



CITY OF FORT LAUDERDALE

**MEETING MINUTES  
CITY OF FORT LAUDERDALE  
EDUCATION ADVISORY BOARD  
Thursday, February 19, 2026, 6:00 p.m.  
101 NE 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave  
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33311**

June 2025 - May 2026

<b>Members</b>	<b>Attendance</b>	<b>Present</b>	<b>Absent</b>
Chair Janet Gualtieri	P	5	1
Brian Bender	P	2	0
Heather Brinkworth	P	4	2
Kristina Dever	P	6	0
John Gillen	A	4	2
Erin Gohl	P	5	1
Juliet Gray-Williams	P	5	1
Kristin LaFleur	A	5	1
Lacresha Cooper	P	4	2
Cary Tabora	P	4	2
Pamela Vance	P	5	1
Jose Ruggero	P	2	0

**Also Attending**

Ashley Dixon, Policy Analyst, City Manager’s Office  
K Cruitt, Recording Secretary, Prototype Inc.  
Maxence Doytier, Member of the Public

**Call to Order and Determination of Quorum**

The meeting was called to order at 6:06 p.m. Roll was called and it was determined a quorum was present.

**Pledge of Allegiance**

Chair Gualtieri asked the Board to rise for the Pledge of Allegiance.

**Approval of January 15, 2026, Minutes**

Mr. Ruggero asked to please note that his name is spelled Ruggero — there is no “i.”

**Motion** made by Erin Gohl, seconded by Cary Tabora to approve January 15, 2026, Minutes as corrected. In a voice vote, the **motion** passed unanimously.

### **Old Business**

Chair Gualtieri noted that a presentation to the Commission regarding graduation venues was unnecessary, as the Commission had already received input from the Board of Education and the community. As a result, commencement exercises will be held at the same venues as last year.

Chair Gualtieri welcomed new member Maxence Doytier, who introduced himself as a public art professional and founder of Twenty6North. She also announced the recent retirement of Susan Leon, Chief Education Officer. In response, Ms. Ashley Dixon, Policy Analyst, introduced herself as the interim liaison in Ms. Leon’s absence, providing her contact information and explaining her role in distributing minutes and agendas, as well as serving as a liaison between the Board and the School Board. She noted that Ms. Leon had already informed key contacts to reach out to her going forward.

Discussion briefly touched on the Commission, budget matters, and scholarships. Ms. Gray-Williams suggested giving Ms. Dixon time to adjust, noting that Commissioners are already familiar with this Board. Ms. Brinkworth emphasized the importance of maintaining focus on the scholarship program, as most information comes from the School District. Ms. Dixon shared that Ms. Leon had prepared her well for the transition, and both Ms. Brinkworth and Ms. Vance acknowledged that the hiring process for a permanent replacement will take time, formally welcoming Ms. Dixon to her new role.

Regarding the hiring process, Ms. Gohl proposed that the Board provide input on desired qualities for candidates, possibly identifying a top three list. Dr. Cooper suggested waiting until candidates are identified before offering recommendations, and Ms. Vance encouraged patience throughout the process. The discussion concluded with Ms. Vance noting that a new Chief Education Officer position had just been posted that day.

- **Communication to the Commission – Chair Janet Gualtieri**

None

- **Redefining Schools Update – Chair Janet Gualtieri**

None

### **New Business**

- **Vice Chair Vacant Position**

Mr. Bender requested clarification on the responsibilities of the Vice Chair position, and Chair Gualtieri provided the explanation.

**Motion** made by Brian Bender, seconded by Erin Gohl to appoint Mr. Bender as Vice Chair. In a voice vote, the **motion** passed unanimously.

- **Mayor's Newsletter**

The discussion centered on the Mayor's suggestion that the City explore starting its own charter school with an AI-focused curriculum, modeled after Coral Springs and Pembroke Pines. Ms. Gohl and Mr. Tabora reviewed the proposal, noting that it would ideally be workforce-focused and possibly located in the old courthouse. While Mr. Tabora thought it was a good idea, he expressed concerns about the number of charter schools and clarified he did not want it to be exclusively AI-focused.

Vice Chair Bender emphasized that the Board represents the interests of Fort Lauderdale residents and stressed that public schools should remain the primary focus, as they provide access to all students. He indicated that support for a charter school could be considered only if it benefits the City but cautioned against diverting resources from existing public schools. Ms. Gohl and Ms. Vance agreed, noting that Fort Lauderdale already offers robust educational opportunities, including magnet programs like the high-tech program at Dillard High School, and highlighted the impact on full-time equivalent (FTE) funding if resources were redirected.

Mr. Ruggero noted that AI could be integrated into the curriculum across all schools, and Dr. Cooper stressed that funding a charter school could undermine public schools, potentially causing staff and student losses. Chair Gualtieri observed that the Mayor's suggestion could put the Board in a conflicted position. Gohl added that a strong public school system supports workforce development and pointed out that the City already has substantial technology integration, such as Microsoft Co-Pilot applications.

The conversation also addressed funding concerns, with Vice Chair Bender highlighting that charter schools often compete with the public system and that public education needs better financial support. Questions were raised about after-school programs, state funding allocation, and public awareness of existing programs. Ms. Brinkworth noted that misconceptions about under-enrolled schools could be addressed through better outreach, and Mr. Ruggero confirmed that schools produce annual reports. Dr. Cooper and Vice Chair Bender emphasized the need for a sustained public relations effort to promote Fort Lauderdale schools.

Ms. Gray-Williams suggested inviting the Mayor to a future meeting to discuss the charter school proposal directly, and Chair Gualtieri requested that Ms. Dixon extend the invitation to the Mayor so the Board can gain a clearer understanding of his vision.

## **Member Discussion**

Chair Gualtieri noted approximately 1,000 job cuts in the Board of Education, with Vice Chair Bender pointing out that affected staff may seek work at charter schools. While Chair Gualtieri suggested inviting them to a meeting, Ms. Gohl and others agreed it was too early. Ms. Vance highlighted the broader impact on families, homelessness, and school budgets, prompting Chair Gualtieri to add an update on job cuts to the next agenda.

The Board discussed City employees volunteering in schools, with Ms. Gohl, Ms. Brinkworth, and Ms. Vance supporting one to two hours per week of volunteer time. Scholarship opportunities were reviewed, with Ms. Brinkworth asking Ms. Dixon to remind principals that each high school has two scholarships available. Dr. Cooper emphasized including links in newsletters for easier access.

Other topics included the Parks bond, school lunch debt and inequities (Ms. Gohl), consolidating annual school reports, and linking school performance data online for accessibility. The Board confirmed magnet schools remain active and briefly considered AI programs for after-school offerings, with Vice Chair Bender noting the challenges of scaling within a large district.

**Motion** made by Juliet Gray-Williams, seconded by Brian Bender to invite the Mayor to attend the next EAB meeting to have a round table discussion pertaining to his recent newsletter regarding the downtown charter school proposal and the future of public education in the city of Fort Lauderdale. In a voice vote, the **motion** passed unanimously.

Ms. Dixon shared that Commissioner Sorenson requested feedback from the Board on hosting an essay contest for the City's upcoming 250th birthday, asking students to reflect on what the Declaration of Independence means to them.

Mr. Tabora noted the contest would need to occur in April and May to meet deadlines. Ms. Brinkworth asked for clarification on the Board's role, and Ms. Dixon explained the Board's involvement would be advisory only; they would not judge entries, as has been the practice in the past.

Vice Chair Bender added that teacher training materials are being updated with a focus on patriotism, and a related door-decorating contest is planned with a mid-April deadline. The Board agreed the idea is positive but noted concerns about timing and emphasized the need to remain impartial. Ms. Gohl asked about the age range, and Ms. Dixon clarified that the contest is open to students citywide.

There being no further business to come before the Board at this time, the meeting was adjourned at 7:37 p.m.

**The next regular meeting is March 17, 2026.**