

BILLINGS CATHOLIC SCHOOLS BOARD MEETING

August 19, 2026 at 4:00 pm

SFC Teacher's Lounge

Opening Prayer	Mark DeHart
Non-Voting Members/Guests Present	Heather Mueller, Nolan Trafton, Kathy Harris, Leah Gibson, Fr. John Pankratz, Mac McCann, Suzanne Vaira, Deb Hayes David Guenther, Jennifer Weisen, Jarred Weisen
Meeting Minutes	June and July meeting minutes were reviewed. Jenn made the motion to approve June and July meeting minutes. Luke seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.
Public Comment Period	David Guenther, a parent of two high school-aged boys who play soccer, addressed the board regarding the newly adopted policy restricting 8 th grade participation in high school athletics. He mentioned that the boys' soccer team has 21 participants currently. He and other parents feel this is not enough participation to field a junior varsity team along with varsity. They hesitate to have athletes who regularly participate on the varsity team to play on the junior varsity team, as that heightens the risk of injury and exhaustion. They had approached Nolan and Pat and requested that 8 th graders be allowed to participate and were denied. Verbiage in the policy states that 8 th grade participation should be rare and used only when the high school program is at risk. Some parents and board members feel this verbiage is open to interpretation and could be clearer. Andrew provided a statement (attached) regarding some of the feedback he has received on the matter.
BCSF	Shanna spoke in Adam's absence. She mentioned that six new board members were brought on earlier this month. Adam has announced his plans to move and vacate his position as Foundation President, so a transition plan is in the works. He plans to stay on through Rams Day of Giving in October. Erika Burke is this year's Foundation liaison from the school board. Rams Day of Giving will take place on October 8 th .

ADMINISTRATION REPORT

BCS President	Andrew welcomed back board members after the brief summer break. He announced that Rocky Mountain College brought on a new Athletic Director in January of this year. As a result, Rocky wants an amendment to the MOU that was drafted in 2024 between them and BCS regarding the Urbaska softball field. The MOU states that no fees will be charged to BCS for their use of Urbaska or Herb Klindt (football) fields. Rocky proposed charging BCS \$2,875 for every football home game. If they terminate the agreement this year, the MOU states they owe BCS \$250k. BCS has enlisted the help of an attorney to move forward. Andrew asked the board to consider this news when considering the Master Plan brought forth by CTA.
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	Ron made the motion to move forward with the Apply phase of the Master Plan. Shanna seconded the motion. The motion was passed unanimously.
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COMMITTEES AND TASK FORCE REPORTS

Operational Vitality Committee Next Meeting: 9/8	There was no quorum at the meeting, so the finances and minutes could not be voted on. Leah presented the 2026 fiscal year-end financials to the board, stating that expenses exceeded the budget by about \$150k, but revenue came in \$231k higher than budgeted. Tuition and ECE revenue both finished lower than expected, but strong ACE funding helped cover that gap. Leah and Andrew received the first draft of the audit Wednesday, with the final expected on August 31st. Kathy provided enrollment data to the board, as well as reminded them of upcoming events Running on Faith, Turn the Table, Roundtable, and Homecoming. Mac reported that a repair to the ECE boiler determined that the manifold was cracked, and a replacement part cannot be found. After speaking with St. Pius, a few options were presented to the board. Option one would be a couple of rooftop units, which themselves are not expensive, but require power upgrades totaling \$100k. Option two would be to replace it with another similar boiler, but that would not heat the entire building, which would cost around \$35k. The Diocesan finance council meets the following day, so a decision needs to be made. BCS would pay 70% of the cost, St. Pius would pay 30%. Andrew suggested taking the money from reserve funds. Peter made the motion to approve up to \$26k from reserve funds to be used for a new boiler at ECE. Jenn seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.
Mission & Catholic Identity Next Meeting: 9/10	Father John Pankratz has taken over as chair of this committee. He would like to incorporate a prayer group into this committee, as well as review the NESBEC standards and plan a staff retreat.
Academic Excellence Next Meeting: TBD	Suzanne Vaira is the new Director of Education. She reported that K-4 teachers have been meeting all week to implement a new phonics curriculum (the Orton Gillingham curriculum) and teachers are excited and engaged in learning it. One of the goals is to bring the three buildings together cohesively.
Governance & Leadership Next Meeting: 10/8	This committee needs a chairperson, so if any board members are interested, please contact Andrew. Both Lisa and Leslie have resigned from the board over the past few weeks. As a result, Andrew suggested that one of the other candidates from the last group of candidates, Joe Landry, be asked to join. Shanna made the motion for Joe to be offered the board member position. Jenn seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.
Closing Prayer	Father Steve provided the closing prayer

Executive Session: NO

Next Board Meeting: September 16th, BCCHS Library

Name	7/15	8/19	9/16	10/21	11/18	1/27	2/17	3/17	4/21	5/19	6/23
Jenn Beckwith	X	X									
Lisa Bruno	X	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Erika Burke	X	X									
Mark DeHart	X	X									
Jon Forte	X	X									
Peter Hamilton	E	X									
Andrew McDonald	X	X									
Mary Pankratz	X	X									
Luke Rains	X	X									
Leslie Schaff	X	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Shanna Tourtlotte	X	X									
Ron Yates	X	X									
Fr. Steve Zabrocki	X	X									

STATEMENT REGARDING 8TH GRADE PARTICIPATION, BOARD PROCESS, AND MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

Concise Statement for Board Delivery and Attachment to Minutes

Purpose and Source Note: This statement clarifies the record, summarizes the Board's policy intent, supports school leadership, and identifies governance practices for moving forward. It is based on the Board meeting video/transcript, the adopted policy summary, and subsequent implementation concerns.

OPENING CLARIFICATION

Over the past several weeks, there has been significant discussion regarding the Board of Education policy on 8th grade participation in high school athletics and the later discussion regarding soccer participation. Because the matter has been discussed publicly in ways that created confusion, I believe it is important to clarify the record, reaffirm the intent of the policy, support the work of our school leadership team, and identify how we can move forward in a more unified manner.

Reasonable people can disagree about the best way to handle 8th grade participation. This is a legitimate policy question involving student development, program sustainability, athletic opportunity, coach discretion, MHSA rules, and the mission of Billings Catholic Schools. Precisely because the issue is complex, it requires careful interpretation, disciplined communication, and respect for the distinct roles of the Board and administration.

Part of why we are revisiting this issue is that the policy and Board discussion appear to have been communicated outside the meeting in a way that did not fully or accurately reflect what was adopted, intended, or assigned to administrative leaders for implementation. Whether that resulted from misunderstanding, incomplete communication, or something else, the effect has been confusion among families, pressure on school leaders, and unnecessary division. That is not healthy for Billings Catholic Schools.

POLICY INTENT AND MHSA PERMISSION

The Board adopted a policy establishing that, **as a general rule**, 8th grade students will not participate in high school athletic programs, with limited exceptions when necessary to preserve the ability of high school students to participate in a specific activity. **The policy was intentionally restrictive.** It was not designed to create a routine pathway for 8th graders, improve competitiveness, increase roster depth, or create early advancement opportunities.

Instead, the policy was designed as a narrow safeguard for rare cases in which a high school program's viability is genuinely at risk and 8th grade participation is necessary to preserve opportunities for high school students. The Board's discussion reflected our mission of forming students in faith, family spirit, and academic excellence while protecting the distinct developmental experiences of middle school and high school students.

It is also important to distinguish between what MHSA permits and what Billings Catholic Schools chooses to do as a local Catholic school system. MHSA permission establishes what may be allowable under association rules. It does not require BCS to allow 8th grade participation in every circumstance, nor does it replace local Board judgment, local school policy, administrative review, or mission-based decision-making.

The Board has the authority to adopt policy. Administration has the responsibility to implement that policy faithfully. That is not changing the policy, overriding the Board, or refusing to follow Board action. It is responsible implementation.

CLARIFICATION

I also want to address comments I made that appear to have been shared or characterized in a way that changes the substance of what was actually said. Reasonable people may disagree about the merits of a decision, but disagreement should be based on the actual position expressed, not on a mischaracterization of it.

In that conversation, my concern was not whether 8th grade participation was permissible under MHSA rules, nor whether the Board has authority to act. My concern was with the decision-making process. Specifically, I stated that the Board should not have voted this spring on a request by a coach during the public comment period at the same meeting in which the request was first presented from the floor. I believed then, and continue to believe, that the stronger governance practice would have been to place the matter on a future agenda so the Board could gather information, review program numbers, hear relevant perspectives, consult administration, and act with proper context.

I raised that same governance concern with Board Chair Jenn Beckwith following the meeting. Any suggestion that I violated MHSA policy, misunderstood MHSA guidance, or believed the Board lacked authority to act is inaccurate. My concern was, and remains, about governance process.

ROLE OF ADMINISTRATION AND SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

It has been suggested that interpreting the motion or applying the policy is not the role of administration. I strongly disagree. The Board adopts policy; administration implements policy. When a policy contains standards, conditions, exceptions, and approval requirements, school leaders must determine whether those standards have been met in real circumstances.

Our principals, Activities Director, coaches, and administrative team should not be criticized for asking the questions the policy requires them to ask. These leaders must consider student opportunity, student safety, program sustainability, developmental readiness, roster needs, coach discretion, parent concerns, MHSA rules, faith and academic priorities, and the mission of Billings Catholic Schools.

Our school leaders are not using the Board as an excuse. They are trying to honor the policy the Board adopted. They are not trying to deny opportunity. They are trying to **ensure that opportunity** is provided in a way that is fair, consistent, mission-aligned, and sustainable. I have complete confidence in the integrity and professionalism of our principal, Activities Director, coaches, and administrative team. They deserve the Board's support, not public second-guessing based on incomplete or conflicting interpretations of what occurred.

COMMUNICATION AND GOVERNANCE LESSONS

This situation highlights a larger issue we need to address as a Board and school system. When people leave a meeting and communicate partial interpretations of what occurred, confusion follows. When private conversations are repeated publicly without full context, trust is damaged. When individuals defend competing versions of events rather than returning to the actual policy, the minutes, and proper communication channels, the institution suffers.

This situation could have been avoided, or at least significantly reduced, if we had followed clearer communication protocols. Questions about policy interpretation should come first to the Board Chair and President. Concerns about administrative implementation should move through the appropriate leadership channel. If a Board member believes a policy needs to be revised, clarified, or reconsidered, the item should be placed on a future agenda for Board discussion.

CLOSING

I believe everyone involved cares about students and wants what is best for Billings Catholic Schools. But good intentions are not enough. We also need good process, disciplined communication, clear roles, and mutual trust.

The issue before us is not simply whether 8th graders may participate in high school athletics. The larger issue is whether we can work together as a Board and leadership team in a way that strengthens Billings Catholic Schools rather than places unnecessary strain on the institution. We can disagree, debate, and revisit policy, but we must do so honestly, directly, respectfully, and through the proper channels.

That is how we protect trust, support our leaders, govern well, and remain faithful to the mission of Billings Catholic Schools.

Respectfully submitted,
Andrew McDonald
President, Billings Catholic Schools