

Tuesday, August 10, 2021

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held August 10, 2021, at Central High School, 1 Lincoln Boulevard, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:31 p.m. Present were members Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Bobbi Brown, Secretary Joseph Lombard, Joseph Sokolovic, and Sybil Allen. Albert Benejan arrived subsequently as noted.

Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

The first item was on the TechTrep contract. Supt. Testani said the item was presented last week at the Teaching & Learning Committee. He said it was an excellent opportunity for the district's children in Grades 4 to 12, providing access to STEM courses in a very efficient manner, which does not require certified teachers. He said it will engage students after the school day, at weekends, and at churches or community centers.

Marlon Lindsay, founder and CEO of TechTrep, presented to the board. He said STEM is at the heart of every single profession that a student may be thinking about. He noted a study that indicated many jobs in the future will change due to advancements in technology such as robotics. He said there will be many job opportunities for those with tech backgrounds such as in advanced manufacturing and cyber security.

Mr. Benejan arrived at the meeting.

Mr. Lindsay said the idea is to expose all students to STEM, including in school, after school, or out of school completely. There are three instructional models. He said every school and organization will have access to a virtual STEM academy. Mentors help deliver the STEM experience. He noted the lack of certified teachers to implement this type of program.

Supt. Testani said the initiative began with a collaboration with Ansonia schools. He said if we continue on the road of college or bust, we are missing the boat on a significant portion of the student population. He said there are high-paying jobs available, including lots of openings at Sikorsky that start at \$22 an hour, including benefits and tuition reimbursement. He said he believed the district's graduation rate could be increased if we served students in a manner that was not a college-or-bust mentality. He said he liked the idea of getting students excited about this at a young age.

In response to a question, Mr. Lindsay, who said he was a Harding graduate in 1985, described the course offerings that are available. He said every course includes ten STEM projects. He described the costs of the program. The contract proposed is for five years for about \$7.75 million.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the program would be paid for with federal ESSER funds that had to be encumbered by September 30, 2024, and meet the guidelines of that program. He said it was no different than purchasing books or online materials such as curriculum renewal.

Mr. Weldon suggested checking on federal acquisition and city requirements about contracts in excess of three years.

He said three years, plus two one-year renewals, are typically used.

There was the discussion of whether a sole-source letter existed. The superintendent said he would reach out to Ansonia about that.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the program would be monitored for effectiveness and participation level by students.

Mr. Lindsay said there is a built-in third party evaluation piece, starting with baseline percentages. He said he is confident 50 percent of students can be exposed to STEM in the first year and 100 percent by the third year. He said there will be annual reports.

In response to a question, the superintendent said over five years the cost amounts \$1.5 million per year, which is \$59 per child.

Mr. Weldon suggested counsel review the agreement. He said it seemed the purchase was of a portfolio of classes that students can take. He suggested incorporating participation metrics into the contract, including almost like an exit clause for the district.

Supt. Testani said he could bring back feedback from the other district in Connecticut on how best to begin the rollout.

Mr. Lombard moved *“to develop an agreement with TechTrep as presented tonight, subject to approval of the finalized contract as developed by counsel.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on a data warehouse contract. P.J. Karaffa, the head of the board's data management office, said the superintendent and the technology committee have looked at the issue of a data warehouse. He said a company was found to implement such a project with DecisionEd. He described it as a data warehouse/dashboard/actionable data system that allows teachers and administrators to see dashboards and see things like performance indexes, early warning systems, attendance, discipline, scheduling, staff attendance, and other thing in one centralized system.

Mr. Karaffa described the current situation, which takes a lot of time to gather data about issues such as finance, discipline, and attendance.

Supt. Testani said as we roll out new programs we want to be able to capture data on effectiveness of the programs, especially on the federal programs. He said decisions need to be based on data. He said the system will allow drilling down into individual classroom performance.

Mark Mason of DecisionEd presented to the board. He said there is tremendous leverage in data, but it comes with a set of challenges. He said a common problem across the country is that data is in different systems that are disconnected, difficult to obtain, and in different structure and formats. He said it becomes a manual, time-consuming process to connect data.

Mr. Mason said DecisionEd connects data sources within the district, gathering updated data nightly. He described it as doing the heavy lifting of the data. He said the most

important part is connecting the data. He described dashboards as windows into data and described their features. He noted examples whereby the data could be sorted by race and ethnicity or students with IEPs. He demonstrated how data can be broken down and analyzed by examples.

In response to a question, Mr. Mason said it is a similar tool to Power BI, but the key is the connections within the data. He said the system connects to already existing data within the district.

In response to a question, Mr. Karaffa said about eight systems for this type of service was looked at. He said currently Hartford and Stamford are using this product. He said this product allows the district to house its own data, which is an advantage. He said the district uses about 18 different systems, as well as state systems that data is pulled from. He said this platform allows interactive capability with the data.

Mr. Sokolovic said it seemed like a great product, but he questioned what benefit there was in not going out to bid.

Supt. Testani said Mr. Karaffa had been advocating for a program like this for years. Mr. Karaffa says the prices of products varies based on the services offered.

Mr. Weldon said it seemed like something of this nature would be performance-based, not a low-bid thing. He said the state list would contain these type of evaluations and he would be comfortable with using the state list.

Mr. Sokolovic said the board received savings on the E-Rate vendor just by going out to bid. He said an RFP could be

written to cover our needs. He said it has been awhile since an RFP came to the board.

In response to a question, Mr. Karaffa said if there is delay we won't see the new system this year. He noted there is training involved and getting stakeholders in line.

Mr. Weldon said he was comfortable with moving forward, but perhaps the board might like to see a checkoff comparison of different products.

In response to a question, Mr. Karaffa said he believed the approximate cost was \$240,000 in the first year of the contract, followed by lower amounts in later years.

Mr. Lombard said this capability was needed in the district. The superintendent said the need for something like this has been increasing and it is needed to show growth is occurring across the district.

Mr. Karaffa said the superintendent had been fantastic in supporting his department.

The next agenda item was on an amendment to the Effective School Solutions contract. Supt. Testani said turnaround money from the state overlaps on many of the schools that were approved. He said the program will be expanded to Barnum and Waltersville because the data indicates these schools need the additional support.

In response to a question, the superintendent said the existing contract was \$520,000 for every two schools. The expansion will increase the program to eight schools.

Mr. Sokolovic moved “*to approve the amendment.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on Bridgeport Caribe Youth Leaders(BCYL) programming. Supt. Testani said the item came out of the Students & Families Committee. The proposal is to provide services to the public schools. He said ESSER dollars include requirements to partner with community partners. He said Bridgeport Caribe Youth Leaders is a well-respected community organization. He said the proposal presented by BCYL checks off a lot of boxes in terms of being able to offer programs effectively and efficiently. He said no additional staffing requirements will be added to the district. He said middle school basketball would be expanded to include an intramural program.

The superintendent noted, as with the summer programming, it is difficult to recruit teachers to work in after-school programs. The proposal would also relieve the district of the need to hire a fulltime student activities director at the district level, which might have to be cut from the budget after ESSER expires.

John Torres, executive director and co-founder of Bridgeport Caribe Youth Leaders, presented to the board and said the proposal will impact over 5,000 students over a three-year period. Also present were Tony Judkins, Frank Borres, Dr Thomas Coley, Amy Marshall, Brethela Love from BCYL.

Mr. Torres said BCYL was established in 2003 as a baseball league at Seaside Park. He said Caribe is known for sports, but sports are leveraged to emphasize the importance of education and community.

Mr. Torres said the goal is to provide youth with role models, mentors, and support necessary for them to remain in school and to have a clear pathway to attending college, vocational programming or joining the workforce. He said tutoring staffing is no more than one tutor per three students. He described Saturday morning tutoring sessions, which had an 88 percent attendance rate.

Mr. Torres said the proposal includes working with students on career and college experience. Mentors are brought in to speak to the students; mock job interviews and resume preparation are included. He described work being done with unions on apprenticeship programs.

Mr. Torres described a program aimed at e-sports and gaming, which will encourage students to learn coding and how to develop games. He said the middle school basketball program will be run in connection the Parks Department.

Mr. Torres said Major League Baseball recently gave BCYL a grant. A recent initiative is to engage students in surveys to learn how to better serve them.

Mr. Torres said he reached out to the superintendent during the pandemic with an offer to help in April 2020 and his staff made close to 300 calls to families to see how they were doing. He said this led to the purchase of Chrome Books, gift cards, food deliveries, and PPE distribution.

Supt. Testani said a lot of groups come into schools to work with students. When the pandemic hit, very few reached out to the district, but Mr. Torres did.

Amy Marshall, who worked for the district for 30 years, said when she was principal at Beardsley School Mr. Torres's

organization worked with her to help a student with cancer. She said the care and concern for youth and the quality of the programming at BCYL is very high.

In response to a question, Mr. Torres said BCYL had about 17 staff members. He said there would not be a problem with scaling up and additional staff would be added, along with the per diem staff that is employed. He said tutors are obtained through partnerships with Sacred heart, University of Bridgeport, and Fairfield University.

In response to a question, Mr. Torres said the group's insurance has been increased as a result of its partnership with Major League Baseball. Mr. Sokolovic noted molestation insurance is also required.

Supt. Testani said because BCYL is not bound by collective bargaining it can hire tutors at a lower rate than the district can. Mr. Torres said for the district to perform the services in the proposal it would cost another \$570,000. The superintendent said BCYL will use coaches currently in the middle school program. Mr. Torres said background checks are required.

In response to a question, Mr. Torres said teachers are recruited from the district and surrounding towns. Programs will be held on Saturday and after school. He said the proposal is to start at Tisdale in the fall, with the goal of going to six schools or more in the third year. He said high school students will receive a stipend for working in the after-school program.

In response to a question, Mr. Torres said if too many students apply for the program another date will be added or students will be rotated.

In response to a question, Mr. Torres said the security costs would be paid by the district and police costs would be funded by the city. The superintendent said there are two SROs responsible for middle school basketball on Saturdays, along with two security guards at each location.

Mr. Benejan said he found some of the costs too high. Mr. Torres said he disagreed and pointed to some low costs for directors. He said we want a partnership

In response to a question, Supt, Testani said the program would be funded through ESSER for three years with no impact on the operating budget. He said he was most impressed with the family and community connections BCYL makes.

Mr. Torres said he did not intend on getting up and leaving after three years. He said he has already had conversations about getting state and federal funding beyond the three years.

Supt. Testani said the school volunteers' tutoring program has been handed over to BCYL. He said many of the volunteers come from wealthier towns with access to philanthropy.

Mr. Benejan moved *“to approve entering into the agreement with Caribe Youth Leaders for the programming proposal that they’ve presented this evening.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on renewal of membership with Council of Great City Schools. The superintendent said the membership was extremely helpful during the pandemic. He

said he had received good information and help on ARP/ESSER as well. He urged continued membership. He said he cut back on some of the services for the CAPSS membership.

Mr. Sokolovic said Great City Schools put on some great seminars and it is focused on larger districts. The superintendent said he can forward some Great City Schools communications to the board members. He said the approximate yearly cost is \$33,000. He noted it has a strong influence on federal legislation.

Mr. Lombard moved “*to approve renewal of membership with the Council of Great City Schools.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was continuing to implement teacher evaluation flexibility in accordance with the state Department of Education guidelines.

Supt. Testani said last year the state department gave all districts flexibility on teacher evaluation due to the pandemic. He said board approval would be needed for changes to be made. He added traditional teacher evaluation will likely be overhauled. He said the final plan will be brought before the board.

Mr. Benejan moved “*to continuing to implement the teacher evaluation flexibility in accordance with CSDE.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:43 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

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