

Monday, April 4, 2022

MINUTES OF THE EDUCATIONAL DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held April 4, 2022, at Central High School, 1 Lincoln Boulevard, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:33 p.m. Present were members Chair Joseph Sokolovic and Bobbi Brown*. Board members John Weldon and Albert Benejan* were present. Committee member Erika Castillo and board members Christine Baptiste-Perez and arrived subsequently as noted. Mr. Benejan arrived at the meeting in person subsequently as noted.

(*remote participation)

Supt. Michael J. Testani was present. Dr. Carmen McPherson was present.

Ms. Brown moved to approve the minutes of the meeting of March 21, 2022. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on adding Eid al-Fitr as a holiday for Bridgeport Public Schools. Mr. Sokolovic said the item was discussed two weeks prior and additional data requests were made. He noted the meeting was being held during Ramadan and some in attendance would have to leave shortly.

Erik Johnson, a teacher at Park City Magnet School, said the students have worked diligently to develop a sound argument to present to the committee. He said it was reassuring to see the community support in the audience.

Ms. Castillo arrived at the meeting.

Mr. Johnson said the students presented a concept as part of a project to make Eid al-Fitr a day off from school in the name of equity for all Bridgeport students.

Students Manaf and Rehaan presented to the committee. They said Eid al-Fitr is recognized by the board on the calendar, but it is not a day off, unlike every other holiday on the calendar.

Rehaan said there was data that Bridgeport was home to about 3,500 Muslims, while the Bridgeport Islamic Community Center estimated the population at over 4,000 in 2008, increasing by 15 to 20 percent annually.

Mr. Johnson said one proposed solution presented was the possibility of marking students present on the holiday. He said the students determined this would be reasonable as an alternative policy but contains risks.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez arrived at the meeting.

Manauf said students marked present might miss something important. He noted the Connecticut Constitution does not give a school district the right to determine a student's religious preference or families might not wish to share such preferences.

Mr. Johnson said the students came to a conclusion the district could not collect this data. He said the students could collect data, but it is difficult to collect. The students are in the process of compiling data on the religious breakdown of the Bridgeport Public Schools.

Manaf said denying a religious holiday violates rights, He quoted the Connecticut Constitution on discrimination and segregation in the exercise of rights. Rehaan quoted the 1st Amendment and the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

Mr. Johnson said the students remain firm that the day before Thanksgiving, the fourth Wednesday of November, should return to an early dismissal day with Eid al-Fitr made a school holiday.

Mr. Sokolovic said the U.S. Census does not collect data about religious beliefs, so the committee basically put an impossible task on the children.

Mr. Johnson said the students have developed anonymous staff and student surveys to be distributed across the district. He said he has spoken to BEA representatives and his principal on the legalities of distributing such a survey.

Mr. Weldon said he spoke to the board's counsel after the last meeting because he had concerns about separation of church and state. He said the attorney indicated survey data is allowed to be collected, but it must be explicitly stated it is optional to fill out the survey. He said such a survey would have to be distributed through the superintendent's office after consulting counsel.

Mr. Weldon said the attorney recommended doing what the committee did because it opens the door for any other religion who wants to have a holiday observed. He said the issue raises questions about other holidays that the district closes for. He said there should be a look for a more global perspective with the whole calendar considered. He said he questioned why Good Friday is a day off, noting he was

Catholic. Additionally, he said, a policy could be established to determine what holiday dictates the school system be closed for the day. He said to only look at one holiday is unfair, and the board was treading on a slippery slope.

Mr. Benejan arrived at the meeting in person.

Mr. Sokolovic noted there was a big Islamic community, including those present at the meeting.

Tarek Hamdia from the Bridgeport Islamic Community Center addressed the committee. He said there are at least 450 to 500 school-age children from his center. The Bridgeport Islamic society and its mosque estimate they have 150 to 200 students in the school district. He suggested the board look at absentee data in the past on the holiday. He said there are also Muslim teachers in the district, some of whom are active in the community center. He said he did not mind other religions and minorities requesting their holidays as a day off. He described the students' reaction to the reasons for Jewish holidays being days off. He said the students should be the focus of any educational process.

Another Muslim student in the district said she was originally from Lebanon, but now goes to Blackham School in Bridgeport. She said as a Muslim it is unfair that there is not a day off. She said there are not a lot of Muslim students at her school; perhaps only 100 out of 1500 students. She said the Muslims at the meeting were currently fasting, yet they are here, away from their families.

Supt. Testani said any survey of the staff would involve discussions with the teachers' union. He said there was an attempt to remove the Jewish holidays from the calendar a

few years ago and the BEA objected to a survey, but discussions continue around that.

The superintendent said the district is closed on Good Friday only because the city government is closed. He said the district has about 1200 workers who follow city contracts, including custodians, clericals, paraprofessionals, and security.

Supt. Testani said if school is open on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, then Veterans' Day would have to be a day off due to negotiations with the noncertified unions.

Mr. Benejan said he knows we have a lot of days off, and as a Puerto Rican he celebrates Three Kings Day. He said we have to take care of our kids as in the motto, every kid, every day. He said he supports the Eid al-Fitr holiday a hundred percent.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said she did not believe looking at holiday policies should be used as a reason to delay a decision as to the current matter. She said U.S. senators and the mayor have supported refugees coming to our city. She said it is not fair that a child is fasting in school and cannot focus or a teacher who has to be in front of a class in the same situation.

Mr. Sokolovic said he believed there should not be a delay. He said we asked the students to come back with data, not to come back and to throw another roadblock in the way. He proposed we leave it up to the superintendent to find a day on the calendar. He said there could be a compromise where the Islamic students do not get marked absent.

Supt. Testani said the next proposed school calendar before the board will include where the day is found, and the board can approve it or revise it.

Ms. Castillo said it was a misconception that we asked the students to do more. She said she asked the superintendent to share whatever data the district might have; she did not ask the students to conduct further research.

Ms. Castillo said she appreciated the students going the extra mile to put together a compelling argument. She said she was not familiar with the history of how we came to celebrate some school holidays and not others. She said it was important to determine the policies going forward.

The superintendent said the 2022-23 school calendar is finalized. He said students must be in school for 180 school days, although the district schedules a day or two above that. He said the board votes on the next school year's calendar in January.

Mr. Sokolovic said the board could codify that it is going to recognize the holiday.

Ms. Brown moved to instruct the superintendent to add to the 2023-24 calendar the Muslim holiday Eid al-Fitr as a school holiday recognized with a day off at his discretion to find out where the day comes from. The motion was seconded by Ms. Castillo.

Mr. Weldon questioned telling the superintendent to do this before he has data and exploring other holidays. He suggested the superintendent gather the information with a view of incorporating it into the 2023-24 calendar for the board to consider. This would allow consideration of Hindu

and Buddhist holidays. He said the full board would have to vote on the matter.

Ms. Brown moved *“to take to the full board to instruct the superintendent, beginning with the 2023-24 calendar, to add Eid Al-Fitr as a holiday with a day off for children of the city of Bridgeport.”*

Supt. Testani said he did not believe there should be a board instruction. Mr. Sokolovic said he believed it should be codified.

Mr. Weldon moved to amend the motion that the superintendent also find the appropriate comparable holidays for the Buddhist and Hindu religions and incorporate them into the overall calendar at the full board level. He said the amendment was to find what those comparable holidays are and include them with this holiday, and to find a way to incorporate them all.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said she had a concern about allowing the superintendent determining what are the appropriate Buddhist and Hindu holidays. She said the original motion should go to the full board, with a separate action on holidays for other religions. She said the amendment was not necessary.

Mr. Weldon withdrew his amendment.

The motion to refer the item to the full board was unanimously approved.

Mr. Weldon moved that “it be referred to the full board for the superintendent to modify this survey to be inclusive of all faiths, to solicit data, such as to be able to determine what

the primary holidays are for the Buddhist and Hindu faiths so that they too can be presented to the board for consideration of a day off. “

Supt. Testani asked if a survey was necessary or if consultation with a local place of worship would be applicable. He said sometimes surveys do not give accurate data because everyone does not respond.

Mr. Weldon modified his motion to say through solicitation of those officials.

Mr. Sokolovic said he was in total agreement with Mr. Weldon, but he believed there were more Muslims than the other religions mentioned. He said he supported a global look at holidays and further consideration at the committee.

Mr. Weldon said looking at the entire structure of holidays and the calendar might perhaps be handled by a separate ad hoc committee.

Mr. Weldon said that could be handled separately as an agenda item at the Regular Meeting.

Mr. Weldon said he would like the people in the audience to appreciate the matter was a lot more complicated as seen in the discussion because there are other people to consider. He said he wanted to do things fairly.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 7:19 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Approved by the committee on November 21, 2022