

Wednesday, February 26, 2020

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF AD HOC COMMITTEE OF GREAT CITY SCHOOLS/MALES OF COLOR OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held February 26, 2020, at Bridgeport City Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 5:42 p.m. Present were members Chair Joseph Sokolovic, Dr. Melissa Jenkins, JoAnn Kennedy, Sauda Baraka, and John Ramos Jr.

Ms. Kennedy moved approval of the committee's minutes of January 29, 2020. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved. A correction was noted.

The next agenda item was on a possible collaboration with the New Haven Family Alliance. Anthony Stanley, a lead mentor, was present, along with Shirley Ellis West.

Ms. West, executive director of the New Haven Family Alliance, said the group is a nonprofit that has been operating for about 29 years, providing supportive case management services to children and fathers in the community. She said the foundation was merging with another nonprofit that hires veterans to mentor challenged young people statewide, and will soon be known as Urban Community Alliance.

Ms. West said the foundation has been looking to build capacity in Bridgeport and Hartford. She said a grant proposal will be submitted to the Fairfield Community Foundation. She said they would like to partner with a school

district to offer an afterschool activity focused on social-emotional learning.

Ms. West said social-emotional learning is one of the critical contributing elements to the success of high-performing schools. She noted the mentors who are veterans in her program are paid, while the district's programs use volunteers and focuses just on males.

In response to a question, Ms West said no funding is being requested from the district. She said she hires male and female veterans who go through two interviews and a DCF background check.

Ms. West said the proposal is to hold the afterschool sessions twice a week for at least two hours. She said two veterans, one male and one female, participate in each day's session. She said the size of the groups should not exceed twenty students.

Ms. West described the training, which takes about nine weeks, that is given to the veteran mentors. It includes engagement, assessments, restorative practice, and life skills.

Mr. Stanley, a Navy veteran, said the mentors are able to discuss a lot of things other people don't want to based on their experience from the military. Ms. West said the mentors are available to the students on a 24/7 basis. She said even though there is offsite mentoring in her program certain approvals are needed for things such as an overnight stay.

In response to a question, Ms. West said the program mostly works with children from 15 to 19.

Ms. Baraka said Mr. Ramos has been involved in mentoring boys at Harding for five years. Mr. Stanley said the majority of the mentoring he does is one-on-one.

In response to a question, Ms. West said the organization was a 501(c) and was insured. Dr. Jenkins noted the current mentoring in the district involved certified staff.

Ms. West said her program could work with Mr. Ramos's mentoring program as a partner where students could be referred to higher level mentoring.

Dr. Jenkins said most of the district's mentoring program is aimed at children who have not been successful in Tier I mainstream rather than those who have had involvement with the juvenile court system. She said the district did not have the intensive mentoring individual program being described.

Carrie Ramanuskas, social-emotional coordinator for the district, said there is an active partnership with the Juvenile Review board(JRB) in Bridgeport. Ms. West said she was very familiar with the urban JRBs. Ms. Ramanuskas said RYASAP was in the lead agency for students with JRB involvement in Bridgeport.

Ms West said she would provide her organization's letter of intent to the committee to see where the proposal would fit with what the district is currently doing. Ms. Ramanuskas said she would like to see the social-emotional curriculum of the proposal because she would be consulted on how it meshes with current district practices. Ms. Baraka said the experiences and skills of the veterans would be valuable to the students who are mentored. Mr. Stanley described his background and what he brings to the table in mentoring.

Ms. Kennedy noted there had been 50 expulsions in the district. Ms. West said her organization had helped improved the expulsion situation in New Haven. She said chronic truancy is another big issue,

Mr. Sokolovic said there would likely have to be another presentation to the full board.

Mr. Sokolovic moved “to move this action forward to Mr. Testani and the full board.” The motion was seconded by Ms. Baraka and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was discussion and possible creation of professional development focused on unconscious bias.

Ms. Ramanuskas said unconscious bias isn’t identified specifically under her work, but is covered under building cultural competence, which she described as learning about the whole person.

Ms. Ramanuskas said the packet she distributed contains the current active training, including restorative practices. She said restorative practices are about building relationships, shifting from a punitive mindset to relationships. She said there is training for adults, high school students, and middle school students. She described some aspects of training, including the use of words.

Ms. Ramanuskas said school climate training is also offered to middle school and high school students. She said all the high schools have a minimum of five student ambassadors. She noted Central and Harding had greatly expanded the numbers of their student ambassadors.

Ms. Ramanuskas said there is training for adults, which includes resilience trauma-informed practice training created with Dr. Freiberg of the state Department of Education. She said all the district's social workers and school counselors have been through this training. She described a film about resilience that is used.

Ms. Ramanuskas said RULER is very effective in the district. She said the student ambassadors receive a full day of RULER training. She described how emotions can impact the grading done by teachers.

Ms. Ramanuskas she brought a book named *Blindspot* which discusses hidden biases of good people. She described recently learning that we perpetuate a culture of violence in everyday language.

Ms. Ramanuskas said there is an annual SEL event called The Human Library. Last year about 60-plus middle school students and 36 high school students attended. She said this year there will be 140 middle-school students and over a hundred high school students, which will take place over two full days. She described how the students learned from the experiences and struggles of district staff members.

In response to a question, Ms. Ramanuskas said she is hoping to build professional development around the *Blindspot* book. She said members of this committee could be part of the development of the training. She said the hardest part of giving training is obtaining the expenditure of funds for substitutes for classroom teachers. She said a two-day training costs \$240 per staff member. She said other trainings have been paid for by philanthropy.

Dr. Jenkins said if grant money was not available cohorts of staff members could be offered the training over time such as with RULER. Ms. Ramanuskas said cultural competence training was done in that fashion. She described the involved process required for getting staff members trained in restorative practices.

Ms. Ramanuskas said the lead agency for the social-emotional learning initiative is the Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition, under RYASAP, which includes partnership with the Yale Center For Emotional Intelligence and school-based health clinics.

There was a discussion of the steps that would be needed to develop unconscious bias training. Ms. Ramanuskas said every SEL training that has been developed has been approved by the superintendent or his predecessor.

There was a discussion of the title of the training. Ms. Ramanuskas said it would probably not be called unconscious bias.

Ms. Baraka suggested a couple of schools be selected to roll some things out at. She said some schools have serious issues around this subject. She said she believed the national climate we are in has spilled over to Fairchild Wheeler and some elementary schools.

Ms. Ramanuskas said the issues happen in every community. Mr. Sokolovic said perhaps Bridgeport could be a trailblazer.

Ms. Ramanuskas said new teachers in the district go through two full days of restorative practice training and a

half day of RULER training. She said a new component could be part of this training.

Mr. Sokolovic said the demographic data provided on specific schools included the total population, including males and females.

The next agenda item was on the white paper. Dr. Jenkins said she will box out some days to bring it to a conclusion. She said she has not had an opportunity to work on it. She said she will be receiving academic data from data management to add to the paper.

There was a discussion of how the suspension data should be presented in the white paper. Mr. Sokolovic suggested presenting the percentage of black males represented in the data.

There was a discussion of whether the budget had to be presented to the full board. Mr. Sokolovic said there are many budget items that do not receive board approval. Dr. Jenkins noted Mr. Testani modified but approved Ms. Noel's budget that she sent directly to him. She said Harding and Central's budgets have not gone to the superintendent yet.

Ms. Baraka moved the meeting be adjourned. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:57 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Approved by the committee on June 4, 2020