

July 17, 2025 – Superintendent’s Work Session Remarks

“My recommended changes to this policy will allow our Board meetings to be more efficient and more focused on the business of students, teachers, and our schools – and will remove the liability associated with broadcast of public comments. Georgia law and Cobb County Board Policy BCBI authorize the board of education to set aside time, during regular Board meetings, for the general public to communicate directly with the Board and superintendent.

The public comment portion of a Board meeting is available for members of the public to share general comments – whether compliments, concerns, or simply information – directly with the board and superintendent. In fact, we offer far more opportunity for public comment than legally required. On board meeting days, we invite public comment at both the work session and voting session.

This is far from the only way for members of the public to communicate with District leadership. To actually solve a problem, if a parent or other member of the public has a concern, we strongly encourage that person to try to resolve the concern at the most immediate level. Speaking directly to the person with the most knowledge about the situation is the best approach to solve any problem.

Many years ago, we started broadcasting our board meetings. The majority of Georgia’s more than 180 school districts do not. This included broadcasting public comments – something extremely rare for a school district. In fact, there are districts that broadcast their meetings but do not broadcast public comment.

When a school district broadcasts public comments, we assume risk for the content. The risk is not necessarily attached to what is said, but the risk is attached to the fact of broadcasting what is said. The District has had to interrupt speakers and edit recordings due to legal concerns such as copyright infringement, or other intellectual property issues, or tortious speech. Despite our speakers agreeing to specific rules as a condition of public comment, we have public speakers who do not follow the rules they agreed to.

Because we broadcast and provide a recording of public comment, those recordings have been distributed across the internet by those who do not agree with what the speaker said, sometimes with alterations. We have never taken any steps to stop this and don’t have any plans to do so. But I have personally heard from citizens, including parents, who would like to engage in public comment with the Board and don’t, because they do not want to be subjected to internet ridicule, abuse, or doxxing. Some people are just camera shy, and do not sign up to

speak because they do not wish to appear in a broadcast.

These changes allow our Board meetings to be more efficient and more focused on the business of students, teachers, and our schools. They will resolve risks that the District faces when it broadcasts public comment. This will also hopefully encourage others who want to share their concerns directly with the board and superintendent to participate.

The law requires all Districts to adopt rules of conduct for public meetings by August 1 each year. These rules must include provisions for the removal of members of the public for actual disruption. These rules have been in place for several years.

There have been some misstatements about the proposed revisions. Any suggestion that these changes are meant to lessen a speaker's ability to express themselves is 100% false. Public speakers will have the same opportunity to make comments to the Board that they have always had. Nothing in the revisions limits the public's access to Board members or the District, or limits what they are able to say.

This will not diminish anyone's ability to comment in the least. Those who suggest otherwise are like someone who says, "Hey, I want to share something with you that concerns me, but I'm only willing to share it with you if you live stream the comment on the Internet and on your social media page. Oh – and you agree to assume legal responsibility and liability for anything I say." Frankly, that's ridiculous.

One of the Board members reportedly told the paper this is 'on brand' for me, and that this recommendation is to limit the "negative rhetoric" surrounding the school board. And, that I'm making this recommendation because of 'angst with some board members.' Let me completely and categorically tell you that these are absolutely false statements. No board member asked or suggested I make this recommendation. These comments are reckless and untrue. And frankly, after more than ten years, I'm used to false statements about me and outright and easily disprovable lies being spread. I do not think this will change that in the least. And those people who want to make those statements about me or members of this board will have the same opportunities they've had for the past decade.

This is my recommendation so our Board meetings can be more efficient and more focused on the business of students, teachers, and our schools. All this does is provide the district extra protection from potential legal risk and provide those who do not want to be broadcast across the Internet the opportunity to share their concerns with the board without being subjected to broadcast by the District. Nothing in these modifications changes the ability to express concerns

to this board or the content of public comment. In fact, I fully expect this change will result in an increase in negative comments.

This proposal has drawn criticism – many from the same critics who seemingly criticize everything this District does. There is an assertion that we are trying to keep public commenters quiet or keep the public from learning things public commenters say. That’s absolutely untrue. First, unlike most school districts, we have journalists attending every meeting of this board – often multiple journalists. If anyone says anything particularly sensational, it is likely to be in the news before the day is over – unless printing it would result in the newspaper facing legal liability. Second, there’s nothing preventing any commenter from recording their own statement, or any other portion of a public meeting, and putting it on their social media or internet page. They just assume the potential legal liability, not the district.

Also, with respect, the president of the Cobb County Association of Educators called the proposed policy changes a ‘slap in the face,’ saying ‘it’s almost like they’re trying to limit free speech.’ I have no idea how you ‘almost’ limit speech, but what I can say is that the real slap in the face is people who know better spreading baseless, nonsensical, and insulting comments. They know full well not everyone – including Cobb educators – want to have their opportunity to directly communicate with this board and me contingent upon being subjected to public broadcast. Again, if Mr. Hubbard, or anyone else from the Cobb Association of Educators, or anyone from any organization needs to have someone in the audience use their phone to record them making a public comment, they are still perfectly free to do so. They can then share it on their social media page – and they can assume any potential legal liability instead of the school district doing so.

We are either serious about being focused on students, teachers, and our schools or we are not. I can assure you, I am.”