

Governance Board Meeting Minutes

Date: January 24, 2026

Time: Approximately 6:00 PM - 7:44 PM

Location: Lab School Learning Lab, Memorial Building

Meeting Type: Biannual Governance Board Meeting

Attendance

Members Present

- Velma Bryant, Dean of Academic Partnerships, Blue Ridge Community College
- Will Childs, Digital Engine Software Group
- Anthony Whitehead, Director of Training and Development,
- Mark L'Esperance, Dean of the College of Education
- John Downey, President, Blue Ridge Community College
- Xavier Grier, Community-Engagement Liaison
- Krista Smiley, Assistant Director LAB School
- Brady Strickler, Principal, Spotswood High School
- Chris Noll, Principal, Turner Ashby High School Principal
- Graham Davidson, Policy Analyst, College of Education
- Donna Abernathy, RCPS Assistant Superintendent
- Jessica Spiller, Fiscal and Administrative Specialist, LABSchool
- Donica Hadley, Executive Director, LAB School

I. Welcome and Tour

The meeting opened with introductions to welcome new members and provide an opportunity for board members and partners to become acquainted.

The meeting began with a tour of the JMU Lab School 11th grade space, providing Governance Board members with an opportunity to observe the learning environment and student experiences firsthand.

Key Highlights

- The facility was transformed from an unused storage area/classroom into a fully functional learning environment.
- Design choices were intentional and focused on student engagement and accessibility.
- Spaces include:
 - Flexible seating arrangements
 - Writable whiteboard surfaces throughout
 - Smart board technology and connected displays
 - Collaborative workspaces
 - Areas for puzzles, chess, and hands-on activities
- Student use of personal cell phones is restricted in accordance with district policy.
- Learning activities emphasize hands-on engagement upon arrival.

School Identity Integration

Facility colors were intentionally chosen to represent participating schools:

- East Rock High School: Red
- Broadway High School: Green
- TA: Black and Gray
- Additional Lab School colors: Purple and Yellow

Safety and Security Updates

Board members reviewed security features incorporated into the facility:

- Keypad-secured entrances and exits
- Controlled access to the Lab School area
- Secured hallway learning spaces
- Continued work on student restroom access procedures to improve efficiency while maintaining security

II. Enrollment and Program Updates

Enrollment

The Board received an update on current enrollment:

- **Cohort 1:** 99 students
- **Cohort 2:** 194 students
- **Cohort 3:** 164 students
- **Total Enrollment:** 457 students

The JMU Lab School is currently the **largest laboratory school in the Commonwealth of Virginia.**

Retention

- **Student Retention:** 93.6% of students from Cohort 1 continued/re-enrolled in the program.
- **Teacher Retention:** 88% of teachers from the 2025 school year have continued with the program.

School Climate and Qualitative Data

The Board reviewed qualitative data related to school climate.

- Mean ratings across all surveyed school climate areas were **4.5 or higher on a 5-point scale.**
- Lab School results exceeded the overall RCPS county averages in the areas surveyed.
- Student and teacher well-being continues to be an area of focus.
- Potential to focus on teacher responses at the school board meeting and share this highlight

Student and Teacher Support

The first 30 days of the school year have emphasized **community building and establishing strong relationships and routines.**

Current support structures include:

- Assistant Director support for teachers through instructional strategies, lesson planning, and instructional coaching.
- Principal support through regular meetings with the Executive Director.
- Learning coaches supporting students through small-group check-ins and 1:1 check-in. Focus on monitoring grades and overall well-being of students

III. Notable Achievements and Celebrations

The Board discussed several recent accomplishments and celebrations:

- **Secretary of Education Visit:** Dr. Smith visited the Lab School on September 14, 2026. The visit provided an opportunity to highlight student critical thinking, collaboration, and the Lab School learning model.
- **9th Grade Celebration:** The Lab School welcomed its newest cohort with a dedicated day focused on community building, celebration, and relationship development.

IV. Program Development and Partnerships

Blue Ridge Community College Partnership

The partnership with **Blue Ridge Community College (BRCC)** is fully underway, with Dual Enrollment courses currently being offered to 11th-grade students.

Discussion also included opportunities to examine how successful Dual Enrollment experiences and lessons learned through the Lab School could inform or be replicated at other Dual Enrollment locations.

12th Grade Curriculum Development

Initial development of the 12th-grade curriculum is underway, with an emphasis on continued career preparation, partnerships, and authentic experiences.

Planning has also begun to identify **community partners who may serve as mentors for 12th-grade students.**

JMU X-Labs and Design Thinking

The Lab School is partnering with **JMU X-Labs** to incorporate Design Thinking experiences into the 11th-grade curriculum.

The Lab School continues to explore partnerships across JMU departments and programs to expand opportunities available to students.

Accessibility Considerations

The board reviewed accessibility features incorporated into the facility design, including:

- Wheelchair-accessible learning spaces
- Furniture and room layouts designed to accommodate students with mobility needs
- Planning intended to serve current and future students requiring accommodations

V. Student Outcomes and Research

Chronic Absenteeism

Current data indicate that chronic absenteeism among Lab School students is approximately **10% lower than among non-Lab School students**. (Broadway and East Rock represented in the data)

Upcoming Research

The Lab School is preparing to conduct **teacher focus groups** to gather additional qualitative feedback and inform program development.

A formal protocol has been developed for individuals and organizations seeking to conduct research in partnership with the Lab School. At this time, research partnership opportunities are open to the **JMU College of Education and Blue Ridge Community College**.

VI. Academic and Instructional Updates

The Board received an update on ongoing academic and instructional work.

Current priorities include:

- Continued curriculum development across grade levels.
- Initial development and planning for the 12th-grade curriculum.
- Maintaining a high level of student-centered engagement.
- Continued alignment of rubrics and assessments with academic standards.
- Ongoing instructional support and collaboration with teachers.

VII. Finance and Operations

The Board received the current **Fiscal Report** for review.

Motion: Dr. John Downey moved to approve the Fiscal Report.

Second: Dean L'Esperance seconded the motion.

Action: The motion was approved by all Board members present.

VIII. Governance and Ad Hoc Committees

Bylaws Ad Hoc Committee

An ad hoc committee was established to review and provide recommendations regarding the Governance Board bylaws.

Committee Members:

- Anthony
- John

- Graham
- Donica
- Donna

All individuals present were invited to provide feedback on the draft bylaws by emailing Donica.

Handbook Ad Hoc Committee

The following individuals will serve on the Handbook Ad Hoc Committee:

- Krista Smiley
- Donna
- Velma
- Brandy Strickler

Grant Application Ad Hoc Committee

The following individuals will serve on the Grant Application Review Ad Hoc Committee:

- Chris
- Graham
- Krista
- Donica

IX. Parent Advisory Council

The Board discussed the addition of parent representatives to serve in an advisory capacity.

- An ad hoc committee will be established to develop the structure and process for parent representation.
- **Donica will chair the committee.**
- The Board is seeking to identify one or more **non-voting parent representatives**.
- The Executive Director (Donica) will work with school principals to identify potential parent representatives.

- The Parent Advisory Council will meet with the Executive Director and Assistant Director to provide feedback and perspective on the Lab School experience.

X. Community Advisory Council

The Board discussed the creation of a community advisory council to strengthen relationships with community partners and ensure continued community input into the Lab School.

Anthony Whitehead and Xavier Grier will work on developing the structure and membership of the community advisory council.

XI. Public Comments

Several themes emerged during the public comment period.

Appreciation for the Lab School Model

Community and school representatives expressed appreciation for:

- The integration of academic content and hands-on learning.
- Opportunities for student collaboration.
- The ways in which the Lab School is embedded within students' home schools, particularly during 9th and 10th grades.
- Students maintaining connections to their home schools and school communities beyond their Lab School experience.
- The Lab School's role in enhancing the overall school district rather than competing for or diverting resources from individual schools.

Enrollment and Community Messaging

One school noted that it continues to experience lower enrollment and is exploring ways to more effectively communicate the Lab School model and its benefits to students, families, and the broader community.

Blue Ridge Community College Partnership

BRCC representatives expressed appreciation for the partnership and the opportunity to see the vision for the Lab School becoming a reality.

Discussion included opportunities to:

- Identify lessons learned from the current Dual Enrollment model.
- Explore ways to replicate successful Dual Enrollment experiences at other locations.
- Think creatively about staffing and instructor models to support the long-term sustainability of Dual Enrollment opportunities.

Sustainability

The Board discussed the importance of continuing to explore innovative approaches to Dual Enrollment instruction and staffing as the Lab School grows.

XII. Adjournment

The meeting concluded following updates, committee assignments, and public comment.

The next meeting will be on Thursday, January 28, 2027 (Meeting place: TBD)