

Monday, April 11, 2022

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held April 11, 2022, at Bridgeport Regional Aquaculture Science & Technology Education Center, 60 Saint Stephens Road, Bridgeport, Connecticut Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:35 p.m.

Present were Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Bobbi Brown\*, Secretary Joseph Lombard, Joseph Sokolovic, Christine Baptiste-Perez, Michael Maccarone, Albert Benejan and Erika Castillo\*. Sybil Allen joined the meeting subsequently as noted. (\*Remote participation)

Supt. Michael J. Testani was present.

Supt. Testani asked there be a moment of silence for the passing of a loyal employee, school psychologist Morgan Graham, and a student from Harding High who was lost this morning.

Mr. Lombard moved relocate Item 11-A to immediately following public comment in deference to the fasting of the Muslim community that is here. The motion was seconded by Ms. Castillo.

Mr. Sokolovic amended the motion to place the item before student representative reports. The amendment was seconded by Ms. Brown and unanimously approved.

The motion as amended was unanimously approved.

**PUBLIC COMMENT:**

Sherine Mousa, a board member of the Bridgeport Islamic Community Center, said we have requested Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha as school holidays. She said it was sad to see her kids and other students asking for a day or two where they could celebrate their holiday. Shoudy, a student, said having the days off would mean a lot to Muslim students so they don't have to worry about school absences or missing assignments.

Ms. Allen arrived at the meeting.

Dr. Khaled Eleithy, representing the Bridgeport Islamic Community Center, said the lack of a school holiday puts children in a dilemma to choose between going to school or celebrating. He said he has been an educator and has never advised a student to skip a class. He said there is a petition signed by over 260 people.

Theresa Lefever, co-chair of CONECT, a multifaith organization over 30 congregations, said she was a lifelong Catholic who believed in raising her children in faith. She said her holiest days were recognized, and this should be a right for all faiths. She presented a letter from Bishop Caggiano of the Diocese of Bridgeport in favor of adding the two holidays to the school calendar.

Manaf Hossain, an 8th grade student at Park City Magnet School, said a project initiated by his social studies teacher resulted in an effort to make Eid at-Fitr a school holiday. He said Muslim students should get this day off. He said not all religions are being treated the same.

Cesar Juarez, a Park City Magnet student, said he wanted his Muslim friends and their families to have the same

religious freedom. He said as a Catholic he gets many days off from school.

Rehaan Bongi, a Park City Magnet student, said the students at the school worked on a problem in the city. He said the students assembled information about Eid al-Fitr not being a day off, along with surveys of students and teachers, and a PowerPoint was created to present to a board committee. He said we will not give up until Eid al-Fitr is a day off from school.

Dr. Anthony Bennett, the pastor of the Mount Airey Baptist Church for the past 28 years, said he was here to support the students to afford them the opportunity so they would not have to choose between being excellent students and practicing their faith. He said we stand with our Muslim brothers and sisters.

Cass Shaw, former president and CEO of the Council of Churches of Greater Bridgeport, said she supported the Muslim community on behalf of about 70 congregations. She said it was also important to embrace and include the Muslim community into the mainstream of our society.

Michelle Rubel, the ordained cantor at Congregational B'nai Israel in Bridgeport, said when going to school in Long Island she had days for the two high holidays in her faith. She said students should not have to make a choice between their spiritual and culture needs and their academic needs. She said recognizing the holiday can teach the lesson of religious freedom and equality of all faiths in our society.

Dr. Tarek Hamdia asked all the Bridgeport Public School students in the audience stand up. He said what are witnessing today is what the schools are teaching about

coming to the country for religious freedom. He said Muslim students would have the experience of having their most important religious occasions recognized are just passed by like any other day in the school system.

Denise George said she was a concerned aunt to a student at Fairchild Wheeler. She said the board had a responsibility to take all complaints seriously and she asked that questions about Mrs. Furnari being suspended be addressed, along with her absence, and the lack of an administrator assigned to the school on SAT Day. She also objected to Supt. Testani cancelling a trip without consulting with parents and his drastic changes which were negatively affecting the entire district.

State Senator Dennis Bradley said he was appearing on behalf of the Islamic community and his Muslim brothers in the city of Bridgeport, along with the wonderful students here. He said the Muslim community has integrated itself in the most positive way into the city of Bridgeport. He said Muslim students from the district have interned in his office. He said there was a tradition as Americans to respect the religious diversity of all people who come to the country.

Erik Johnson said he told the students here and watching at home that if we came ready and prepared the community would back us. He thanked the community for being here and the board for the opportunity to hear our arguments.

Tahassan Islam said if the policy is changed it will change people's lives forever. He said he was proud of being part of the project. He said he liked school, but his mother would tell him not to go to school on the holiday.

Jeanne Malguglio said her son's life was changed three years ago by Principal Beth Furnari. She said Ms. Furnari's abrupt departure shocked the IT School and caused incredible anxiety among students. She said Ms. Furnari loves her students as if they are her own and urged she could come back to Fairchild Wheeler immediately.

Anjumanara Chowdhury said Eid al-Fitr was about more than a holiday, but about equality among religions. She said she felt left behind in the past by having to catch up on missed work while she celebrated the holiday as part of her religion.

An Do said growing up among Muslim students he found their religion fascinating and intriguing. He said not having a day off on their special day is unfair and he urged Eid al-Fitr be made a holiday.

Gladys Walker-Jones, on behalf of the NAACP for the Greater Bridgeport Area, said we stand with our Muslim population and asked the board to take their concerns seriously. She said marking students present who are absent for the holiday should be a nonstarter as a security issue.

Farhan Memon, the chairman of the Connecticut chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the largest Muslim civil rights group in the United States. He said all over the country school boards are making Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha school holidays, which are commemorated by Muslims worldwide. He said Muslims are asking that both days be added to the calendar in the interests of equity and the educational interests of students.

Mahaa Eitay said we are only asking for two holidays for our children. She said as a grandmother she would love to have her grandchild celebrating the holiday. She said our community did not want to be left out or our children discriminated against.

The next agenda item was discussion and possible action to close schools in observance of the Muslim holiday Eid al-Fitr.

Mr. Weldon said the board's counsel, Attorney Floyd Dugas, provided a written communication on the law. Attorney Dugas indicated state law does vest in local boards of education the authority to establish the school calendar. Boards cannot endorse religion in general or any particular religion. It is illegal to close school for religious reasons. school can be closed on a religious holiday for a secular, nonreligious reason. The most common reason is due to the large number of people in the community anticipated to be absent because they will be celebrating the holiday. He said holidays such as Christmas have been considered to be secularized. The bottom line is if school is to be closed for Eid al-Fitr you must do it because you anticipate a large number of students to be out, thereby frustrating the educational process.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said it was evident that there will be a large number of students absent, therefore it would be appropriate as indicated in the legal opinion that Eid al-Fitr should be recognized by the school board.

Supt. Testani recited data about school absences that was requested. June 3, 2019: 1457 absences; June 4, 2019(the holiday): 1,399; June 5th, 2019: 2070. May 12, 2021: 2021 absences; May 13, 2021(the holiday): 1512 absences; May

14, 2021: 1,543 absences. He said on May 21st, 2019, there were 1308 absences; May 22nd, 2010: 1299. Two weeks after the holiday in 2021, there were 1310 absences on one day; 2043 on another day; and 1319 on a third day. He said he did not know how much insight the data provided because students go to school because they don't want to miss school.

Mr. Lombard said this is the right thing to do now, but the board had to think about how to address tomorrow's requests. He noted there are many other religions. He said it would be impossible to recognize every religious holiday.

Supt. Testani said there was no option of marking children not in school present. He said school attendance is a legal record and this could not be done.

Mr. Weldon said the school calendar for the upcoming school year was approved with the holiday observed so students are able to take the day off without penalty. He said there will be no tests, homework assignments or projects on the day. He said information could be gathered about the numbers that take the day off as an excused absence in the coming year. He said the historical data did not indicate a great change from one day to another.

Mr. Sokolovic said the perfect argument for closing schools was that there would be no important homework or exams or lessons on that day. He said this would cause 20,000 students to pause their education instead of adjusting the calendar.

Mr. Weldon said not having homework does not make the day a waste, and parents will have a choice on whether to send their children to school.

Mr. Benejan said he was very proud of the students, and they deserve the day off. He said the board was here to help the community. He said he hoped the decision would be made tonight and he was one hundred percent in support.

Ms. Castillo said she was moved by the public comments she heard from families who were fasting. She said the board's main priority is education, especially with learning loss due to the pandemic. She said the calendar for 2022-23 has already been established, so this conversation is for the following year. She noted the state requirement for minimum class days for students.

In response to a question, Mr. Benejan said Hamden and New Haven recognized the holiday. Ms. Castillo said that was a compelling argument.

Ms. Brown said she tried to respond to all e-mails she has received. She said when she heard the students in the Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Committee, and she found them amazing by using the skills taught in the schools, and said she favored establishing the holiday.

Avery Flechtner of Fairchild Wheeler said we are all about equity and inclusion in Bridgeport. She said when she missed a day of school, she was absent from hearing a lecture and taking notes. She said two weeks off was not needed at Christmas.

Mr. Weldon said we cannot close schools for the sake of religion; a secular season was needed.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez asked to see the legal opinion from Berchem & Moses. Mr. Weldon said he received the opinion



at 3:46 p.m. and he was subsequently on a train. Ms. Baptiste-Perez said as an attorney she needed to read it and comprehend it.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said it was learned at the committee that data on Muslim children being absent is not collected. She said families were faced with a hard, complicated decision about their children's education. She said an excused absence would be wrong and noted that Bridgeport is a location for refugees from world conflicts. She added that the conversation is happening because this is during Ramadan.

In response to a question, the superintendent said it would not be hard to find a day to substitute should Eid al-Fitr be made a holiday.

Mr. Sokolovic moved that *"due to the fact that many Islamic students will be off and the disruption that it will cause to the school day and operations of the system that we approve Eid al-Fitr as a holiday going forward in the '23- '24 school year."* The motion was seconded by Mr. Lombard.

In response to a question, Mr. Sokolovic said the 95 percent of students whose education will be stalled by 5 percent of the students being absent would be significant.

In response to a question, Mr. Weldon said he would forward the legal document to Ms. Baptiste-Perez.

Mr. Lombard said he believed the board could set the calendar regardless of whether or not it was addressing a large number of people absent.

In response to a question, Mr. Weldon summarized the counsel's opinion that schools can be closed for secular,

nonreligious reasons; the most common reason is due to a large number of people in the community anticipated to be absent because they will be celebrating holiday.

In response to a question, Mr. Weldon said the Jewish holidays were put in place 40 or 45 years ago, and he did not know the demographics that were involved then. He said that needed to be looked at.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said she still had not received the document and asked that it be sent to her.

Mr. Benejan said the board members had to relax and stop with the body language. He said these people need to have the holiday that the Muslim community is requesting.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said a valid secular purpose is related to the rational basis test. She said this is a good reminder of constitutional law that it cannot be arbitrary and irrational. She said she wanted to see the document to make a rational determination, including the legal citations. She said she did not believe it was restricted to the attendance rate.

Mr. Weldon said he sent the legal document to Ms. Baptiste-Perez, which is preliminary, and will be followed by something more extensive.

The motion was approved by an 8-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Baptiste-Perez, Benejan, Brown, Castillo, Maccarone, Sokolovic, Allen, and Lombard. Mr. Weldon abstained.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez moved for a five-minute recess. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved. The meeting was recessed at 8:01 p.m.

The meeting was resumed at 8:16 p.m.

### **APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:**

Ms. Allen moved approval of the minutes of Regular Meeting of March 28, 2022. The motion was seconded by Ms. Baptiste-Perez. The motion was approved by an 8-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Baptiste-Perez, Benejan, Brown, Castillo, Maccarone, Sokolovic, Allen, and Weldon. Mr. Lombard abstained.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez moved approval of the minutes of Special Meeting of March 28, 2022. The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen. The motion was approved by an 7-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Baptiste-Perez, Brown, Castillo, Maccarone, Sokolovic, Allen, and Weldon. Mr. Lombard and Mr. Benejan abstained.

### **CHAIR REPORT:**

Mr. Weldon said the last hour or so illustrates the need for an Ad Hoc Committee, for Districtwide Calendar, Holidays and Vacations.

Ms. Allen moved that *“this ad hoc committee be established, and it be charged with finishing its work no later than August 31st.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

### **COMMITTEE REPORTS/REFERRALS:**

Ms. Brown said the Ad Hoc Districtwide Branding Initiative Committee will meet this Wednesday to discuss the district logo and other items.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Educational Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Committee met on April 4th and what happened today was the result of the meeting.

Supt. Testani said there will be a referral to the Contracts Committee on the busing RFP response. He said Ms. Siegel is in final negotiations. He added the special education position has been reposted and has been reconfigured to an unaffiliated position to try to widen the recruiting net.

Mr. Benejan said the Students & Families Committee would meet on April 28th.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said the Teaching & Learning Committee met on April 4th. Two of tonight's agenda items were handled, along with an enlightening discussion on students' sports participation requirements. She said the superintendent would work with coaches to develop a handbook that will emphasize the student-athlete component. There was also a presentation on a later start time for high schools.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Finance Committee met on March 31st for a community forum, which was decently attended. There will be one last community forum on April 26th.

## **STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE REPORTS:**

Avery Flechtner of the IT School at Fairchild Wheeler said Supt. Testani held a roundtable at the school, and it was a productive discussion. She said there will also be a pep rally this week, including a dodgeball game, which the students are grateful for.

Aleena Khan of the Aerospace School at Fairchild Wheeler said Paul Zim, a 10th grader, received honorable mention at UB's Research Day for a project. The school will hold a spirit week after spring break, along with a pep rally.

Latonia Ferguson of Central High reported on her school, including tee shirts for awareness of autism; a success week with volunteers from the National Honor Society; and a competition where the debate team defeated Harding High's team.

Shermaine Elliot from Harding High said the PTSO and School Governance Council began a hygiene project to give students access to products they may not have access to. Senior students have received over \$603,000 in scholarships.

### **SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT:**

Supt. Testani said the ELL Summit will be held on April 28th at Harding High. Former ELL students may apply for scholarships.

The superintendent said a summer STEM camp is planned for July 5th through the 11th for Grades 4 to 6 at five locations, and for 10th and 11th graders at Bassick and Harding.

Supt. Testani said there will be BPS job fair on May 17th at Central High, with another held at the end of June, with highly qualified educators being sought for next year.

The superintendent said, since December 8th, 900 pre-K students have read 17 million words to date through the Footsteps to Brilliance app.

Supt. Testani thanked the Tauck Foundation for their generosity that is funding a cupcake truck that will visit every school over the next few weeks to thank staff for their hard work.

The superintendent said the Village Initiative Project, under the leadership of Theresa Wilson, exposes Bridgeport youth to higher education through college tours. He said they are currently seeking more Grade 6 to 8 students to participate.

Supt. Testani said Miles Gee, a building substitute at Park City Magnet, has received an incentive bonus and is a finalist for substitute of the year.

The superintendent said the Bridgeport Public Education Fund has disclosed the awardees for this year, which will be celebrated at a later date at an awards ceremony.

Mr. Benejan said he hears from parent leaders that it takes a long time for vendors to get paid. The superintendent said the business office looked into the matter and there are efforts to streamline the process. He said it was found that sometimes vendors have changed addresses since they registered.

Ms. Brown said quite a few young girls reached out to her in response to an incident in the district. The superintendent said folks from the Hub and RYASAP reached out to the district and Ms. Rocha-Reaes spoke to them about resources for counselors and student success team members. The mobile crisis unit will be available at the school for support. Professional development will be provided to all staff to support social-emotional needs and training for students.

## **NEW BUSINESS:**

The next agenda item was on a Discovery Magnet school field trip to Nature's Classroom in Ivoryton, Connecticut. Teacher Mary Servino was present. She said this would be the first overnight trip since the pandemic. The trip will consist of 44 6th graders, along with four chaperones. Departure is May 31st and returning on June 3rd.

Ms. Servino said it is a great educational experience that involves team building and includes science and social studies. She described the health measures that would be in place, including testing for the students.

In response to a question, Ms. Servino said Nature's Classroom has not been doing slavery reenactments for the past five years. The activities can be requested by the teachers and those have never been requested in the past. She described the daytime and nighttime activities.

Mr. Benejan moved "*to approve the Discovery Magnet school field trip to Nature's Classroom.*" The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on John Winthrop School's field trip to Washington, D.C. Jennifer Russell and Carrie Ramanauskas were present. The proposed trip is from June 20th to June 22nd, with two nights involved.

Ms. Russell said the trip will include the Vietnam memorial, the Holocaust Museum, the Lincoln Memorial, and the World War I and World War II monuments. She described the Covid testing requirements. She said there was a doctor on call for 24 hours a day. Students who test positive will be

quarantined and the parents will be able to fly to down to take the children home at no additional cost.

Ms. Russell described the academic portions of the visits to sites, including workbooks they will fill in.

Ms. Russell said there will be 40 students with eight chaperones. There will be a nighttime chaperone available to monitor students at night. She said World Strides is a long-established company providing these trips. Ms. Ramanauskas said district schools have used the company in the past.

Ms. Allen noted she used to take her students to Washington, D.C., all the time.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez moved *“to approve the John Winthrop school field trip to Washington, D.C., as presented.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez moved to adjourn the meeting. The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:53 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

*Approved by the board on April 25, 2022*