



Indian River School Board Meeting Highlights January 26, 2026

Meeting Agenda

- High School Wellness Centers: transparency and informed consent
- Plan to handle future growth
- Measuring success of school safety spending
- Curriculum Committee report: cursive writing and possible third-grade retention
- Financial Reports: spending, oversight, and planning ahead
- Elevating teacher voices at board meetings
- Opportunities for the public to stay informed and involved

Beebe Wellness Centers at High Schools: A Routine Contract That Sparked Bigger Questions

Beebe Healthcare's contract renewal to operate the high school Wellness Centers looked routine on the agenda, but it opened a broader conversation about informed consent and transparency. District 4 Board Member Dr. Michelle Parsons asked whether parents truly understand what they are agreeing to when they sign the wellness center consent forms. Beebe representatives explained that the consent language is standardized under state law and used statewide, meaning Beebe cannot change the form itself. Superintendent Dr. Jay Owens noted that while the form may stay the same, the district can add plain-language explanations, so parents better understand the scope of services and confidentiality.



During the discussion, it was clarified that confidential services include contraception and birth control, as well as HIV and STD testing. The presenting Beebe nurse noted that STD testing is

done by urine test only and does not involve genitourinary exams.

Another key issue was oversight. Beebe does not currently provide regular data on how often the wellness centers are used or what types of care are provided. By the end of the discussion, Beebe agreed to begin supplying monthly, non-identifiable summary reports so the Board can better understand how the program operates while protecting student privacy.

Phillip Showell Elementary: New Sign Funded by PTO

Families at Phillip Showell Elementary will soon notice a new school sign. The Finance report confirmed that the sign, with a total cost of approximately \$30,000, will be fully paid for through PTO fundraising rather than district operating funds. No taxpayer dollars are being used.

Futures Committee: Planning Without a Clear Destination

The Futures Committee discussion focused on long-term building use and enrollment planning, with Millsboro Middle School raised as a possible part of the solution. This conversation is happening as nearby middle schools — Selbyville Middle School and Sussex Central Middle School — are currently operating over capacity, at approximately 102% and 104% respectively. Several possibilities were discussed, including whether Millsboro Middle School could help relieve enrollment pressure, be repurposed for alternative programming, or potentially be leased to generate revenue. No recommendations were made, and no decisions were requested by the Board.

What became clear during the discussion is that the committee has not yet defined its core goal. It remains unclear whether the focus is addressing overcrowding, responding to enrollment shifts, generating revenue, improving programming, or some combination of these factors. Board members also emphasized the need for accurate, evidence-based enrollment projections before any long-term decisions are made. Futures Committee meetings are open to the public. For now, the Futures Committee is gathering ideas — but the Board will need clearer goals and data before any direction is set.

School Safety: Asking How We Measure Success

School Board Member Derek Cathell, chair of the Safety Committee, presented an update on district safety efforts. During the discussion, District 4 Board Member Dr. Michelle Parsons raised a broader question about accountability, asking what safety metrics the district is currently tracking given the size of the safety budget.



As of December 31, the Safety & Security fund totals approximately \$1.65 million, with more than \$1.34 million—over 80% spent on personnel, primarily School Resource Officers (SROs) and constables. Dr. Parsons emphasized that with such a significant

investment, the Board should be tracking measurable outcomes, not just expenditures. Superintendent Dr. Jay Owens agreed that clearer, districtwide safety metrics would be helpful and stated that administration would work on providing that information to the Board.

Separately, the district received approximately \$200,000 from a national vaping lawsuit settlement. Administration is still determining how best to use those funds: detection measures or preventive education.

Curriculum Committee: Cursive Writing and Possible Third Grade Retention

School Board Member Ivan Neal, chair of the Curriculum Committee, provided an update highlighting the district's renewed focus on cursive handwriting instruction. Under Delaware law, all elementary schools are required to provide cursive instruction by the end of grade 4. With IRSD's adoption of Core Knowledge Language Arts (CKLA), formal cursive instruction now begins in grade 3. District administrators noted that this timing is developmentally appropriate, allowing younger students to first master basic letter formation and phonics.



During the Curriculum Committee meeting, administrators explained that professional development efforts in recent years have focused heavily on implementing the Science of Reading and transitioning from a balanced literacy model to structured literacy. At an upcoming Elementary

Principals meeting, principals will be reminded of the state cursive requirement and plans will be discussed to ensure consistent implementation across schools. The committee also discussed reinforcing cursive skills beyond elementary school, including signature instruction in middle school business courses and potential incorporation at the high school level.

At the Board meeting, District 4 Board Member Dr. Michelle Parsons welcomed the focus on cursive and asked for greater clarity around curriculum oversight, including who serves as the district's curriculum director and whether the Board could receive regular curriculum reports, similar to finance updates. She also raised questions about what curriculum metrics are being measured, particularly around reading comprehension, and how often those data are reviewed. Superintendent Dr. Jay Owens

agreed to ask the curriculum director to begin providing monthly curriculum reports to the Board.

The discussion also touched on student promotion and retention. District 4 Board Member Dr. Michelle Parsons referenced feedback from the recent staff survey, noting that many teachers expressed concern that students are being promoted without sufficient mastery and raised the question of whether third-grade retention should be considered. Board Member Kim Taylor added that retention may be more effective when addressed in earlier grades. Curriculum Committee Chair Ivan Neal agreed that the topic of retention should be reviewed further by the full Curriculum Committee.

Financial Reports: Spending, Oversight, and Planning Ahead

Several agenda items focused on the district's financial position, giving Board members a clearer picture of how spending is tracking and what risks lie ahead. At roughly the midpoint of the fiscal year, district spending remains below 50% of the total budget, suggesting the district is generally on track. At the same time, Board members emphasized that staying within budget overall does not eliminate serious pressure points that require closer attention.



One of those pressure points is energy. Board members expressed frustration with dramatic increases in electricity costs that are running above budget. With IRSD schools served by both Delmarva Power and Delaware Electric Cooperative, energy prices can vary widely by location, making costs difficult to

predict and manage. While adequately heating school buildings is essential for students and staff, the financial strain of these energy increases is significant. Board members noted that legislators need to understand the burden these rising utility costs place on school districts.

During the discussion, District 4 Board Member Dr. Michelle Parsons raised concerns about financial accuracy and oversight, referencing the recent mis-categorization of approximately \$5 million in another district, Appoquinimink School District. She asked who reviews and double-checks IRSD's financial reports before they reach the Board and what safeguards are in place to prevent similar errors. Finance Director Chris Parker explained that multiple layers of review are built into the process, including internal checks and verification through the state's financial reporting system.

Capital spending was also discussed. Dr. Parsons asked for clearer context on how change orders accumulate over time and what they represent as a percentage of the original project budget. Chris Parker stated that this cumulative figure will be included in the final project report and tracked for future major capital projects.

For minor capital improvements, Dr. Parsons noted that current reports show where money is spent but not what problems are actually resolved. Facilities Director Mr. Dooley will work with staff to summarize what conditions were corrected, what safety, code, or operational risks were mitigated, and whether issues are fully resolved or recurring.

Elevating Teacher Voices at Board Meetings

During the meeting, a broader governance idea was also raised regarding how teacher perspectives are represented at Board meetings. Both the Board President Mark Steele and District 4 Board Member Dr. Michelle Parsons expressed interest in creating opportunities to hear directly from teachers. Dr. Parsons suggested that inviting a Teacher of the Year recipient to speak could be a meaningful way to incorporate classroom perspectives into Board discussions. Superintendent Dr. Jay Owens agreed to explore that idea.

Community Members Are Welcome at IRSD Committee and School Board Meetings

Indian River School District committee meetings include Curriculum, Buildings & Grounds, Policy, Finance, and the Futures Committee, and they are open to the public. Committee meetings are held on the second Tuesday of each month at Millsboro Middle School. School Board meetings are also open to the public, including time for public comment, and take place on the fourth Monday of every month. Meetings may be attended in person or streamed live online, making it easier for residents to stay informed and engaged.

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