

Commission on Women
August 25, 2025

A meeting of the Commission on Women was held on this date beginning at 4:07 p.m. at 2 George Street and over video conference call.

Notice of this meeting was sent to all local news media.

Present: Chair Trischia Khouri, Jennifer Brown, Louis Weinstein, Cynthia Bolt, Amy Castle-Rogers, Kate Wade, Hilda Gadsden, and Denise Fugo.

Staff: Mindy Sturm, Jamie Roper, and Patrick Carlson, recording.

1. Approval of Minutes

On a motion of Commissioner Brown, seconded by Commissioner Weinstein, the Commission voted unanimously to approve the April 28, 2025, minutes.

2. Guest Presentations

Chair Khouri said Ashley Lidow would be leading a discussion on lactation access throughout the community and Leah Whatley would be presenting recent updates to the Charleston County School District (CCSD) budget.

Ms. Lidow asked what had been previously discussed to pursue improved lactation access.

Chair Khouri said they had formed a proposal and identified several vendors who could facilitate the creation of physical sites throughout the City. She said she had discussed the subject with a regional representative of Mamava and had drafted a proposal to present to City Council.

Ms. Lidow said she worked as the Chief Strategy Officer for the Women's Rights and Empowerment Network (WREN), and they had helped pass a pregnancy accommodation law that included lactation access across the state. They were also working on expanding coverage for lactation specialists and doula care throughout South Carolina. She suggested that the Commission work on trying to increase awareness for those rights and help to educate the community as they propose different ideas to improve lactation site access. She also said if the Commission wrote a letter in support of lactation access, WREN could use it to lobby legislators and contribute their efforts to the larger movement supporting women's healthcare.

Commissioner Fugo asked if WREN had been in contact with hospitals to check which ones actively supported breastfeeding as a practice.

Ms. Lidow said not specifically but there was a South Carolina breastfeeding coalition that they supported and could give her contact information for their leadership.

Commissioner Weinstein asked if WREN ever saw patients.

Ms. Lidow said they were an advocacy group who lobbied and supported community efforts to improve life for women and girls across the state.

Commissioner Bolt asked if the legislature had contacted businesses to update them about the pregnancy accommodation laws.

Ms. Lidow said there was a series of communications that went out upon its passage.

Ms. Gadsden said she appreciated all the information and said they should improve public education about these updates and services as much as possible.

Ms. Whatley introduced herself as a member of the Charleston County School District board and gave a presentation about the state of recovery learning loss and budget allocations across CCSD. She said her work on the board focused on improving the fiscal health of the school district and prioritizing student outcomes by utilizing Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund money.

Chair Khouri asked for a definition of ESSER.

Ms. Whatley said that ESSER was a federal funding bill for educational programs to compensate for COVID-era learning loss. She said that several Ivy League schools recently conducted a national study of over 14,000 school districts and, of the 9,000 districts represented in the presentation, CCSD led the study in both math and reading education recovery.

Commissioner Brown asked if there was any data concerning individual schools.

Ms. Whatley said the data would not single out schools from a study perspective.

Commissioner Brown said she was concerned that it ignored failing schools in the region.

Ms. Whatley said the CCSD members had access to information all the way down to individual students, but that information would not be discussed in a public forum. She said they had been pouring money into student literacy outcomes guided by a literacy task force. Based on the results from the Ivy League study, the CCSD implemented the weighted student formula to give principals more autonomy concerning their allocated resources and funding, recruited local businesses to partner with local schools, and established an educational foundation to recruit funders for additional district investments. In addition, the CCSD had given every teacher a \$5000 bonus and supported non-certified support staff to be compensated above market rate. She said she noticed one of the most consistent declines in local data over the past year involved the number of multilingual learners. She said she was not sure why that was the case, but she suspected it had something to do with immigration.

Commissioner Brown said the language barrier also had to be taken into effect when considering student success because the tests in question were only administered in English.

Ms. Whatley said they had expanded the existing welcome center over at R.B. Stall High School in North Charleston and implemented welcome programs in West Ashley because it was the fastest growing and most transient area in the district.

Commissioner Brown said the number of students attending local schools during the first ten days traditionally helped to determine certain budget allocations. She was concerned because the local news had reported that many Hispanic children were missing in some schools compared to last year's enrollment levels.

Ms. Whatley said, if she wasn't mistaken, about 4,000 students had not shown up for the new school year and did not know if it was because they had left the area or were afraid to come to school.

Commissioner Brown said it was probably a little of both.

Ms. Whatley said this information would be presented to the CCSD in September and would point out the Commission's questions and concerns.

3. Adjournment

There being no further discussion, the Commission adjourned at 5:18 p.m.

Patrick Carlson
Clerk of Council's Office