Richmond School Board to hold emergency meeting on 'devastating' SOL scores, potential leadership changes

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RICHMOND, Va. -- The Richmond School Board will hold an emergency meeting to discuss a "devastating decrease to student achievement" and potential division leadership changes, according to Board Chair Dr. Shonda Harris-Muhammed.

The decision came at the request of several board members after newly released data from the Virginia Department of Education revealed a significant drop in SOL scores in Richmond Public Schools.

Around two-thirds of all RPS students failed in the subjects of history, science, and writing during their first full year of in-person instruction since the COVID-19 shutdown, while a vast majority of other school districts saw improvements from the 2020-2021 school year.

The pass rate for all RPS students in history fell from 59% in 2020-2021 to 34% in 2021-2022. In writing, it fell from 55% to 36%. In science, it dropped from 46% to 32%. The pass rate for math rose from 32% to 37%. The pass rate for reading remained steady at 47%.

Harris-Muhammed said she expected to see a decline in test scores but did not anticipate the fail rates, which have left her "deeply concerned," to be so substantial.

"I have seen over time a level of concern rising within School Board members, and within the community, discussing openly about our student achievement," said Harris-Muhammed. "So for me, as a School Board representative, it was very disappointing."
The Chairwoman said addressing student outcomes "starts and ends" with the governance team to include all nine School Board members and Superintendent Jason Kamras.

Harris-Muhammed called for a critical analysis of the numbers to pinpoint the district's shortcomings and what needs to be changed.

"We need to unpack the data by ethnicity. We need to unpack it by gender. We need to unpack it by school. We need to unpack it by leadership. We need to unpack it by curriculum. We need to unpack it by all of those subgroups that are critically important to deciding if a school district is accredited or not," Harris-Muhammed said. "That requires the ten of us to have honest and courageous conversations. When that happens, we need to be able to speak transparently to the public."

Noting that the conversations are "not going to feel good," Harris-Muhammed called for accountability of how "adult behavior" has led to poor achievement.

During a June School Board retreat, the Council of Great City Schools, which advises and provides support to the governance team, released findings of its analysis of School Board meeting discussions between January and May.

The council found there were six meetings in which the RPS Board spent between 0-10% of discussion focused on student outcomes. Three meetings were listed at 0%. The highest percentage of time spent on student achievement was 31.8% during the Board's March 21 meeting.

When asked if Harris-Muhammed felt the Board has been distracted from addressing student achievement, she said, "I don't think the School Board caused interruptions in terms of discussing student achievement. I do believe, though, that it needs to remain a focal point of our agenda and the business at hand. The School Board is just one piece of student outcomes. We also have a leadership team (Kamras' administration)."
She said the Board will hold a special meeting Tuesday evening to talk about the SOL scores and privately discuss personnel matters.

"It's a sense of urgency, and anyone that does not see this as a sense of urgency, it would be a concern," Harris-Muhammed said. "What is it that we need to pivot right now before the 29th (start date for academic year), and how can the School Board support you in that pivoting process?"

Kamras' administration currently does not have a designated Chief Academic Officer, who would oversee all issues related to the curriculum, after Dr. Tracy Epps resigned over the summer. The Superintendent's cabinet is also missing a Chief Operating Officer and Chief Wellness Officer.

"We are trying to approve personnel as quickly as we meet. There may be some suggestions to change personnel. We don't know yet, so I don't want to put in an alarm into the public," Harris-Muhammed said.

When asked if leadership changes may apply to the Superintendent, Harris-Muhammed said, "That is a discussion for the will of the Board to have and if that should happen. At what point, if it does happen, the community will know."

The special meeting is scheduled for Tuesday at 6:30 p.m. at John Marshall High School. There will be a 30-minute public comment period followed by an open discussion by the Board. The meeting will wrap in closed session.

An RPS spokesperson said Kamras did not have any comments to share at this time.

However, Mayor Levar Stoney released the following statement which criticizes the School Board for a decision he said did not best address learning loss:
“No one should be surprised that prolonged virtual learning and the trauma of the pandemic would negatively impact academic outcomes. That’s why I continue to be disappointed that the RPS School Board declined to adopt a year-round academic calendar, despite extensive research showing that this would be the single most effective way to combat pandemic learning loss.

We must acknowledge the hard work and dedication of RPS staff, teachers and students over the past few years who have fought to recover from unprecedented disruptions to traditional learning.”

At least one School Board member, Jonathan Young, agreed with the mayor’s sentiment that the board should’ve adopted a year-round calendar.

But the Board’s Vice Chair, Kenya Gibson, attributes low performance to different factors.

“Unlike other districts in the state, RPS performed better during the virtual year than they did this past year when we were back in person. That’s what makes this so concerning. And our school year extended to the last week in June, far later than neighboring districts. From my perspective, the issues boil down to two things, our curriculum and our protocols around technology. We have heard from countless teachers that this new scripted curriculum does not align with our classroom needs. We also learned that students have spent an average of over 5 hours a day on YouTube. These are critical issues that need to be addressed with expediency,” Gibson said.

And in response to the mayor, Harris-Muhammed said RPS' current academic status cannot only be explained by COVID-19 impacts. Rather, she believes many issues can be traced to the division’s climate and culture.
She said the board will be dedicated to digging deeper to determine root causes of failing scores and improve student success "regardless of professional and political opinions." She added she's grateful for the mayor's financial support.

Meanwhile, Governor Glenn Youngkin said he was not shocked to see lower SOL scores in districts with these two factors: larger minority populations and prolonged COVID-19 restrictions. RPS falls into both categories.

"Virginia's kids in underserved areas have been hurt more than the average kid. Averages are dangerous, and we need to go look at the underlying data. What we see of course is those communities that have been underserved, those communities with Black students, with Latino students, with English learners, students with disabilities suffered far more," Youngkin said.

He added schools that stayed virtual longer following the 2020 shutdowns performed worse than those that opened sooner. RPS was one of the last districts in the state to reopen for in-person instruction.

RPS also continues to enforce classroom masking requirements for staff and students whose parents do not opt them out of a mandate. Youngkin said school leaders should stop "arguments about masks" and focus on the curriculum.

"That's not a decision for the school boards. It's not a decision for the superintendent. It is a decision for parents," Governor Youngkin said.

Harris-Muhammed encouraged parents to get involved in the conversation as well and wanted to thank teachers for their dedication to students.

"We are taking this seriously. The families to the students of RPS— They work with us. We cannot do this work without them. We cannot do this work without parents sharing with us what their students need," she said. "I just want to take the opportunity to say to
our teachers, I thank you for doing that hard work. I thank you for supporting our
children. I thank you for putting yourselves second."