

**MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE  
BOARD OF EDUCATION, ZION-BENTON TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL  
DISTRICT 126, LAKE COUNTY, ILLINOIS  
TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 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 6:00 p.m.

Board President Nordstrom presided.

**ROLL CALL**

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

Absent: Member McNeal and Member Scott

**PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE**

**STAFF, STUDENT, AND COMMUNITY CELEBRATION**

President Nordstrom explained that the usual celebrations and student recognitions, which were scheduled for this month, had to be rescheduled due to a conflict with another district meeting. As a result, the recognitions were not planned for this meeting. The regular meeting is being held without the special recognition section, and the agenda now moves directly to communications from staff, guests, and district residents.

**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.

Chris Syzmanski addressed the district's decision not to record committee meetings. He read a the letter he had sent to the Superintendent and the entire school board, raising concerns about transparency and accountability. Chris expressed dissatisfaction with the justification that the district lacks resources to

record committee meetings and asked for clarification on several points, including staffing requirements, estimated costs, potential automated solutions, and the possibility of involving students in recording as an educational opportunity. He argued that the absence of recordings deprives the public of a complete and transparent record, which is essential for accountability. Chris urged the Board to reconsider this decision and provide a public breakdown of the challenges preventing the implementation of committee meeting recordings.

Ruth Davis addressed several concerns related to the district's financial decisions. She first questioned how the district planned to allocate the CEJA grant money back to taxpayers, noting that the Superintendent's response at the previous meeting did not directly answer her question. She highlighted the tax abatement issue, referencing a memo and raising concerns about the transparency of the figures, specifically the property tax relief grant (PTRG) and how it was reflected in the abatement calculations. Ruth also inquired about discrepancies in the numbers related to the abatement and requested updated figures that accurately reflect the tax abatement after accounting for PTRG.

Additionally, she questioned the fast pace of the facility master plan process, asking why it was being rushed and whether changes in the CEJA Grant would impact the financing of the plan. She suggested the board slow down the process to allow more community input and transparency. Finally, Ruth proposed that the board provide answers to questions raised during public comment on the district's website so that the entire community could benefit from the information.

Larry Stephens, a citizen of the district, expressed his disappointment that the scheduled meeting was canceled. He praised the Winthrop Harbor Board for their decision to go to referendum for a \$10 million request, something he felt District 126 has not done in years. Larry emphasized the importance of asking the public for input, noting that decisions made by a small group could cost the district millions of dollars.

He also raised concerns about the district's plans to move forward with electric buses, pointing to the recent bankruptcy of Illinois' largest electric bus manufacturer as a warning sign. Larry suggested the district slow down on this initiative, especially given the current economic challenges. Additionally, he expressed skepticism about the district's strategic plan, stating that some recommendations from architectural firms could result in excessive costs, as they earn a percentage of the recommendations made. He concluded by urging the board to consider the public's financial strain, particularly with many people losing jobs and struggling to pay taxes.

George Foster began by thanking the Superintendent for continuing to provide community information and for notifying him about the cancellation of a joint meeting. He then expressed concern over a recent survey he received showing that 61% of Lake County Public High School students failed the state math exam. Specifically, he noted the high failure rates at Waukegan High School (95.4%) and Zion Benton High School (93.9%), and highlighted the significant difference in failure rates compared to other districts.

Foster emphasized his concern about the preparedness of students upon graduation, whether they would be successful in trades, sciences, or other fields. He stressed that the board's role in measuring and guiding students is crucial for their future success. He also inquired about the status of a mentoring program that had been discussed in previous meetings, asking if it had started as planned. Foster concluded by emphasizing the importance of ensuring that graduates are equipped with essential skills like reading and writing and are prepared for careers, further education, or military service.

Blake Fortenberry expressed appreciation for the thoroughness of the school master plan but urged the board to proceed cautiously with construction projects, particularly given the uncertainty around funding, especially federal funding. He noted the lack of a predictable funding model and emphasized the importance of being responsible with spending in these uncertain times. Fortenberry acknowledged the value of community feedback on the plan, highlighting needs such as air conditioning in the gym and drainage improvements for the baseball field. However, he cautioned that the money for these projects ultimately comes from the community or state, and given current economic conditions like inflation and low consumer confidence, the board should be careful with how funds are allocated.

## CONSENT AGENDA

A motion was made by Member Champine, seconded by Secretary Stephen, to accept the Consent Agenda. A roll call vote of members approved the motion, present voting 5-0. Included in the Consent Agenda are the following:

- Minutes from Prior Meeting - Regular Board of Education Meeting - January 2025, EXHIBIT 3A
- Treasurer's Report-January 2025, EXHIBIT 3B
- Contractor Payout Request, EXHIBIT 3C

- Overnight Field Trip Illinois High School Theatre Festival 2026, EXHIBIT 3D
- Revenue and Expenditure Summary- January 2025, EXHIBIT 3E
- Bills Paid- 2nd Half January 1st Half February 2025, EXHIBIT 3F
- Bills Payable- February 2025, EXHIBIT 3G
- Activity Board Reports- January 2025, EXHIBIT 3H

## SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT

President Nordstrom took a moment to recognize and congratulate Dr. Jesse Rodriguez, who was recently named the 2025 Lake County Superintendent of the Year by the Lake County Superintendents Association. This prestigious honor was given based on Dr. Rodriguez's leadership and contributions to education at the local, state, and national levels. President Nordstrom highlighted Dr. Rodriguez's role in the district and his leadership as the President of the Lake County Superintendents Association.

Dr. Rodriguez expressed his gratitude for the recognition, attributing the honor to the collaborative efforts of the district's faculty, staff, administrators, and the Board of Education. He emphasized that the recognition was a result of the district's collective work and the strong governance provided by the Board. Dr. Rodriguez also shared that he was proud to represent the district and hoped to further represent Lake County and Illinois at the national level. The meeting then briefly paused for celebratory treats and congratulations.

Dr. Rodriguez, during the Superintendent's report, highlighted the ongoing efforts to align the district's initiatives with the state's Vision 2030, emphasizing the importance of predictable funding, shared accountability, and preparing students for post-secondary success. He shared pride in local programs, such as the African American History celebration, and spoke about his active involvement in state-level education discussions, especially regarding the proposed state budget. While acknowledging some financial uncertainties due to national and state factors, Dr. Rodriguez reassured that the district would not let external challenges hinder its ability to deliver quality education. He stressed the district's strong financial performance and commitment to providing the best educational opportunities for students, regardless of the broader financial landscape. He also mentioned the importance of having contingency plans, ensuring that the district is prepared for various scenarios to maintain stability and progress in education.

## REPORTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### **Principal's Report**

Bonnie Felske, Principal of ZBTHS, gave a report focusing on various updates. She began by emphasizing her commitment to addressing challenges at the school and her dedication to making improvements, particularly in preparing students for the upcoming ACT on April 15th. She outlined a 60-day prep plan, which includes focused goal-setting, individual coaching sessions, class prep activities, and motivational campaigns. Additionally, she shared an initiative to involve the community through a “Rally for the ACT” campaign, encouraging parents, businesses, and the community to support students in their preparation.

She also updated the board on efforts to improve student attendance, including outreach activities like home visits and letters. Regarding facilities, she mentioned upcoming construction projects, particularly for the music and art rooms, and emphasized that there would be no disruptions to instruction. Finally, Felske highlighted positive school achievements, including artist of the month recognitions, athletes signing to college, exchange students, and the National Navy Championship win by the ROTC team.

Kevin Wiland, the principal of Zion Benton East (ZBE), provided a detailed report highlighting several initiatives aimed at improving student performance and fostering community engagement. A major focus was on the district's "Countdown to ACT" campaign, which included targeted efforts to prepare students for the upcoming ACT test. Over 25% of juniors enrolled in a prep class, and personalized outreach through one-on-one meetings with advisory teachers resulted in significant score improvements. Wiland also discussed the introduction of Star Wars-themed videos to celebrate academic achievements such as Winter Practice ACT improvements, honor roll recognition, and perfect or improved attendance. In addition to academic efforts, ZBE organized fun activities, such as a Valentine's Day contest and the ZBE Games, to boost school spirit and student engagement. Finally, Wiland highlighted the success of a Family Fun Night, which saw increased parental involvement and provided a platform for discussing social-emotional learning and fostering stronger partnerships between families and the school. Overall, Wiland's report showcased a well-rounded approach to supporting students academically, celebrating their achievements, and enhancing community involvement.

Dr. Rodriguez expressed deep appreciation for Dr. DiGangi's leadership and commitment, especially regarding the transition to new state assessments. He acknowledged the hard work and enthusiasm she brought to the task, particularly in organizing and motivating the staff to ensure a successful shift in curriculum. Dr. Rodriguez highlighted the positive results, noting the upward trajectory of the district's scores, and personally thanked Dr. DiGangi for her dedication and leadership.

Dr. DiGangi, in turn, emphasized the collective effort of the entire staff in navigating the changes, especially the transition to a new digital ACT format. She expressed pride in the teachers' resilience and adaptability and underscored the importance of providing students with multiple pathways for their futures. Dr. DiGangi also focused on building student confidence and self-efficacy,

recognizing that while standardized tests measure certain skills, they don't capture the full range of students' abilities. She concluded by acknowledging the ongoing work needed for progress but affirmed that the district was on the right path, appreciating the collaborative efforts of all involved.

Included and made part of these minutes:

**EXHIBIT "5A" and "5B", ZBTHS & ZB East Principal Reports**

## BOARD COMMITTEE REPORTS

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

President Nordstrom provided a brief update on the Business, Bid Finance Committee's meeting held on February 18th. He mentioned that most of the topics discussed during the committee meeting would be addressed later in the agenda. These topics included the property tax relief grant status, property tax abatement resolution, the Clean Heavy Duty Vehicle Grant update, and the GRS GASB 75 actuarial services engagement letter. Additionally, they discussed the contractor payout request #13, the bus leasing agreement, the Vision 2030 resolution, a capital improvements update, and the draft of the facilities master plan. He also took a moment to thank Ms. Moreno and Ms. Butler-Sampson for their help in organizing the celebration for Dr. Rodriguez.

## **NEW BUSINESS**

### **Approval of Resolution for Property Tax Abatement of Property Taxes Levied by the Board of Education for the 2024 Levy Year**

Dr. Woell explained that the resolution presented to the board allows for the transfer of \$900,000 from the Education Fund to the Bond and Interest Fund. This amount will then be abated back to the taxpayers of Zion Benton District 126, as part of the district's long history of property tax abatement. The resolution is necessary to both transfer and abate these funds to benefit the taxpayers.

A motion was made by Vice President Benitez, seconded by Secretary Stephen, that the Board of Education accepts the Superintendent's recommendation to approve the resolution transferring funds from the Educational Fund to the Bond and Interest Fund of the District and abating a portion of the taxes heretofore levied for the year 2024 to pay debt service on outstanding bonds of the District. A roll call vote of members approved the motion present voting 5-0.

**EXHIBIT "7A"**, Property Tax Abatement Memo BOE 02\_25\_2025 , Transfer and Abatement Resolution (LY24), v.1 (5).pdf

### **B. GRS GASB Statement 75 Letter of Engagement**

Dr. Woell explained that the district is required to perform actuarial valuations of its health and benefit programs annually as part of the audit process and in compliance with Governmental Accounting Standards Board (GASB) regulations. Typically, the district conducts full valuations every other year, with partial valuations in between. GRS has been providing these services for the district, and Dr. Woell proposed a four-year agreement with GRS, which would save the district \$1,050 compared to renewing every two years. He recommended the board approve this extended four-year contract.

A motion was made by Member Champine, seconded by Secretary Stephen, that the Board of Education accepts the Superintendent's recommendation to approve the letter of engagement with Gabriel, Roeder, Smith & Company (GRS) to perform GASB Statement No. 75 actuarial valuations for the District's healthcare and benefits programs for fiscal years ending June 30, 2025, June 30, 2026, July 30, 2027, and June 30, 2028, as presented. A roll call vote of members approved the motion present voting 5-0.

**EXHIBIT "7B"**, GASB Statement 75 Letter of Engagement Memo BBF 2\_18\_2025, GRS GASB 75 Engagement Letter Feb\_2025.pdf

### **C. Bus Lease Agreements**

Dr. Woell explained that the bus lease agreements are part of the district's standard revolving lease program for diesel buses, unrelated to electric buses. There are two leases being presented: one for a small microbus and another for two larger buses, including a 72-passenger bus and a wheelchair-lift bus. The leases have a four-year and five-year term, respectively. After the lease period, the buses are purchased back by the leasing company for the cost of the final payment and resold. This system helps maintain the bus fleet and provides warranties, ensuring that the district isn't responsible for major repairs. Dr. Woell requested approval for the leases, with delivery expected in July 2025.

President Nordstrom asked for an update on the electric bus grant opportunity. Dr. Woell explained that the grant, worth over \$27 million, has been put on hold as part of a review process. The funding opportunity notice has been shelved, and there is no new information at this time. A follow-up meeting is scheduled for the next day, where further updates may be provided. As of now, there is no progress on the grant.

A motion was made by Vice-President Benitez, seconded by Member Champine, that the Board of Education approve the Superintendent's recommendation to approve two lease agreements with Provident Capital Leasing to lease three buses from Central States Bus Sales beginning July 9, 2025. A roll call vote of members approved the motion present voting 5-0.

**EXHIBIT "7C"**, Bus Lease Agreement 72 Pass and Lift Bus Feb 2025.pdf, 2-Bus Lease Agreement Feb 2025 Microbird.pdf

#### **D. Vision 2030 Resolution**

Dr. Rodriguez expressed support for the Vision 2030 resolution, emphasizing the importance of backing the initiative. He hopes that all school districts in Illinois will approve it, and he encouraged the board to continue their support for this commitment.

Secretary Stephen asked how realistic it is to secure state funding, given the predictability of funding. Dr. Rodriguez responded that while securing state funding is likely, it is still being unpacked by the legislative branch. He emphasized the state's commitment to supporting education but mentioned the importance of having backup plans if circumstances change. He acknowledged the challenges but stressed that these challenges would not be used as an excuse, as the priority remains protecting the children and the community.

A motion was made by Member Champine, and seconded by Secretary Stephen that the Board of Education accept the Superintendent's recommendation to approve the Vision 2030 Resolution as presented. A roll call vote of members approved the motion present voting 5-0.

**EXHIBIT "7D"**, Vision 2030 Resolution.docx

#### **E. Second Reading - Press Update 117**

Dr. DiGangi provided an update on the second reading of Update 117. She explained that during the January Policy Committee meeting, the Press Plus update was reviewed and presented. The first reading took place at the January board meeting, and there have been no changes since that first reading.

A motion was made by Member Champine, and seconded by Secretary Stephen that the District 126 Board of Education accept the Superintendent's recommendation to approve the Press Plus update 117 as presented. A roll call vote of members approved the motion present voting 5-0.

**EXHIBIT "7E"**, Zion-Benton THSD 126 - Drafts - 1\_10\_2025.pdf, Board Memo -Press Plus 117\_118.docx

### **F. Second Reading - Safe Haven**

Dr. DiGangi stated at the January board meeting, the board conducted the first reading of the district's Safe Haven Policy, which outlines the district's role in immigration enforcement activities. There have been no changes since the first reading.

A motion was made by Vice-President Benitez, seconded by Member Champine, that the District 126 Board of Education accept the Superintendent's recommendation to approve the Safe Haven policy as presented. A roll call vote of members approved the motion present voting 5-0.

**EXHIBIT "7F"**, Policy 7\_151 (2).pdf, Board Memo - Safe Haven.docx

## **OTHER BUSINESS**

### **Capital Improvements Updates**

Dr. Woell provided an update on the capital improvements, stating that phase one and phase two are nearly complete. The door cylinder locks for the library, which had been awaited since August, are now installed and functioning well. Additionally, on Presidents' Day, 10 fire-rated sidelights were installed in classrooms. The final task, replacing the front entryway doors, will be completed over spring break.

### **Facilities Master Plan Updates**

Alison Andrews from Wold Architects presented an update on the district's facilities master planning process. She explained that the plan is still in draft form, with more details to come in March. Recent efforts have focused on engaging various stakeholders, including 22 student advisory committees and over 400 students who provided input through surveys. Key themes emerging from these discussions include improving learning environments, restroom facilities, and safety. The process has also involved identifying "need statements" based on feedback and prioritizing them through community town hall meetings. Upcoming work includes updating classrooms, upgrading restrooms, improving infrastructure, and enhancing athletic facilities, with the earliest renovations starting in summer 2027. The plan will continue to evolve and align with the district's financial and strategic goals.

Member Champine raised several points regarding the school district's facilities plan. She emphasized that the planned work is not new construction, but rather routine maintenance and upgrades to bring outdated buildings up to modern standards. She noted the district's obligation to maintain its buildings, which require significant capital investments, and raised concerns about potential financial challenges if state funding decreases. However, she reassured that the plans are designed to be flexible, allowing work to be staggered or paused as needed.

Alison Andrews responded by clarifying that the recommendations were not meant to dictate specific actions for the first year but were intended to align with available funding and the capacity of the construction management partner. She stressed that the plan allows for flexibility, with decisions to be made based on funding, work volume, and construction timelines. Andrews also mentioned that energy-efficient upgrades and improvements, such as fire suppression system extensions and infrastructure updates, were integrated into the strategy.

A community member then raised a concern about the administration wing, commenting on the color coding used in the plans and asking whether it indicated heavy renovation. President Nordstrom responded by explaining that the color coding in the plan could represent a range of work, from simple updates like paint and signage to more significant changes, such as wall removals. President Nordstrom acknowledged the community's participation, noting that there had been four town hall meetings that helped build the current plan over the past few months. He asked for any specific questions regarding the presentation and encouraged the public to share concerns so Dr. Rodriguez, Dr. Woell, and Alison could address them. He assured the community that if any issues needed to be addressed more broadly, they would make sure to share that information.

President Nordstrom ended by thanking everyone for their contributions and efforts to keep the process straightforward and appreciated the work done so far.

Included and made part of these minutes:  
**EXHIBIT "8B"**, FMP Final Draft.pdf\_

### **Athletic Recognition Committee Update**

Cynthia Moreno and Jack Niemi provided an update to the Board of Education on the progress of the Athletic Alumni Recognition Committee. The committee's goal is to enhance the alumni recognition program, ensuring that alumni receive the acknowledgment they deserve. They have focused on establishing clear criteria for future recognitions, aiming for a fair and consistent process. Jack Niemi shared the committee's background, explaining that the initiative began in response to community interest in recognizing distinguished alumni, such as Brian Colbert. They developed a three-tier recognition system, including jersey retirements (Tier 1), alumni excellence (Tier 2), and the existing wall of

achievement (Tier 3). The committee has also discussed formalizing the process for recognizing athletic accomplishments beyond high school, including achievements in college and professional careers. Their work emphasizes transparency and a legacy of excellence, with a future-focused approach to honoring alumni.

Member Champine inquired about the historical photos and memorabilia displayed in the school's trophy case, including items from the 1940s. Jack Niemi responded that the committee had reviewed and maintained various artifacts, including photos from the 1960s and 1970s and helmets from the 1950s and 1960s, to highlight the rich history of the school's athletic achievements. President Nordstrom asked for an update on the status of the committee's work, and Niemi confirmed that they were refining the recommendations and preparing to present them to the Board of Education for final approval. Dr. Rodriguez added that the recognition process needed to include values like sportsmanship, long-term impact, and community contributions, not just athletic performance, and expressed support for celebrating athletes from all sports and levels. The committee's goal is to ensure a transparent, fair process that recognizes both athletic and community contributions, with the final approval of the board expected soon.

### **CLOSED SESSION**

Vice President Benitez made a motion, seconded by Member Champine, to adjourn to closed session at 8:00 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.

### **RECONVENE IN OPEN SESSION**

A motion was made by Member Champine, seconded by Secretary Stephen, to return to open session at 9:23 pm. The Motion was approved by a roll call vote of members present voting 5-0

### **PERSONNEL APPROVALS**

A motion was made by Vice President Benitez, seconded by Member Cook, to approve the personnel approvals as amended. A motion was approved by a roll call vote of members present, voting 5-0. Included in the amended personnel approvals were:

#### I. Employment

- Patterson, Elizabeth is recommended for hire as Paraprofessional – Part Time, with a starting date of February 03, 2025. Ms. Patterson will be paid an hourly rate of \$18.65.
- Curtin, Ryan is recommended for hire as a Baseball Assistant Coach for School Year 2024-25. This position is a Category D Step 1.

## II. Leaves

- Soto, Raul is requesting a leave of absence beginning February 04, 2025, through February 14, 2025. The request is recommended to be approved as it is in accordance with board policy.
- Manning, James is requesting an intermittent leave of absence beginning January 21, 2025. The request is recommended to be approved as it is in accordance with board policy.
- Schachtschneider, Kurt is requesting a leave of absence beginning February 18, 2025, through February 28, 2025. The request is recommended to be approved as it is in accordance with board policy.
- Parmacek, Madeline is requesting a leave of absence beginning August 11, 2025, through November 02, 2025. The request is recommended to be approved as it is in accordance with board policy.

## III. Resignation

- Gauger, Ann is resigning her position as a Math Teacher for Zion-Benton East High School effective the end of SY 24-25.

## IV. Retirement

- Meyer, John is announcing his retirement as IT Specialist, Zion-Benton Township High School District 126, effective June 30, 2025.

Included and made part of these minutes:  
**EXHIBIT "11A"**, Personnel Report

## **ADJOURNMENT**

President Nordstrom adjourned the meeting at 9:24 pm.

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JERRY NORDSTROM, President

ATTEST:

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PATRICIA STEPHEN, Secretary