

BOE Caucus Meeting Feb. 17, 2026

- Discussion of student walk out and concern for student safety. Morris raises concerns that certain non-JCPS people were involved/organizing for political gain.
- Ruanne presented on test scores for high school graduation preparedness – students taking the exam this fall for the second time scored very low, especially in math.
- Budget discussions.

Regular BOE Meeting Feb. 19, 2026

Roll call:

- Dr. Norma Fernandez, **Superintendent**
- Dr. Francine C. Luce, **Business Administrator**
- Maryann McKenzie, **Board Secretary**
- Ramon Rivera, **Board Counsel**

Members of the Jersey City Board of Education

- Noemi Velazquez, President
- Dejon Morris, Vice President
- George P. Blount
- Natalia Ioffe
- Afaf Muhammad
- Alpa B. Patel
- Tia Rezabala
- Dr. Matthew Schneider
- Lorenzo Richardson

Key Takeaways

- Discussion of student walk out from last week – high school students walked out during instructional hours to protest ICE. The Board officially denounced the involvement of outside parties and local politicians in a recent anti-ICE student protest, expressing concern that students were being used for political agendas, and passed a motion to ban Mussab Ali from all JCPS.
- Presentation by David Sciarra of Genova Burns LLC regarding the school budget -anticipate a roughly \$200M budget shortfall due to the predicted cost of education vs. Jersey City tax levy and payroll tax revenues. District will be requesting State assistance, but a tax raise above the 2% cap is likely.
- After waiting several hours for public comment to begin, Trustee Morris made a motion to reduce public comment from 3 mins to 1 min (speakers had already been advised due to the number of speakers registered (54) and the packed agenda, that they were

shortening comment to 2 mins). This was met with public outcry.

- Discussion regarding moving of PS 16 kindergarten program from Annex to Danforth to as temporary way to address downtown over-crowding issues. Many public comments were regarding Danforth kindergarten move; lots of criticism of District of lack of planning and no long-term solution.
- Other public comment included a demand for the release of the rest of the special education report, concerns regarding the use of technology in schools, and upkeep of buildings and student safety.

Presentations for Black History Month

David Sciarra, Presentation on School Budget Issues (architect of NJ school funding)

- Governor's budget was supposed to come out end of Feb.; Sherrill has asked for an extension to the end of March
- JCPS facing issues/problems with the state funding formula
- Total district operating budget is just over \$1B. 60% of budget is comprised of "adequacy budget" \$615m – cost of providing all JCPS students with a basic education and basis for SFRA formula
 - Other outside aid is per pupil aid from the state and federal govt. – preschool, transportation, special ed., etc.
- State has "wealth equalized funding" formula. State has a formula for "local fair share" based on the local property tax, property values and resident income levels.
- S2 bill passed in 2018 to phase out adjustment aid to JC. In response, JC put into place the payroll tax to offset this aid decrease
- All payroll tax is supposed to go to JCPS, but City can keep 3% to cover admin costs for recovery of taxes
- For 25-26 SY [THIS WAS LAST YEAR], adequacy budget totaled \$732k – this is determined by the state. Local fair share as computed by the state is \$739k – first time this amount has exceeded the adequacy budget. Expect this number to go up in state's anticipated budget
- Local tax levy is \$452m – gap of \$280m. Payroll tax estimate is \$80.9m, so still have \$200m deficit. Used \$82m banked cap to cover some of the deficit.
- No estimated state aid because expectation is we will be self-supporting
- Only \$70m available in Banked Cap for the coming year.
- Local levy has always been beneath the adequacy budget because state imposes a 2% per year tax levy increase – this was paused in 2019-2023 when state allowed JC to increase taxes to try to catch up to adequacy budget, but still not sufficient. Unclear if state will pause this again to allow levy tax increase.
- JC current tax rate is 2.04%; state avg is 1.81%
- Payroll tax supposed to be going fully to fund schools; suggests a full audit of payroll tax – what was actually collected and how was it allocated.
- City will be getting much better information now on employers to allow them to go after employers for the payroll tax.
- Need to request state aid to help with adequacy budget and local fair share.

- PILOTS – when this happens, the value of those buildings is not available for property tax collection and schools are excluded from PILOT payments. Need to change the laws on this.
- Requests – slides will be made public in Board Docs
- Valazquez – requests public participation/support as we approach budgeting. Attend City Council and state legislative meetings to request support.

Student Representative Report from Citywide Student Council Meeting

- Number 1 student concern is building conditions/facility improvement – maintenance and upkeep
- More resources for schools – school clubs, arts, etc.
- Students concerns/lack of understanding re certain school policies
- Student rep plans to make a newsletter to update students re BOE meetings and actions
- Concerns re bullying and safety

Superintendent Statements & Report

- Discussion re high school student walk out last week to protest ICE.
- Fernandez saying they need to protect all students first and they need to stay on campus during school hours. Saying political figures were encouraging/planning the walk out and targeting kids to get numbers/attention.
 - o JC Times article covering this stated that students interviewed said the walk out was a student-led idea and they reached out to Mussab Ali and others for support
- Discussion of PS 16 K bussing to Danforth. Growth downtown has exploded and current buildings cannot safely accommodate the number of students – need an additional 13 classrooms. No other way to deal with this overcrowding immediately. Fernandez sent PS16 parents a communication today with plan/timeline. In discussions with the City to discuss options for long term solutions; Fernandez and some BOE members have also met with parents to hear questions/concerns.
- Morris makes a motion to strengthen the Code of Conduct and to ban Mussab Ali from all JCPS facilities without prior approval of Superintendent.
 - o Morris says “rally” organized by Mussab Ali made students violate the JCPS code of conduct, and that it could have been a safety issue if more students have attended. Says Ali is a potential threat to students.
 - o Basically Morris is saying BOE would have been held responsible if a student was hurt – no one else would have been responsible, so he doesn’t want them to participate.
 - o Encouraging Superintendent to discipline the students that participated.
 - o Counsel plans to issue a “cease and desist” letter to Ali to clarify what he can and cannot do.
 - o Muhammad saying rally could have been done after school or on a weekend. Apparently Velazquez communicated with Ali about hosting the rally but he thought a walk out had more impact.
 - o Matt S – there has not been an investigation, no evidence that Ali actually planned this versus students, so not voting yes here.

- Tia R – don't want to "credit" Ali with planning this, and don't have enough information.
- Morris – trying to rehabilitate this. Saying there is evidence that Ali was the organizer of the event and social media proof to try and get JCPS students to participate. Saying there have been District-supported walk outs before in safe locations.
- Ioffe – apparently Ali said students would not be disciplined; not up to him.
- Richardson – doesn't feel information he has is sufficient and this deserves an investigation before banning Ali.
- Gwen (student rep) – students have been planning a rally for this Sunday at 1 pm at City Hall
- Motion passes, ban is put into effect.

Public Comment

- Morris moves to shorten public comment to one min, given the number of speakers (54)
- Richardson – you previously said 2 mins when meeting started
- Motion to limit to 1 min passes (Tia, Matt and Lorenzo voted no)
- Lots of public comment on PS 16 move to Danforth – why is this happening now, what is the long term plan, this was not a surprise – no planning
- Comments about technology in schools, release of special education budget
- Concerns re use of Yonder bags which hold phones during the day – students rush to get their devices at the end of the day; students don't have access in case of emergency
- Concerns about ICE; statements of support for student walk out
- Concerns about district/board failures to remedy actions and continue to pay to settle lawsuits – fiscal irresponsibility. \$275,000 settlement just reached in Feb, with former JCPS employee. 16 lawsuits with former employees for harassment, discrimination, etc with 6 figure settlements. No action taken to reprimand/remove the people in positions of power who are causing these suits/complaints.
- Concerns about mice, rats, quality of food – employee saying she got a cease-and-desist letter for making statements on social media.
- Jim Nelson – where are we with the 2025 annual audit – would like it available before budgeting for next year.

Fernandez response to parent comments:

- JC has been building high rises downtown without regard for schools/servicing the population of downtown area; JCBOE cannot build schools – we are a State Development Fund system
- City refused to rebuild the old PS 3 school to accommodate over-crowding downtown; resolution was to use Danforth for pre-K
- Annex was originally supposed to be for pre-K, but by the time it was ready it was already too full, so needed to be used for K
- PS 16 was remodeled last year and added 6 additional classrooms
- Aware that this is a temporary solution, but need City assistance – encourage parents to complain to the City.

Valezquez:

- There is a 4-person board committee working with PS 16 parents and City Hall to try to engage in long-term planning for
- Morris is chair of Community Outreach Committee – upcoming meetings will be held at PS 16 and Danforth

Board discussion:

- Eminent domain raised – board counsel clarifies that the BOE does not have that authority, City needs to do that
- Muhammad: We need a solution – cant just hear complaints and not do anything/come up with a plan
- Afaf: encourage community to contact the state/governor – we need fiscal support
- Ioffe: there have been attempts to institute public/private partnerships, but “community givebacks” are already mandated to be affordable housing so developers are not incentivized to provide additional incentives
- Tia – motion for BOE to ask Dr. Fernandez to issue the rest of the Spec. Ed. Report within the next 30 days, unless there are some legal constraints that prevent it from being release, and, if so, a report to the board from counsel outlining the issue with release and how to resolve and a timeline
 - o Didn’t pass; Ioffe saying they can just talk to Fernandez about the status, don’t need a formal time frame
- Morris – meeting with PS 16 parents – want a long term solution for PS 16 overcrowding. Asking for a motion directing the Superintendent to work with the administration/City to come up with a long term plan.
 - o Motion added and passed.
- Richardson – raising some JCPS communication issues.

GO TO CLOSED SESSION AT 9:40 PM; COME BACK AT 11:30 PM

Votes

- Velazquez: starts by apologizing to Richardson for her comment.
- All budget items passed, including next year school calendar, with no discussion
- Tia/Afaf issue re abstention and no vote on special ed