



*The Helena Public Schools educate, engage, and empower each student to maximize his or her individual potential with the knowledge, skills and character essential to being a responsible citizen and life-long learner.*

Board of Trustees  
Special Board Meeting

Tuesday, May 30<sup>th</sup>, 2023  
Lincoln Campus and via Microsoft Teams  
11:00 a.m.

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## MINUTES

### ATTENDEES

*Trustees    Others*

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| Siobhan Hathhorn, Chair | Rex Wertz, Superintendent  |
| Linda Cleatus, Trustee  | Barb Ridgway, Chief of Staff   |
| Jeff Hindoiien, Trustee | Keri Mizell, Human Resources Director                                      |
|                         | Josh McKay, Assistant Superintendent 6-12                                  |
|                         | Joslyn Davidson, Curriculum Director                                       |
|                         | Janelle Mickelson, Business Manager  |
|                         | Gary Myers, Director of Educational Technology                             |
|                         | Karen Ogden, Communications Officer  |
|                         | Brian Cummings, Assistant Superintendent PreK-12                           |
|                         | Many guests of the public, staff and students of the Helena Public Schools |

#### I. CALL TO ORDER

Board Chair Siobhan Hathhorn called the meeting to order at 11:40 a.m.

## II. REVIEW OF AGENDA

The trustees reviewed the agenda, and no changes were made.

## III. GENERAL PUBLIC COMMENT

Ms. Melaina Kloberdanz gave general public comment. Ms. Kloberdanz is a student at Helena High School. Ms. Kloberdanz stated that she is involved in student council, NHS, mock trial, and a lot of other extracurricular activities. Ms. Kloberdanz is here today to talk about the budget crisis and possible solutions. Ms. Kloberdanz stated there have been a lot of rumors about electives and what may be cut or combined. Ms. Kloberdanz stated this is a complex and multifaceted issue and she believes the ultimate issue is regarding the boundaries between Helena High and Capital High. Ms. Kloberdanz stated if we redraw the boundaries between the two schools it could ultimately solve our issue and it would give Helena High equal opportunity and equal classes compared to what is offered to Capital High.

Mr. Robert Stimpson gave general public comment. Mr. Stimpson is a student at Helena High School. Mr. Stimpson is here today to talk about classes that have already been cut this year. Mr. Stimpson stated that the AP Capstone Curricula was not offered by Helena High this year. Mr. Stimpson stated that he has taken over a dozen AP classes at Helena High, and the AP Capstone Curricula, specifically the second class in the course, AP Research, has been the most valuable educational experience he has ever had. It taught him what he wants to do with the rest of his life, and it is the best resume builder he has ever used. Mr. Stimpson stated he submitted it on college applications and believes it contributed to him getting into the University of Chicago in the fall. When Mr. Stimpson took the course, he was the only person in the class, but he believes it is not a hard course for a teacher to teach, and that it is such a student-led course that he believes it could be taught at the same time as another class. Mr. Stimpson believes it would be a shame if Helena High lost the AP Capstone Curricula, and it would be bad for the students.

Mr. Ryan Burke gave general public comment. Mr. Burke is a student at Helena High School. Mr. Burke stated that he has been involved in music since the second grade, but never fully found his connection to music until he joined the Helena High jazz band. Through this course he has learned teamwork and leadership through daily rehearsals and participation in festivals. Mr. Burke said that he has gained confidence through this program and has been inspired to explore the art and history of jazz which has not only increased his appreciation of music but has exposed him to new perspectives on the history of the United States and the civil rights movement outside of class. Mr. Burke stated that he has bought and read multiple books about jazz and thinks it is worthwhile noting that if a course inspires a student to spend their own money to read a book you know you're doing something right. Mr. Burke stated that we lost a large portion of our students to East Helena, and while we do not have the power to force those students to return, we do have the power to redraw the lines between Capital High and Helena High to ensure that we provide an adequate and justly sized student body to enable us to offer the classes essential to a full education.

Ms. Robin Bryce gave general public comment. Ms. Bryce is a student at Helena High School. Ms. Bryce stated that she was informed that some of the classes at Helena High School may be reduced or cut and she thinks this is a terrible decision. She has been in choir all four years of high school and took orchestra in middle school. Ms. Bryce said choir has helped her get through high school and music is so important to the lives of not just kids, but everyone. Ms. Bryce stated that choir made her who she is today and has helped her make so many friends. Ms. Bryce believes that these cutbacks may only be made at Helena High School and she is asking for the same opportunities as East Helena High and Capital High and believes that the school boundaries need to be changed. Ms. Bryce stated that our state government has hit a surplus of money this year and yet our schools may be gutted from their most valuable programs. Ms. Bryce stated that we can advocate for the people who can't stand up for themselves and we have the power to speak to people who can get more funding and more support for our schools.

Ms. Lyla Ackerman gave general public comment. Ms. Ackerman is a student at Helena High School. Ms. Ackerman stated that she is speaking on behalf of the Helena High Choir program and is currently the Choir Club President. Ms. Ackerman stated that she and many of her peers saw the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their program. They had to invest in choir masks and film their concerts separate from their A and B day peers, however, they were cleared by the Health Department to have concerts as long as they followed the same guidelines that sports groups were. Ms. Ackerman stated they were refused this opportunity, limiting their chances to display the hard work of their choirs. Ms. Ackerman stated their choir program took another recent hit by the building of East Helena High School, and that they have lost many incoming students due to where the district lines are drawn. Ms. Ackerman stated that the choir program brings in people from all walks of life and they have learned to respect each other and to respect the cultures of music. Ms. Ackerman stated that all choir participants in the district Music Festival this year earned superior ratings in solos and duets, which takes extra investment of time outside of school and is a testament to the encouragement of a passionate teacher. Ms. Ackerman stated they need this level of instruction in order to achieve these accomplishments and this type of instruction would not be possible if we were to merge classes due to different levels of experience. Ms. Ackerman stated that enrollment numbers ebb and flow in school, especially in electives. Their numbers may show a lack of participation this year, but to give them a few years. Ms. Ackerman stated that they are speaking to encourage enrollment to keep an elective that is the only reason for coming to school for some students, and to keep Mrs. Kohoutek as a teacher because they have all learned something wonderful from her and they want more people to experience it too.

Mr. Brady Lay gave general public comment. Mr. Lay is a student at Helena High School and a member of the Helena High School Philharmonic Choir. Mr. Lay passed out documents to the Board of Trustees. Mr. Lay stated it has come to his attention that the board is considering shrinking or dissolving parts of the Helena High School choir program in an attempt to save money. Mr. Lay stated that he would like to bring to the board's attention two websites which can be seen on the footnotes of the document that he gave them. There is a link to a video essay on the topic by

Spencer Lee which can be accessed on YouTube and an online petition to change.org to encourage the school board to support the choir program and other such fine arts.

Ms. Greydyn Gildroy gave general public comment. Ms. Gildroy is a student at Helena High School. Ms. Gildroy has been in orchestra since she was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and is here today to talk about the orchestra program as she feels it has been repeatedly overlooked amongst school funding. Ms. Gildroy said there is one orchestra at Helena High School, and they are slowly but surely growing that number, but there is a high turnover rate due to lack of good equipment and lack of good facilities. They have an orchestra room, but they must play in the band room because the orchestra room is not temperature controlled.

Ms. Adelia Murray gave general public comment. Ms. Murray is a student at Helena High School. Ms. Murray stated that she started taking French I at Helena High School and it changed her life. She has learned so much about Parisian cultures and mannerisms from her amazing French teacher Ms. Bartels. Ms. Murray stated she will continue her French journey in her junior and senior year because fortunately there are enough students to keep the classes alive, but the same could not be said for German. Ms. Murray believes the German class will slowly be taken away and stated that we will not be able to be productive members of society if our language classes are stripped away. Ms. Murray stated that colleges love seeing a foreign language credit on your application and taking a foreign language immensely helps your future.

Mr. Mark Dudley gave general public comment. Mr. Dudley is a student at Helena High School. Mr. Dudley stated that he is an art student, and art has always been part of his life. Mr. Dudley said hearing that some of these programs may be reduced makes him think about the teachers that may be fired and the families they need to take care of, and students that would not be able to take these programs.

Ms. Kristin Drees gave general public comment. Ms. Drees is a parent of children in the Helena Public Schools. Ms. Drees said she was incredibly proud of her daughter and the other students that came to speak today. Ms. Drees stated that you can't expect students to ask for classes that are clearly not supported by the district. Ms. Drees stated that she is hoping that as we make the reductions that they will be equitable across the board, and that if we will be cutting classes that sports should also be cut. Ms. Drees stated that sports have dedicated fields, dedicated buildings, dedicated sheds for their equipment, and dedicated community involvement. Ms. Drees stated that the Mock Trial team went to nationals as a brand-new team and did not get the same press time or communication time as the sports teams did.

Ms. Adella Harris gave general public comment. Ms. Harris is a student at Helena High School. She is the Vice President at Helena High School for the upcoming schoolyear, a pole vaulter for the girls track team, on the golf team and in Business Professionals of America. Ms. Harris is here today to speak about the elementary schools in the Helena School District. Ms. Harris stated that on the Helena Education Association website it states there is talk about cutting music and P.E. and that

might be a burden that may fall on the general education elementary school teachers. Ms. Harris stated that elementary students have so much pent-up energy and deserve to have music and P.E. to help get that energy out.

Ms. Isabella Brewer gave general public comment. Ms. Brewer is a student at Helena High School. Ms. Brewer stated that she had a much different school experience than the rest of her peers. Ms. Brewer moved to the Helena Public Schools after attending high school in Arizona. Ms. Brewer stated that Arizona is ranked #50 in education in the United States and Montana is ranked #27. Ms. Brewer stated that she is very grateful to experience a higher value education here in Montana. Ms. Brewer stated that programs such as orchestra, photography, auto, culinary, French, theater, ceramics, and German, is essential to the health and happiness of students who would not otherwise have these opportunities. Ms. Brewer stated that choir has opened the door for her to many opportunities on a professional level. Ms. Brewer stated that you do not represent her and her fellow young musicians if you choose to cut funding for these programs, please take into consideration the amount of young lives you're cutting down before they even truly begin.

Ms. Loreley Drees gave general public comment. Ms. Drees is a student at Helena High School. Ms. Drees stated that here in Montana we are privileged to have children be apart of so many great activities. Ms. Drees stated that art has always been central to Helena and its community. Ms. Drees stated that AA school districts across the state are working to expand their arts programs and we should not fall behind. Ms. Drees stated that we should encourage students from a young age to participate in fine arts activities. Ms. Drees stated that we see a community built on raising \$20,000 for new football jerseys, yet the community support for the arts has been severely declining. Ms. Drees stated that the arts deserve the same amount of respect, funding, and support as sports do.

Mr. Ken Lay gave general public comment. Mr. Lay is the parent of a student in the Helena Public Schools. Mr. Lay stated that the impact of the loss of nearly 500 students from Helena High School was utterly predictable many years ago. When that happened, Mr. Lay said he and many others assumed the boundaries between Capital High School and Helena High School would be redrawn because if you don't redraw the boundary, the result is that the entire demographic blow is absorbed entirely by Helena High School. Mr. Lay stated that the school board needs to come up with some sort of a short-term fix and they need to redraw the boundaries. Mr. Lay stated that he is a real believer in fine arts education, and it is essential for the mental health of students.

Ms. Patricia Burke gave general public comment. Ms. Burke is the parent of a student in the Helena Public Schools. Ms. Burke is here today to advocate for the jazz band and the entire music program. Ms. Burke is concerned that Helena High School will lose the jazz band because they cannot fulfill the minimum 14 members that would need to be in it. Ms. Burke stated how important music and jazz band has been to her family and how involved her entire family has been in jazz band and

music in the Helena Public Schools. Ms. Burke stated that over the past five years, she has watched Helena High's student population dwindle which has been very apparent at band concerts. Ms. Burke stated that two problems contributed to the lower number of band students this year. One problem is the school board has not dealt with the loss of East Helena students; thus, Helena High has lost close to 1/3 of their student body. The second problem that impacted the music program was the inability for music students to perform for the first several months during the 2020-2021 school year. At the same time, indoor sports continued. This resulted in several students quitting music since there was no goal (performance). Ms. Burke concluded her public comment by asking the board if the cuts are equal between the high schools, are Helena High students taking the brunt of the financial decision, and if they are providing equal opportunity to the Helena High band program.

Mr. Sean Burke gave general public comment. Mr. Burke is the parent of a student in the Helena Public Schools. Mr. Burke is here today to express his concern over our district's recent decision to potentially remove a number of fine arts electives offered at Helena High School, and he assumes this decision was heavily influenced by the current enrollment numbers. Mr. Burke stated that the COVID pandemic had a particularly damaging effect on the arts programs at Helena High School. Mr. Burke stated that although many of the classes did their best under the circumstances, all their hard work would be for not because in the months following the initial class closures, students were told that the concerts and performances they had been preparing for had been cancelled. Mr. Burke said from what he understands, we were the only AA district to not have any form of pep band, jazz band and symphonic performances during this period, however, sports continued. Mr. Burke stated that our performing arts program struggles were further amplified when large numbers of students chose to leave Helena High for the new high school in East Helena. Under these conditions, it's not surprising that the enrollment in classes such as jazz band suffered a heavy blow. Mr. Burke stated that we have an important decision before us and cutting costs is never easy, however, he asks that in making our decision, we consider the circumstances that resulted in some of the enrollment numbers we are seeing. The reduction in numbers is not simply due to disinterest in fine arts programs that are no longer relevant, rather, they are primarily results of recent events that were particularly harmful to a certain segment of the Helena School system curriculum. If given a little time, these courses will flourish again.

Ms. Kathy Lay gave general public comment. Ms. Lay is a parent of a student in the Helena Public Schools. Ms. Lay stated that music is incredibly important to her family and because of her children attending the fine arts programs here in Helena one of her children is now part of the choir in college, another one of her children has produced music on multiple online outlets, one of her children went on a mission trip to a different country and could only bring a few items and chose to bring their violin with them, and for their youngest child who is still in the Helena Public Schools, music and theater is his outlet. Ms. Lay stated that other options need to be explored rather than cutting these programs.

That concluded general public comment.

#### IV. NEW BUSINESS

##### A. Item for Information

##### 1. Trustee Orientation

The Board of Trustees were introduced to district department leaders listed below and their staff members. Department leaders and staff members stated their names, what they do in the district, and answered any questions the trustees had.

Technology-Gary Myers and staff

Facilities-Todd Verrill and staff

Chief of Staff-Barb Ridgway and Allison Balboni and Karen Ogden

Transportation-Tom Cohn and staff

Assistant Superintendent Pre-K-5-Brian Cummings and Valice Stevens

Assistant Superintendent 6-12-Josh McKay and Allison Balboni

Athletic Director-Tim McMahon & Kelli Kessler

Business Office-Janelle Mickelson and staff

Curriculum-Joslyn Davidson and Katrina Salois

Federal Programming and Data Assessment-Kaitlyn Hess

Human Resources-Keri Mizell and staff

SACC-Kirstan Roush and staff

Special Education-Sean Maharg and staff

#### V. BOARD COMMENTS

The Trustees discussed how valuable the orientation was today and that there is a lot that gets done for kids every day by a great team of dedicated people.

**VI. ADJOURNMENT**

The meeting was adjourned at 3:16 p.m.

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Candice Delvaux, Recording Secretary Date