira Cook
- Angelina Diaz
- Janalise Jimenez
- Alyssa Rodrigo
- Avery Shogren
- Mackenzie Wacyk

- Sydney Wright

**Staff Recognized:** College and Career Center:

- Blythe Anthony
- Ana Peterson
- Allison Zameck

Executive Director of Student and Specialized Services, Mr. Jake Carlson, echoed these sentiments, crediting the innovation and leadership of the counseling staff and students in driving many of the initiatives forward. Together, their work has modeled excellence and has become a model that other districts now seek to replicate.

Principal Wiland continued the celebration by honoring Deb Biar, ZBE's librarian, for her exceptional work integrating technology, creating engaging communications, and producing visual media that highlights student success and important school information. Wiland praised her initiative, creativity, and dedication to supporting both students and staff.

The student spotlight was on recent graduate Vishwa Patel, who was honored for her academic excellence, perfect attendance, leadership in NJROTC, and her heartfelt commencement speech that centered on gratitude for those who supported her journey. Vishwa, who was accepted to the University of Illinois' College of Engineering with a full scholarship, was recognized as an exemplary student whose humility and drive reflect the values of the district.

Superintendent Dr. Jesse Rodriguez added his personal praise, recalling how Vishwa's words during her graduation speech resonated deeply, particularly her aspiration to work as hard as her mother, a sentiment that moved and inspired the entire room.

The evening concluded with group photos, warm congratulations, and shared pride in the achievements of staff and students who represent the best of District 126.

Included and made part of these minutes:

**EXHIBIT "2A,"** March 2025 ZB P.R.I.D.E.

## **COMMUNICATIONS FROM STAFF, GUESTS, AND DISTRICT RESIDENTS**

Board President Nordstrom emphasized District 126's commitment to providing an equitable and respectful learning environment, free from bullying, harassment, racism, sexism, and hate speech. He called for community collaboration to foster a positive atmosphere. He then moved on to the public comment section, inviting staff, guests, and district residents to address the Board. Nordstrom reminded

everyone to sign in and noted that speakers would be limited to three minutes, with a warning given when time was about to expire.

Ruth Davis raised several questions and concerns addressed to the Board of Education. She began by asking whether District 126 intends to apply for the CEJA grant this fiscal year, noting that, based on information shared during a recent zoning property tax meeting, significant taxpayer relief would only be realized if all area school districts, including District 126, apply for the grant.

Ms. Davis also questioned aspects of the proposed organizational chart included in the board packet. Specifically, she asked why school principals are shown reporting to the Chief School Business Official when, per Board Policy, they are primarily responsible for instructional improvement and should therefore report to the Chief Academic Officer. She also raised concerns about the Executive Director of Athletics reporting to the Chief Human Resources Officer, questioning the relevance of HR in managing athletics. Furthermore, she expressed confusion about executive directors reporting to both the Superintendent and Chief Officers, and asked for clarity on who would be conducting their evaluations. Citing Board Policies, she emphasized that the Superintendent or designee is responsible for administrator evaluations and noted that one of the chief officers, according to the Illinois State website, may not hold the proper licensure to perform evaluations.

Ms. Davis also referenced an agenda item regarding the approval of an amendment to the Superintendent's contract. She stated that after reviewing the 2025 board meeting minutes, it does not appear that a formal evaluation of the Superintendent was conducted, as required by Board Policy. She urged the board to follow its own policy, which outlines that the Superintendent should be evaluated annually in a session involving all board members, including a discussion of strengths and areas for improvement.

Finally, Ms. Davis reiterated a previous request that questions posed during public comment be posted publicly on the district's website along with responses, rather than responses being shared only with the individual who made the inquiry. She concluded by thanking the board.

Larry Stephens addressed the Board of Education to offer his congratulations to both the newly elected and re-elected board members. He noted that he had missed the previous couple of meetings due to spending time in Florida but wanted to return to express his support and encouragement. Acknowledging the challenges of serving on the board, he commended the members for their commitment to the role and encouraged them to continue doing good work. In closing, Mr. Stephens also shared well wishes on behalf of his friend Roger

Whitmore, who was unable to attend but wanted to extend his congratulations to the board as well.

## **ORGANIZATION OF BOARD COMMITTEES**

President Nordstrom provided an update on the organization of board committees. He shared that the proposed committee assignments were included in the board packet and noted that he was largely able to accommodate board members' preferences. However, in a few cases, there were more interested members than available spots on certain committees. In those instances, President Nordstrom reminded the board that all members are welcome to attend any committee meetings as members of the public to stay informed and engaged. He also mentioned that the formal calendar and related action item would be addressed later in the meeting. He concluded by expressing appreciation for the time and effort board members dedicate to their committee work.

## **CONSENT**

A motion was made by Member Stephen, seconded by Vice-President Champine, to accept the Consent Agenda. A roll call vote of members approved the motion, present voting 6-0. Included in the Consent Agenda are the following:

- Minutes from Prior Meeting - Regular Board of Education Meeting - April 2025, Exhibit 5A
- Board Activity Report- April 2025, Exhibit 5B
- Bills Paid- 2nd Half April, 1st Half of May 2025, Exhibit 5C
- Bills Payable- May 2025, Exhibit 5D
- Revenue and Expenditure Summary- April 2025, Exhibit 5E
- Treasurer's Report-February 202, Exhibit 5F
- Contractor Payout Request, Exhibit 5G
- Roofing Restoration Project, Exhibit 5H
- Medical Dental/Vision Renewal Rates for FY26, Exhibit 5I
- Property, Liability, and Workman's Compensation Insurance Renewal Rate, Exhibit 5J
- Baseball Field Repair and Restoration, Exhibit 5K
- Annual Electronic Device Disposal Approval, Exhibit 5L

## **SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT**

Dr. Jesse Rodriguez delivered his superintendent's report reflecting on an incredibly full but celebratory close to the school year. He began by

acknowledging the whirlwind of student events, activities, and achievements that filled his calendar—some even prompting the cancellation of travel plans—but emphasized that the joy, pride, and momentum far outweighed the exhaustion. Reaffirming his commitment to educational excellence through sustained and focused efforts, Dr. Rodriguez shared that the district's ongoing vision is rooted in empowerment, equity, and achievement for all students.

His report opened with a tribute to the Class of 2025, featuring a video montage showcasing graduation and student life. He praised the positive impact of district investments in instructional leadership and technology, and he highlighted the strength of community support, particularly at events like the Community Scholarship Awards and Rotary recognition programs. Throughout his report, Dr. Rodriguez emphasized the importance of lifting student voice, highlighting accomplishments such as the growth of the Seal of Biliteracy program, National Honor Society induction, and SkillsUSA participation, where over 145 students competed and one was named Student of the Year.

Dr. Rodriguez celebrated the success of *Goal 721*, the district's signature college and career readiness initiative, and commended the work of the Office of Student Services and school counselors in guiding students through their postsecondary pathways. He recognized engaging, real-world learning opportunities, including field visits by Sports and Entertainment Marketing students, the Business INCubator Pitch Night, and the Transition Program's proposal for a student-led coffee cart—all examples of how the district supports authentic learning experiences for every student.

He continued by spotlighting the creative and inclusive spirit of the district. Specialized programs like the Transition Program and English Learner services were applauded, particularly the ZB Zinnias project, which blossomed from greenhouse to garden with student-led enthusiasm. The publication of 41 student-written pieces in *Young Writers* further exemplified academic excellence. Dr. Rodriguez also celebrated the arts, pointing to the success of *Shrek the Musical*, Jazz Night, and an ever-growing music program strengthened by the board's investment in additional staff. Events like Senior Movie Night and Prom were noted as joyful, safe experiences that build community.

Community engagement and service were woven throughout the report. Students participated in the Climate & Culture Beach Cleanup, mentored 8th graders at Beach Park Middle School, and volunteered through clubs like Interact and sports teams at organizations such as Feed My Starving Children. He recognized the leadership of staff members like Mr. Warren Regnier and the success of inclusive athletic programs such as Special Olympics, girls' track, soccer, and national-level wrestling.

Anecdotes such as the success of "Puppies with the Principal"—a lighthearted and well-received staff event organized by Principal Felske, her secretary, and Chief HR Officer Cynthia Moreno—illustrated the district's commitment to community, morale, and joy in the workplace. Dr. Rodriguez acknowledged staff

excellence at the Educator of the Year celebration and commended Dr. Diallo Brown for publishing an article on awareness of autism. He concluded by noting his recent honors at regional and state conferences, including being named a Superintendent of Distinction—an achievement he described as a collective honor shared with the District 126 community and Lake County leadership peers. Dr. Rodriguez emphasized that the district's success is no accident—it is the result of vision, consistency, and intentional collaboration.

A short video tribute to the Class of 2025 followed his remarks. Dr. Rodriguez concluded his report with heartfelt gratitude and reflection, stating that it had been an amazing year filled with memorable achievements. He highlighted the district's end-of-year celebrations, noting the impressive engagement from both in-person and virtual audiences. Over 3,000 people participated or tuned in to the senior celebration, including more than 1,400 viewers online—evidence of a deeply connected and supportive community. He thanked the Board of Education for their strong governance and high expectations, the administration for carrying that vision forward, and teachers and students for their dedication and passion. Dr. Rodriguez reaffirmed his belief that Zion-Benton will continue to grow into the best school district anywhere.

He ended his report expressing appreciation for a year defined by excellence, collaboration, and joyful moments. As the district sends off the Class of 2025 and reflects on the accomplishments of the year, Dr. Rodriguez encouraged everyone to hold onto the memories made, to remain focused on progress, and to continue striving for greatness in the years ahead.

## **REPORTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **Principal's Report**

President Nordstrom began by noting that principal reports were included in the meeting packets and would not be presented verbally at this time, as the board is alternating report presentations every other month. Following this, Principal Felske expressed sincere appreciation on behalf of the staff for the board's recognition efforts throughout the year. She shared that the staff truly valued the appreciation events, which received many positive comments and helped boost morale by bringing smiles and positivity to the school community. President Nordstrom also acknowledged Mr. Carlson's optimistic prediction about the graduation day weather, which proved accurate as the sun appeared just in time for the ceremony, adding a warm and uplifting close to the discussion.

Included and made part of these minutes:

**EXHIBITS "7A" and "7B", ZBTHS & ZB East Principal Reports**

## **BOARD COMMITTEE REPORTS**

## **Business/Bid/Finance Committee**

President Nordstrom addressed the board committee reports, explaining that all items from the Business and Finance Committee were included on the current meeting's agenda. He noted there was no difference between the committee agenda and the board agenda for the month, so he did not read the items again. Nordstrom encouraged board members to review the Business and Finance Committee agenda online and invited any questions related to that meeting.

## **NEW BUSINESS**

### **A. Approval of Organizational Chart**

Dr. Rodriguez presented the proposed approval of the updated organizational chart, emphasizing that while many districts do not formally approve such charts, this process reflects the district's commitment to transparency. He explained that the changes were minor but significant, highlighting the establishment of three chief roles overseeing human resources, finance, and academics—positions he had aimed to implement the previous year but was now ready to move forward with. Dr. Rodriguez described how this structure would streamline operations by grouping administrators into focused teams that could handle deeper projects more efficiently, while still maintaining direct evaluation and oversight by the superintendent. He noted the inclusion of roles such as Chief Academic Officer and Executive Director of Community Outreach and Student Success, clarifying that these were title changes rather than new positions. Additionally, the chart anticipated potential future shifts, such as reclassifying assistant directors of safety from bargaining unit members to administrative roles, with minimal cost impact but improved operational effectiveness.

Board members engaged with Dr. Rodriguez to better understand how this new structure would improve efficiency. Member Fortenberry asked for an example of how consolidating oversight under three chiefs would enhance daily operations compared to the previous model where all administrators reported directly to the superintendent. Dr. Rodriguez responded that while all administrators still report directly to him and he conducts their evaluations, the chiefs and executive directors can now collaborate more closely and provide more immediate support and feedback, allowing for quicker decision-making and better leadership capacity.

President Nordstrom added that the organizational chart's solid lines represent direct reporting and evaluation by the superintendent, while the dotted lines indicate the chiefs' role in day-to-day consultation and operational support. This

layered approach was intended to provide principals and directors with accessible resources without delaying communication or action.

Member Fortenberry asked if the board could review the effectiveness of this new model after one year, Dr. Rodriguez welcomed the suggestion and expressed confidence that it would work well, noting he would report back if adjustments were necessary. He emphasized that this approach was based on his previous experience in larger districts and that now was the right time to implement it to ensure effective and efficient district operations. The discussion concluded with general agreement and anticipation of positive outcomes from the updated organizational structure.

A motion was made by Vice-President Champine, seconded by Member Stephen, that District 126 Board of Education accepts the Superintendent's recommendation to approve the Organization Chart pending legal review. A roll call vote of members approved the motion present voting 6-0.

**EXHIBIT "9A"**, Organizational Chart BOE May and Revision to District Org Chart May 2025

## **B. Board and Committee Calendars and Assignments**

Dr. Rodriguez presented the proposed board and committee calendar for the upcoming year, which had been shared in draft form the previous month. He highlighted that the calendar includes not only regular board meetings but also joint meetings with other school districts, ensuring a comprehensive schedule is set in advance.

President Nordstrom added that committee assignments would be finalized and posted on the district website following the meeting, making it easier for board members and the public to access this information. The primary focus was to confirm understanding of the committee dates and times before the calendar is formally adopted. Dr. Rodriguez praised the board's consistency over the past three years, noting how rare meeting cancellations have been and how early scheduling has contributed to effective and efficient governance throughout the year.

A motion was made by Vice-President Champine, seconded by Member Stephen, that District 126 Board of Education accepts the Superintendent's recommendation to approve the Board and Committee Calendars and Assignments as presented. A roll call vote of members approved the motion present voting 6-0.

**EXHIBIT "9B"**, FY26 BOE Calendar 2nd Draft Proposed - Google Docs

## **C. Approval of Vision 2030: The District 126 New 5-Year Strategic Plan**



Dr. Rodriguez introduced the final version of the District 126 Vision 2030 Strategic Plan, a comprehensive roadmap developed after months of collaborative discussion that builds upon the district's progress under its previous plan. Emphasizing leadership, learning, service, and evidence-based practices as core values, Dr. Rodriguez highlighted key achievements, including improved graduation rates rising from 75% in 2019 to 88% in 2024, alongside attendance and staff retention rates consistently around or above 90%. These gains reflect past investments and policy decisions supported by the board and community, and the new plan aims to accelerate this momentum even further.

Dr. Pawelczyk reinforced the district's ongoing mission to prepare students for college, career, and life by maintaining a strong commitment to equity, empowerment, and excellence. He stressed the importance of inclusivity, ensuring the strategic plan addresses the needs of students, staff, and the broader community. Both leaders emphasized that leadership is a shared responsibility extending from the boardroom through administration to the classroom, describing District 126 as a true professional learning community. Despite initial skepticism, the district has demonstrated high expectations, transparency, and measurable progress, making the plan a collective effort shared by the board, administration, staff, students, and community with the goal of sustained growth and success.

The Vision 2030 plan aligns closely with the State of Illinois's broader Vision 2030 initiative, focusing on future-ready learning and shared accountability. The district has taken proactive organizational steps, including hiring a Technology Director to drive innovation, while maintaining strong financial stewardship through predictable funding despite recent fiscal challenges.

Central to the plan is a "3-3-3" framework comprising three pillars, three priorities, three commitments, and three key performance indicators aligned to each commitment. This structure creates clear accountability, with executive leadership directly responsible for implementation. Key priorities include ensuring 90% of students graduate fully prepared for college, career, or life, verified through internal benchmarks that go beyond simply earning a diploma. The plan also underscores the importance of a safe and supportive learning environment, featuring ongoing evaluations through drills, surveys, and security enhancements such as upgraded door access systems and surveillance.

Staff recruitment and retention remain a top priority, with a goal of retaining 90% of staff annually through strengthened engagement, professional development, and partnerships supported by the ongoing "Stay" campaign. Community engagement efforts are designed to deepen high-quality partnerships, expand meaningful events, and improve school rating designations within the Illinois School Performance framework. Financial stewardship includes maintaining a high level of fiscal responsibility, executing a 10-year facilities master plan, and establishing a foundation to generate alternative funding to support students and staff.

Dr. Rodriguez noted that the strategic plan is a living document, adaptable based on lessons learned from both successes and challenges, with a continuous commitment to refining efforts to improve outcomes. Shared accountability extends to intentional outreach involving families, local governments, foundational districts, and private partners, fostering mutually beneficial collaborations that enhance student readiness. Additional resources have been allocated for community engagement and coordinated communications across school boards, reflecting prior feedback. A clear budgeting process aligned with strategic priorities will ensure resources support the plan's goals.

Long-term financial planning is reflected in a five-year financial plan and a decade-spanning facilities master plan that supports educational objectives. While some funding uncertainties remain, the district is committed to sound fiscal management, avoiding structural deficits, pursuing tax relief, and engaging in advocacy. Dr. Rodriguez expressed confidence in the district's ability to navigate financial challenges while prioritizing student success and maintaining commitments to staff and the community.

Ultimately, the District 126 Vision 2030 Strategic Plan serves as a forward-looking blueprint designed to elevate student achievement, enrich learning environments, and strengthen community partnerships. Grounded in the pillars of Future-Focused Learning, Shared Accountability, and Predictable Funding, the plan outlines strategic priorities that ensure every student graduates ready to thrive in college, career, and life through rigorous academics, inclusive practices, and targeted supports. Key initiatives focus on advancing academic systems, integrating technology to accelerate readiness, expanding student support frameworks, and fostering a culture of professional growth and belonging among staff. Community and family engagement remain central, with ongoing efforts to cultivate meaningful partnerships and deepen collaboration with foundational districts. Operational priorities include enhancing crisis preparedness, aligning financial planning with educational goals, and modernizing facilities to create welcoming, future-ready spaces.

Progress toward these goals will be measured through clear performance indicators such as graduation rates, college and career readiness, staff retention, school climate, and fiscal responsibility. An interactive dashboard will support transparency and continuous improvement, allowing all stakeholders to monitor outcomes in real time. In all, Vision 2030 embodies District 126's commitment to innovation, equity, and excellence, ensuring every learner has the opportunity to succeed and thrive. President Nordstrom expressed his appreciation for the thorough and inclusive planning process.

A motion was made by Secretary Benitez, seconded by Member Stephen, that the Board of Education of Zion-Benton Township High School District 126 accepts the Superintendent's recommendation to approve Vision 2030: The District 126 New 5-Year Strategic Plan. A roll call vote of members approved the motion present voting 6-0.

**EXHIBIT 9C"**, May 2025 Vision 2030: The District 126 New 5-Year Strategic Plan and May 2025 Vision 2030: The District 126 New 5-Year Strategic Plan

**D. Approval of FY26 Proposed Salary Ranges for Administrative Positions**

Ms. Moreno presented the proposed salary ranges for administrative and management positions for Fiscal Year 2026, recommending board approval. She noted that the proposal includes two new positions—Assistant Director of Safety and Assistant Director of Athletics—both of which reflect organizational changes previously outlined by Dr. Rodriguez in the updated FY26 organizational chart. These additions align with the recently negotiated memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the union and the Board of Education, which will be further discussed in closed session. Ms. Moreno emphasized that the proposed salary ranges are informed by current market trends and are designed to maintain internal equity, supporting the district's efforts to continue attracting and retaining top talent. The submitted document highlights the new positions and their corresponding salary ranges for the board's review.

A motion was made by Secretary Benitez, seconded by Vice-President Champine, that the Board of Education of Zion-Benton Township High School District 126 accepts the Superintendent's recommendation to approve the addition of two new positions to the administrative and union exempt salary ranges effective FY26. A roll call vote of members approved the motion present voting 6-0.

**EXHIBIT "9D"**, FY26 Union Exempt Raises - Google Sheets and FY26 Salary Ranges for Administrative Positions

**OTHER BUSINESS**

**A. School Data: Discipline Reports**

The board received a comprehensive update on student discipline trends across both Zion-Benton Township High School (ZBTHS) and Zion-Benton East (ZBE) for the 2024–2025 academic year, with Principal Bonnie Felske and Principal Wiland presenting school-specific data and insights. Their presentations reflected a shared commitment to consistency, student support, and the view that discipline is not punishment but a tool for growth.

At ZBTHS, Principal Bonnie Felske highlighted a districtwide decrease in disciplinary referrals, particularly in the second half of the year. Using Skyward's 91 behavior codes to track incidents ranging from fights to vaping and classroom disruptions, the district recorded 410 fewer referrals compared to the previous year. Fights declined each quarter, and classroom disruptions dropped significantly—from 1,294 to 969 incidents.

Board Member Kathy Champine asked Felske what she believed had most contributed to these positive trends. Felske responded by emphasizing the importance of daily consistency, administrator visibility, and a firm yet supportive adherence to the school's handbook. While she values clear leadership and a structured vision, she stressed that the progress was a team effort—an outcome of unified staff commitment and persistent follow-through on discipline systems. Jake Carlson commended her for restoring consistency and providing strong, steady leadership that has positively influenced both staff and students.

At ZBE, Principal Wiland echoed many of the same values while offering a distinct perspective shaped by the smaller school environment. He credited both his predecessor, Principal Felske, and Assistant Principal Isaacs for laying the groundwork, noting that the school's size enables more direct, immediate intervention. Wiland walked the board through quarterly data, identifying a 79% reduction in fights, a 42% drop in vaping incidents, and a 21% decrease in classroom issues. Overall violations fell by 42%, suspensions decreased by 27%, and total suspension days declined by 37%. However, he noted a sharp spike in electronic device violations in the first quarter, which he attributed to a staff-wide enforcement push. While total referrals rose slightly—from 597 to 618—Wiland explained that the overall severity of incidents decreased, signaling an improvement in school climate.

He also previewed a plan for a new personal electronic device policy to be implemented next year, which will include consistent storage procedures, stakeholder engagement, and communication efforts aimed at ensuring clarity and buy-in from all parties. Wiland repeatedly emphasized that discipline should be approached as an opportunity to teach and correct, not to punish, and praised his team for building a supportive environment through assemblies, climate events, and visible celebrations of student growth.

Board President Nordstrom commended both principals for their clarity and leadership, noting that the regular presentation of this kind of data had lapsed during the pandemic and leadership transitions. He expressed appreciation for the return of consistent reporting and highlighted how important these updates are for board oversight, especially in light of policy shifts such as the increased role of school resource officers and new cell phone regulations.

Superintendent Dr. Rodriguez closed the discussion by reaffirming the district's intention to continue quarterly updates. He emphasized that student discipline is nuanced and complex—fights are not always straightforward, and drug-related incidents vary widely in context and severity. Rodriguez pointed out the importance of detailed investigations and thoughtful, individualized responses. He announced the district's plans for a long-term, multi-year effort to revise and refine the student code of conduct. This initiative will aim to create a more clearly defined, restorative, and equitable discipline framework that better serves students, families, and staff.

## **B. Office of Safety Update (SRO Report)**

Executive Director of Safety and Security Arturo Hernandez presented an end-of-year update on the district's first full year of implementing a School Resource Officer (SRO) program. Introduced by Superintendent Dr. Rodriguez, who commended Hernandez for his leadership and consistency, the report offered a comprehensive look at the SRO's impact, evolution, and the district's goals for the future.

Hernandez began by acknowledging the collaborative efforts that brought the program to life, thanking the Board of Education, Superintendent, and the Zion Police Department for their shared vision and support. While the district had a limited history with an SRO decades ago, this year marked the first formal reintroduction of the role in recent memory. From the outset, the program aimed to establish a visible, trustworthy law enforcement presence that not only promotes safety and deters criminal activity, but also fosters positive relationships between students, staff, and police.

Central to the success of the program has been Officer Robles, the district's assigned SRO. Robles maintained a strong and consistent presence at both campuses through daily foot patrols, exterior checks, and participation in school events. More than a figure of authority, Robles has become a valued educator and mentor. He regularly visited classrooms to speak about law enforcement, legal rights, and drug prevention—including the use of Narcan—and introduced students to career paths in the military and public service. His bilingual skills proved especially valuable in de-escalating conflicts, interpreting for Spanish-speaking families, and supporting deans and staff during disciplinary interventions and emotionally charged situations.

Officer Robles also assisted in investigations involving theft, disorderly conduct, and property damage, collaborating with outside police departments on more serious matters such as missing persons cases. He issued citations for transportation-related infractions when necessary, but his overall approach prioritized prevention, mentorship, and building trust.

Feedback from the district's Safety Committee affirmed Robles's effectiveness, citing his high visibility in hallways and his approachable, student-focused demeanor. One area identified for improvement was increasing his presence at Zion-Benton East. Hernandez acknowledged this need and committed to working closely with Principal Weiland to develop a more balanced schedule that ensures visibility and support across both campuses.

Board members and district leaders echoed strong support for the SRO program. Secretary Benitez praised the positive community connections Robles has made, while Hernandez noted that both students and staff immediately notice when Robles is not present—evidence of the meaningful impact his presence has had. Hernandez expressed optimism for the program's future, with plans to expand

educational outreach and continue aligning the SRO's work with the district's mission of creating a safe and supportive learning environment.

Board Member Stephen asked for clarification on Officer Robles's schedule. Hernandez explained that Robles is assigned full-time to District 126 and begins each day at the Zion Police Department before reporting to the schools. While his primary location is the main campus—due to its larger student population and higher incident volume—there are clear plans to increase time at Zion-Benton East based on stakeholder feedback.

President Nordstrom reflected on the board's long-standing discussions about the benefits of having an SRO and expressed appreciation that, even in the first year, the program had exceeded expectations. He highlighted Robles's deep integration not only in security operations but also in classroom learning and community outreach, calling it a success story rooted in the right hire and strong leadership.

In closing, Hernandez credited the district's HR department for selecting the right person for the job. He emphasized that a successful SRO program depends entirely on the individual in the role—and Officer Robles has proven to be the ideal fit. Board members, including Stephen and Fortenberry, agreed, expressing shared gratitude for the program's progress and enthusiasm for its continued growth.

### **C. Capital Improvements Update**

Dr. Woell provided an update on the district's ongoing capital improvement projects, focusing primarily on the renovations underway at both school libraries. The libraries officially transitioned on May 1st, with demolition and construction work progressing during the second shift from 3:00 to 11:00 p.m. to avoid disrupting the school day. He shared recent photos illustrating significant progress, noting that most shelving and walls in the CTHS library have been removed, with scaffolding and steel beams temporarily supporting structural areas as permanent reinforcements are installed.

Despite some setbacks, including a recent accidental power outage caused by floor saw cutting, electricians have been actively addressing the electrical issues. The team used X-ray technology to locate all power supplies embedded in the flooring to prevent further disruptions. Dr. Woell praised the dedication and coordination of teachers and executive directors who have managed the complex logistics of packing, moving, and staging materials to keep the project on track.

He reported that all other spaces are expected to be fully turned over by May 27th, marking a key milestone in the renovations. Additionally, biweekly planning meetings continue, with a focus on preparing for the summer 2026 renovation phase, which will target the transportation building and parking lot areas. The team is also ensuring that the current 2025 projects stay on schedule and that no

critical details are overlooked. Dr. Woell concluded by expressing excitement about the steady progress.

Included and made part of these minutes:

**EXHIBIT "10C"**, Images

#### **D. Tax Extension Report**

During the meeting, Dr. Woell presented the annual tax extension report, offering the Board of Education a historical overview of the district's tax rates and total extensions based on the equalized assessed valuation (EAV). He explained that while the tax rate has steadily decreased over the years, this change is directly tied to property values—when property values rise, the tax rate drops to maintain consistent revenue, and vice versa. This system helps ensure a stable stream of funds for the district.

Dr. Woell praised the district's ongoing efforts in tax abatements, noting that the bond and interest fund saw a reduction of about \$900,000 due to successful abatements. He also highlighted the property tax relief grants the district has received since 2020, emphasizing that the district has abated not only the grant amounts but also additional funds totaling roughly \$7.5 million. This approach reflects the board's longstanding commitment to minimizing taxpayer burden.

However, Dr. Woell expressed concern about the lack of clarity regarding the abatement process moving forward, particularly around the CEJA grant. He explained that without clear rules and timelines, it will be difficult to apply for and manage these grants effectively. President Nordstrom asked about the potential complications if the timing of rulemaking conflicts with the district's normal operations. Dr. Woell responded that he is awaiting definitive guidance on submission deadlines and procedures, and until then, the district may have to delay applying for the grant to avoid missteps.

President Nordstrom acknowledged the uncertainty and agreed, noting that many taxing bodies face similar financial challenges. Dr. Woell confirmed this, pointing out that municipalities like the City of Zion are also navigating the same issues, especially the strain of fronting abatement funds before reimbursement.

Member Fortenberry inquired about the recent increase in tax extensions, noting the district received an additional \$1.5 million this year. Dr. Woell explained that while this bump is positive, he expects tax revenues to stabilize or possibly decrease slightly in the next few years due to changes in funding mechanisms and property valuations. He cautioned against budgeting based on the higher current figures, a sentiment Member Fortenberry agreed with, emphasizing the need for fiscal prudence.

Dr. Woell also shared insights on the expected gradual decline in property tax relief grant amounts over the next decade—from about \$3.4 million initially down to approximately \$1 million—resulting in less abatement funding available to the

community. He described this as a complex issue that requires further analysis as the district enters the third year of this grant cycle.

As the discussion wrapped up, Dr. Woell reassured the board that despite funding unpredictability, the district remains on sound financial footing and will continue to manage projects carefully to maintain its credit rating.

Included and made part of these minutes:

**EXHIBIT "9D"**, 2024 EAV and Tax Rates.pdf and Tax Year 2024 Report

## **E. Community Education Sessions**

Dr. Woell introduced the upcoming Community Education sessions, a project initiated at the request of Dr. Rodriguez when Dr. Woell first joined the district. He explained that after tomorrow's executive cabinet meeting, they hope to finalize a date for the first session in June. These sessions will be planned in partnership with Mr. Hernandez, involving the safety and finance departments, aiming to provide presentations followed by Q&A opportunities for community members.

Dr. Woell outlined four initial topics for these sessions, designed to increase transparency and community understanding, especially around issues like property taxes.

Member Fortenberry expressed strong support for the initiative, emphasizing the importance of making these sessions accessible and well-attended. He cautioned against low turnout, and that if only a handful of people attend, the sessions wouldn't be very effective. Dr. Woell agreed, affirming efforts to promote the sessions widely. He also shared plans to record the presentations and potentially break them into shorter videos for posting on the district website, making the content easily accessible and convenient for community members to view anytime.

Member Stephen asked whether outreach would extend beyond the website, to which Dr. Woell responded affirmatively, noting they would use social media and other channels to spread the word.

Dr. Rodriguez added that the district's Office of Outreach, led by Dr. Pawelczyk, would coordinate promotion efforts along with staff dedicated to community and student engagement. He explained that the plan is to hold two simultaneous presentations—one with Dr. Woell and one with Mr. Hernandez—either separately or together, allowing for a comprehensive session covering both finance and safety topics. These events will be advertised across multiple media platforms to maximize community participation.

The board expressed enthusiasm about the initiative, with Dr. Woell noting his excitement for this new approach to community education.

Included and made part of these minutes:



## **EXHIBIT "9E",DRAFT of School Finance 101 March 2025**

### **CLOSED SESSION**

Secretary Benitez made a motion, seconded by Member Stephen, to adjourn to closed session at 8:31 pm for consideration of the appointment, employment, compensation, discipline, performance, or dismissal of specific employees and collective negotiating matters between the public body and its employees or their representatives, or deliberations concerning salary schedules for one or more classes of employees. (5 ILCS 120/2(c)(1,2). The motion was approved by a roll call vote of members voting 5-0. (Vice President Champine stepped out at this time).

### **RECONVENE IN OPEN SESSION**

A motion was made by Vice-President Champine, seconded by Member Stephen, to return to open session at 10:33pm. The Motion was approved by a roll call vote of members present voting 6-0

### **PERSONNEL APPROVALS**

A motion was made by Vice President Champine, seconded by Member Fortenberry, to approve the personnel approvals as amended. A motion was approved by a roll call vote of members present, voting 6-0. Included in the amended personnel approvals were:

#### **I. Employment**

- Martinez-Lara, Fernando is recommended for hire as a Zion-Benton Township High School Science Teacher through the Visiting International Teacher Program with ISBE. Dr. Martinez-Lara will start School year 2024-2025. Dr. Martinez-Lara will be placed on the salary schedule at MA30, Level 02.
- Henkes, Aimee is recommended for hire as a Spanish Teacher at Zion-Benton East High School. Ms. Henkes will start School Year 2025-2026. Ms. Henkes will be placed on the salary schedule at MA00, Level 18
- Skeppstrom, Fred is recommended for hire as a Science Teacher at Zion-Benton Township High School. Mr. Skeppstrom will start School Year 2025-2026. Mr. Skeppstrom will be placed on the salary schedule at MA00, Level 01
- Quesinberry, Jennifer is recommended for hire as a Science Teacher at Zion-Benton Township High School. Ms. Quesinberry will start School Year

2025-2026. Ms. Quesinberry will be placed on the salary schedule at BA00, Level 01

- Terrelonge, Arnold is recommended for hire as School Bus Driver for Zion-Benton Township High School District 126. Mr. Terrelonge start date is on May 19, 2025 . Mr. Terrelonge will be paid an hourly rate of \$27.55 II. Transfers
- Stone, Robert is recommended for transfer from Special Education Teacher at Zion-Benton Township High School Zion Alternative Program to Drivers Education / Physical Education teacher at Zion-Benton Township High School effective School Year 2025-2026.

### III. Leaves

- Bush, Christopher is requesting a leave of absence beginning May 02, 2025 to May 09, 2025. The request is recommended to be approved as it is in accordance with board policy.
- Tellez-Miscichowski, Melissa is requesting a leave of absence beginning June 23, 2025 to July 11, 2025. The request is recommended to be approved as it is in accordance with board policy.
- Porter, Raymond is requesting a leave of absence beginning April 22, 2025 to May 30, 2025. The request is recommended to be approved as it is in accordance with board policy.
- Bailey, Andrea is requesting a leave of absence beginning July 07, 2025 to July 24, 2025. The request is recommended to be approved as it is in accordance with board policy.
- Greathouse, Nickea is requesting an extension from her leave of absence beginning April 08, 2025 to August 05, 2025. The request is recommended to be approved as it is in accordance with board policy.
- Larmie, Michael is requesting an intermittent leave of absence beginning June 02, 2025. The request is recommended to be approved as it is in accordance with board policy.
- Poulsen, Nicole is requesting an intermittent leave of absence beginning May 28, 2025. The request is recommended to be approved as it is in accordance with board policy.

### IV. Resignation

- Magna, Pamela is resigning her position as a Department Chair for Zion-Benton Township High School Zion Alternative School Program effective the end of SY 24-25.
- Tenorio, Josselyn is resigning her position as a Bilingual Instructional Aide for Zion-Benton Township High School Zion Alternative Program effective end of SY 24-25.
- Yonke, Jared. is resigning his position as Assistant Boys Soccer Coach, Zion Benton Township High School, effective end of SY 24-25.

Included and made part of these minutes:  
**EXHIBIT "12A"**, Personnel Report

### **APPROVAL OF MOU's**

#### **A. Approval of MOU with ZBFT Re: Assistant Athletic Director and Assistant Safety Director**

A motion was made by Member Cook, seconded by Member Stephen, to approve the MOU regarding the Assistant Athletic Director and Assistant Safety Director as presented in Closed Session. A motion was approved by a roll call vote of members present, voting 6-0.

#### **B. Approval of MOU with ZBFT Re: Summer Work Schedule for Classified Staff**

A motion was made by Secretary Benitez, seconded by Vice President Champine, to approve the MOU regarding the Summer Work Schedule for Classified Staff as presented in closed session. A motion was approved by a roll call vote of members present, voting 6-0.

### **APPROVAL OF FY25 ADMINISTRATION, UNION EXEMPT COMPENSATION**

#### **A. Approval of FY26 Administration and Union Exempt Compensation**

A motion was made by Member Stephen, seconded by Secretary Benitez, to approve the Administration and Union Exempt Compensation as presented in Closed Session. A motion was approved by a roll call vote of members present, voting 6-0.

### **Approval of Contract Amendments**

#### **A. Approval of Superintendent Contract Amendment**

A motion was made by Secretary Benitez, seconded by Vice-President Champine, to approve the Superintendent Contract Amendment as presented in Closed Session. A motion was approved by a roll call vote of members present, voting 6-0.

**B. Approval of ZBTHS Principal Contract Amendment**

A motion was made by Member Stephen seconded by Vice-President Champine, to approve the ZBTHS Principal Contract Amendment as presented in Closed Session. A motion was approved by a roll call vote of members present, voting 6-0.

**ADJOURNMENT**

President Nordstrom adjourned the meeting at 10:40 pm.

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JERRY NORDSTROM, President

ATTEST:

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CHRISTOPHER BENITEZ, Secretary