

BOARD OF EDUCATION
(Official)

September 2, 2021
Elizabeth, New Jersey

An emergency meeting of the Board of Education was called on September 2, 2021 at 6:00 p.m. using an online platform technology. Voice conferencing technology for the September 2, 2021 meeting was available to the public at <https://www.facebook.com/epsnj> and <https://www.youtube.com/user/epschools>.

Mr. Jacobs welcomed everyone. Mr. Jacobs stated that Co-General Counsel Jonathan Williams would present a statement on behalf of the Board of Education.

Co-General Counsel Jonathan Williams stated that on the recommendation of General Counsel, Superintendent, and President of the Board of Education, we are recommending that the Board adopt a resolution to call this meeting an Emergency Meeting of the Elizabeth Board of Education as defined by statute for purposes of discussing the status of the school district following tropical storm Ida and the damage which has resulted.

Mr. Jacobs requested a motion to declare the meeting an emergency meeting as defined by law.

A motion was made by Mrs. Carvalho, seconded by Mrs. Goncalves, that the meeting be declared an emergency meeting by law.

The motion was carried by the following vote:

Affirmative: Mmes. Barbosa, Carvalho, Chevres, Goncalves, Moreno-Ortega, Mr. Jacobs – 6

Negative: None

Board President Jerry Jacobs presented the following statement at 6:12 p.m.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, good evening. This is an emergency meeting of the Board of Education. Pursuant to New Jersey Statutes and the rules adopted by the Board of Education, notice of this meeting using an online platform was posted on the District website and social media outlets on September 2, 2021.

There will be an online public portion for citizens to address the Board. Members of the public who wish to participate may participate by emailing statements relative to agenda items and /or educational matters to the Secretary of the Board at kennedha@epsnj.org. All statements received will be read into the record during the Meeting’s Public Comment Portion. All emails must be submitted and received by the Secretary of the Board up to the start of the meeting and, as is always the case, must include the public member’s full name for the record. Each statement submitted by a participant shall be limited to three minutes in duration. The total time of public comment shall be limited to 60 minutes. Emails received but not read after the 60 minute duration will be spread in full in the Official Board Minutes of this meeting.”

Present via online platform technology: Diane Barbosa, Maria Carvalho, Iliana Chevres, Stephanie Goncalves, Rosa Moreno-Ortega, Jerry Jacobs – 6
Absent: Nathalie Alcaide-Hernandez, Charlene Bathelus, Stanley Neron – 3

Superintendent of Schools Olga Hugelmeyer, School Business Administrator/Board Secretary Harold E. Kennedy, Jr., Assistant Superintendent for Teaching and Learning Jennifer Cedeno, Assistant Superintendent for Schools Rafael Cortes, Assistant Superintendent for Schools Judy Finch-Johnson, Chief of Operations Francisco Cuesta, and Co-General Counsel Jonathan Williams, Esq. of DeCotiis, Fitzpatrick & Cole, LLP were present via online platform technology.

Mr. Jacobs called for a moment of silence for the five Elizabeth citizens who were lost in the horrific flooding yesterday evening.

Pledge of Allegiance

Mr. Jacobs stated that last night we experienced tremendous amounts of rain. Mr. Jacobs stated that it was historic in the amount of rain that came down. Mr. Jacobs stated that he is glad to hear that many of our citizens, employees, staff, and children in our community are safe. Mr. Jacobs stated that it is unfortunate that there was loss of life that did occur in our City and we pray for those souls. Mr. Jacobs stated that life is short and that is why we have to live life to the fullest.

Mr. Jacobs asked if there were any Board comments.

Mrs. Moreno-Ortega commented that she wants to pray for the families who had loss and stated that we are here to support you. Mrs. Moreno-Ortega stated that she wanted to speak to the community in Spanish.

Mrs. Carvalho thanked our Superintendent and her team, from the assistant superintendents to the security guards, custodians, and bus drivers, and everyone that came out today to work to prepare our schools and to help our City and all the people that have been displaced due to this flooding. Mrs. Carvalho stated that the quick response of our team has really helped and assisted the people in our City that need help and for that she is very grateful. Mrs. Carvalho stated that your hard work and dedication to our district is not going unnoticed and thanked everyone.

Mr. Jacobs thanked our Superintendent, assistant superintendents, and the amazing staff that we have in the Elizabeth Public Schools because when there is a challenge and when there is a tragedy, the EPS team is always ready to support our community and for that he is forever grateful.

Mr. Jacobs remembered the thirteen service members whose lives were lost last week in Afghanistan. Mr. Jacobs stated that it is most important and we have to recognize that our countrymen fight for our country and our freedoms. Mr. Jacobs stated that he knows that well because his son is a Marine veteran now. Mr. Jacobs stated that we want to remember those families and keep them in our thoughts and prayers.

Mrs. Hugelmeyer acknowledged the amazing partnership with the City of Elizabeth and so many individuals that have worked together with our team members in order to help our displaced residents and to ensure their safety and that the services were properly

delivered. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that it has been a very challenging day but one that we can look back and say that everyone gave 110% and how well we all worked together. Mrs. Hugelmeyer gave a special thanks to Elizabeth Police Director Graves who is our contact person for emergency management. Mrs. Hugelmeyer gave a special thank you to Director Krishna Garlic and a special thank you to our Board members because they have been phenomenal throughout the course of this day in addressing the needs.

Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that tonight we are here because it is important that we discuss the impact of tropical storm Ida on both our residents and on our schools. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that it is important that we discuss the recommendations that she has for the new school year. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that it is important that we take the time to be able to review the status of our schools and ensure that we are all aware in terms of where we are as an organization having conducted a very extensive evaluation of every school building throughout the course of today.

Mrs. Hugelmeyer asked Mr. Williams if the recommendations should be brought into private session.

Mr. Williams explained the options of discussing the recommendations.

Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that out of respect for our Board of Education she would like to report in our private session so that we are able to review it together and then gladly present in public following our discussion.

The President requests a motion to go into Private Session to consider matters exempt under the Open Public Meetings Act, specifically for reviewing damage from tropical storm Ida. The Board will reconvene in public.

A motion was made by Mrs. Goncalves, seconded by Mrs. Barbosa, to go into private session at 6:35 p.m.

The motion was carried by the following vote:

Affirmative: Mmes. Barbosa, Carvalho, Chevres, Goncalves, Moreno-Ortega, Mr. Jacobs – 6

Negative: None

Mrs. Barbosa excused herself from the meeting.

A motion was made by Mrs. Goncalves, seconded by Mrs. Chevres, to reconvene in public session at 8:45 p.m.

The motion was carried by the following vote:

Affirmative: Mmes. Carvalho, Chevres, Goncalves, Moreno-Ortega, Mr. Jacobs – 5

Negative: None

Board President Jerry Jacobs presented the following public participation statement.

“At this time, the meeting is open for public comment online to those who have emailed statements relative to agenda items and/or educational matters to the Secretary of the Board at kennedha@epsnj.org. Each statement made by a participant shall be limited to three minutes in duration. The total time of public comment shall be limited to 60 minutes.

At this time, the Secretary of the Board will read into the record all emails that have been submitted up to the start of the meeting. Each statement submitted by a participant shall be limited to three minutes in duration.”

Mr. Kennedy read the following email received from Julie Sims:

“I have been a proud teacher for the Elizabeth Public Schools for what will be 20 years this upcoming school year. I am also a Jewish American who has been fortunate enough to work in a school district that recognizes and closes schools for BOTH days of Rosh Hashanah. However, for the first time in the last 20+ years, the official 2021-2022 Elizabeth Public School calendar has teachers and staff reporting to school on Wednesday, September 8 (the second day of Rosh Hashanah). I had originally thought this was an error and would be corrected once the appropriate people were notified. Unfortunately, I was incorrect.

Having schools open on the second day of Rosh Hashanah is, in fact, a deliberate change in the calendar and not an oversight, as I had hoped. As a Jew, I am insulted by this blatant slap in the face to the Jewish community and Jewish team members in the Elizabeth Public Schools. I understand and FULLY SUPPORT the addition of Juneteenth and Eid Mubarak as non-school days. However, being inclusive of other religions and celebrations DOES NOT mean that the second day of Rosh Hashanah suddenly becomes expendable. The reality is that Rosh Hashanah is a 48 hour holiday, one day is not more important than the other. It is the equivalent of Christmas being two days long. That is how holy and important both days of Rosh Hashanah are for the Jewish people.

There are other days in the calendar where school is closed and it is not a federal holiday. December 24, for example, could easily be a school day (or half day). As could Good Friday, the Friday before Easter Sunday. I would gladly come to school on those days. Additionally, the students are starting on a Thursday in September and ending on a Thursday in June. Pushing the calendar back just one day would mean the students would begin on a Friday and end on a Friday, and there would still be days at the end of June in the event of snow days or make up days. However, when faced with all of the possible options, the decision was made to cut one of the days we have off for religious and secular holidays, and Rosh Hashanah was the "winner."

As is true throughout the world, Jewish teachers at EPS are definitely in the minority when it comes to the number of staff members observing the holiday. I cannot help but feel like the second day of Rosh Hashanah was cut because the Jewish team members are the path of least resistance/easiest target. Sadly, that’s often how it goes when it comes to our society’s treatment of Jewish people.

As I mentioned in the email I sent out on June 14 to Mr. Harold Kennedy, this means that Jewish team members will be forced to use a personal day to observe our holiday instead of coming in for the very first day of school for staff members. Consequently, we will be coming in on the very first day with our students. As you can imagine, this gives us zero preparation time prior to the students coming in, which is clearly not an ideal situation for the students, parents/guardians, or the teachers. Not to mention how stressful this situation is for your Jewish staff. I am hopeful that the board will reconsider the start date for the upcoming school year.”

Mr. Kennedy read the following email from Maria Lorenz:

“I think it is a shame that the board president continues to violate the rules of public comments. I even think it is more shameful that the rights of my child continue to be violated and here we are re-opening the schools and my child has yet to receive the services that you agreed to in court and violated.

I hope that schools are delayed in re-opening and any water remediation would be addressed properly.”

Mr. Jacobs thanked them for their comments. Since there were no other public participants signed in to address the Board, Mr. Jacobs closed this portion of the meeting.

Mrs. Barbosa returned to the meeting.

Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that she is presenting to our community the work that began very late last night and continued throughout the course of today. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that our City sustained a significant impact and our schools sustained a significant impact on its facilities. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that we felt that it was important to share this evening the extensive assessment that we conducted at all our facilities throughout the course of the day. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that it was very important to us to be able to ensure that we reviewed every single facility and ensure that we had a thorough accounting. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that we communicated with our division of plant and property and we communicated with the schools’ leadership to ensure that we had a full assessment and an opportunity to share with our Board of Education and with our school community.

Mrs. Hugelmeyer summarized what their assessment included. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that two schools in particular, Dr. Orlando Edreira Academy School No. 26 and Dr. Antonia Pantoja School No. 27, sustained the greatest impact of the storm where the flooding can be described as between 8 feet and 11 feet. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that as a result of the impact on the mechanical infrastructure of the schools as it relates to boilers, hot water heaters, and electrical panels as an example, our intent is to certainly continue to examine these two facilities. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that we will continue to engage sharing with our Board and with our community the status of both of these schools. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that with regard to the schools in our district, we had the opportunity to examine each school and in essence, the schools had been impacted in a variety of ways. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that in some of our facilities you would have a cafeteria that was water-logged, ceiling tiles that were also water-logged, certain classrooms that had water that filtered in, and basements that were flooding. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that another example of the damage that was sustained in our schools was in terms of the water that filtered into particular classrooms and the instructional materials that were affected or the rugs that we use in the lower elementary grades that would become saturated. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that these are examples of the type of water damage that was sustained throughout the organization as a result of this intense storm that was defined as 6 inches of rain per hour.

Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that it is very important that we discuss this evening the impact that this storm has had on our schools and equally as important and critical that we take the time to ensure that we address these issues in our facilities so that we are prepared to open our schools successfully. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that the Elizabeth Public Schools has always taken tremendous pride in the condition of its facilities so, therefore, we ask our parents, we ask our community to be patient with us because we do want to be able to address the impact of this storm on our facilities. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that, as a result, it is important that she make a recommendation to our Board that we delay the opening of our schools. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that as a reminder to our parents, we were initially scheduled to have our teachers and all of our instructional staff return on September 8th and we were well prepared prior to this storm to welcoming all of our children on September 9th. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that her recommendation to our Board of Education is to move the opening of schools to a later date. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that originally our staff was

scheduled to return on September 8th and her recommendation is for staff to return on Monday, September 13th. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that our children were originally scheduled to report on September 9th and would be reporting on Tuesday, September 14th. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that this would afford our division of plant and property the sufficient time to be able to address the impact that this storm has had on our schools and ensure that we are ready to welcome our staff and children back to school.

Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that it is important when we talk about this delay in the opening of schools that we also ensure that we have everyone at the table. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that during the course of this day that started very, very early in the wee hours of the morning we were communicating with each other and discussing the impact that this storm was having. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that we were really quite concerned with this storm especially since it had not been anticipated that it would be so severe. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that our administrative team gathered together today including our assistant superintendents, our chief of operations, deputy counsel, coordinator of plant and property, school business administrator, and comptroller all met to be able to have a very clear understanding of our schools. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that it was important that the conversation took place today and by extension that we are sharing with our school community the impact the storm has had on our schools. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that it is very important as a next step we invite our teachers' union, principals' and supervisors' union, directors' union, and non-certificated administrators' union to the table so that we can review the status of our schools together so that we can discuss and ensure that we are working collaboratively on the successful opening of our schools.

Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that with regard to Dr. Orlando Edreira Academy School No. 26 and Dr. Antonia Pantoja School No. 27 it is very important that we continue to evaluate these two schools. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that the status of these two schools require a great deal of attention on our part and requires us to work diligently to ensure that we do not delay any further the opening of these schools. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that she wants to be completely open and honest with our community. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that it is important that our children come first and our children are our priority. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that it is important that we are providing a thorough and efficient education to our children. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that we may have to incorporate virtual instruction if the opening of the buildings is further delayed beyond the dates shared this evening. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that she will be advocating to our NJ DOE through an emergency petition to the Commissioner of Education in order to address this important topic of conversation as it relates to the impact of the storm on our schools.

Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that it is not just the impact of the Elizabeth Public Schools but the storm has impacted numerous school districts. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that we are very committed and very passionate about ensuring that we are successful about our reopening. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that we do need this additional time dedicated in order for us to support our division of plant and property in ensuring that our facilities are once again fully prepared to serve our children.

Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that amazing work took place today and she is incredibly grateful to our Board of Education, Elizabeth Police Director Graves who served as Emergency Management contact, Battalion Chief Maurice, and Director Krishna Garlic. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that it was very important that we invested the entire day to ensuring that we were supporting our displaced residents. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that we dedicated six of our schools to serve as shelters for our displaced residents to ensure that they felt safe, comfortable, and welcomed. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that with the City of Elizabeth and all of the resources that they provided together with our facilities and our transportation services, we have been quite supportive throughout the course of the day.

Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that our displaced residents are currently at Dunn Sports Center and in collaboration with our City of Elizabeth as well as the American Red Cross, we are ensuring that all the supports that are necessary continue to be provided as needed. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that she will be sharing communications in writing to our families with regard to the delay in opening of our schools for our children to begin on September 14th and in particular for our School Nos. 26 and 27 keeping our families informed with regard to the importance of our commitment to the delivery of instruction to our children. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that she will be posting and sharing via email, text, robocall, and webinars that will be made available to our families to have a very thorough understanding of the delay in opening of schools and ensure that we have those conversations with parents and any and all questions that they have will be addressed. Mrs. Hugelmeyer stated that we will continue to proceed with the opening of our schools for full in-person. Mrs. Hugelmeyer thanked the Board for their continued support and commitment.

Mr. Jacobs thanked Superintendent Hugelmeyer for the report. Mr. Jacobs thanked the Superintendent and the entire staff for stepping up to the plate and serving our community in its greatest time of need. Mr. Jacobs stated that we can always count on the Elizabeth Public Schools to be at the forefront when the community is in need. Mr. Jacobs thanked Elizabeth Police Director Graves, Mayor Christian Bollwage, and the officials and directors who were integrally responsible for helping us deal with this crisis. Mr. Jacobs stated that it is unfortunate that these things happen but the district along with the Superintendent is making sure that every effort is put forward that our schools will be able to open safely which is the most important thing is our children especially in these times with the pandemic. Mr. Jacobs stated that it is better to take the extra couple of days to ensure that the schools are in the shape that they need to be in for us to have a successful opening.

Mrs. Moreno-Ortega stated that it is important to say some words to the community in Spanish what the Superintendent explained.

Mr. Jacobs stated that the Board would like to put forth certain resolutions in order to support our community in the best way possible.

Mr. Williams stated that at the request of the Superintendent and on recommendation from General Counsel, there are three resolutions to be considered by the Board off the floor in response to the report which has been received this evening.

Resolution – Board of Education Endorsing Continued Inspection of All School Facilities for Damage Resulting from Tropical Storm Ida and Moving the Start Date for the Opening of the School Year to September 13, 2021 for Staff with Children Returning to School on September 14, 2021

A motion was made by Mrs. Goncalves, seconded by Mrs. Carvalho, to adopt the above resolution.

The motion was carried by the following vote:

Affirmative: Mmes. Barbosa, Carvalho, Chevres, Goncalves, Moreno-Ortega, Mr. Jacobs – 6

Negative: None

Mr. Williams stated that at the request of the Superintendent and on recommendation from General Counsel, the following is a resolution to be considered by the Board off the floor.

Resolution - Board of Education Endorsing Continued Inspection and Review of Damages Focusing on School Nos. 26 and 27 and Recognizing the Need for the Possibility of Further Petition or Discussion to the Department of Education and the Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Education for an Emergency Petition for Virtual Learning at Those Two Sites for the Foreseeable Future

A motion was made by Mrs. Carvalho, seconded by Mrs. Moreno-Ortega, to adopt the above resolution.

The motion was carried by the following vote:

Affirmative: Mmes. Barbosa, Carvalho, Chevres, Goncalves, Moreno-Ortega, Mr. Jacobs – 6

Negative: None

Mr. Williams stated that Superintendent requests and recommends the following resolution off the floor the Board's consideration.

Resolution – Ratify Utilizing School Facilities as Emergency Shelters for Displaced Persons and Continued Use of the Dunn Sports Center for That Purpose for the Foreseeable Future

A motion was made by Mrs. Goncalves, seconded by Mrs. Barbosa, to adopt the above resolution.

The motion was carried by the following vote:

Affirmative: Mmes. Barbosa, Carvalho, Chevres, Goncalves, Moreno-Ortega, Mr. Jacobs – 6

Negative: None

Mr. Jacobs asked if there were any Board member comments.

Mr. Jacobs stated that he was glad that they had the opportunity to have this meeting as there were so many important issues facing our City and our residents in our community. Mr. Jacobs stated that we stand behind our community and we are here to support them in any way possible. Mr. Jacobs stated that we are looking forward to a successful opening of our school system and we are taking the steps now at this meeting to make sure that happens. Mr. Jacobs thanked everyone for all their hard work and countless hours. Mr. Jacobs stated that in the last 24 hours added to the burden of having to reopen schools successfully in this environment.

On a motion by Mrs. Goncalves, seconded by Mrs. Carvalho, the meeting was adjourned at 9:20 p.m.

The motion was carried by the following vote:

Affirmative: Mmes. Barbosa, Carvalho, Chevres, Goncalves, Moreno-Ortega, Mr. Jacobs – 6

Negative: None

Harold E. Kennedy, Jr.
School Business Administrator/Board Secretary