

Friday, May 28, 2021

MINUTES OF THE EDUCATIONAL DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held May 28, 2021, by video conference call, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:01 p.m. Present were members Chair Sosimo Fabian and Joseph Sokolovic. Board member John Weldon was present. Board member Albert Benejan joined the meeting subsequently as noted.

Mr. Sokolovic moved to approve the committee's minutes of November 16, 2020. The motion was seconded by Mr. Weldon and unanimously approved.

Dr. Fabian said he wanted to address a few issues, particularly a definition to the board on what diversity means for the district. He said the meeting was held with the background of social media postings from a fellow board member. He said diversity is very challenging to discuss without also discussing acceptance and respect. He thanked members of the public who supported him in regards to the postings.

Dr. Fabian said he wanted to answer the question of how he became a lawyer. He said is an immigrant from the Dominican Republic; attended high school in the Bronx and Canisius College. He said he earned a doctoral degree from Georgetown University in biochemistry and molecular biology; taught at Hunter College for a number of years. He

then attended law school, and passed the New York and Connecticut bars, and has been a lawyer for 18 years. He noted his first language is Spanish and believes in diversity and respect. He said his mother raised him on AFDC, otherwise known as welfare.

Mr. Sokolovic said he was the one who posted on social media. He said he was accountable to the public, who put him in office. He said he appreciated Dr. Fabian's dedication to the law profession, but wished he would show the same dedication to this committee, which has not met in six months. He said the board voted to appointed Dr. Fabian to the board. He said moving forward as a team requires us to meet. He said Dr. Fabian should have apologized for not holding a meeting in six months and being derelict in his duties.

Dr. Fabian said Mr. Sokolovic had been a member of the board since 2017 and did nothing about diversity and inclusion. Mr. Sokolovic said he chaired the Males of Color Committee for two years, which published a white paper. He said was calling Dr. Fabian a liar publicly. He said Dr. Fabian did not want to do the work, but for a resume booster. He said there would be more writings on social media.

Mr. Benejan joined the meeting.

Mr. Weldon said it's one thing to be disappointed about how things are going, but it's a whole other thing to turn it into a string of insults about someone's character and their level of commitment. He said expressing it with such borderline hatred is inappropriate, doesn't accomplish anything, and takes away from the conversation.

Mr. Sokolovic said we are accountable to the public. He said if he stepped out of line he'd expect to be called out for it. He said if the committee does not start producing he would escalate on social media.

Mr. Weldon said Mr. Sokolovic should have called Dr. Fabian instead of going to social media. Mr. Sokolovic said he e-mailed Dr. Fabian and gave him agenda items, and spoon fed him the way to start the committee.

Dr. Fabian said there needed to be a working definition of diversity and the types of metrics to be used. He said he wondered whether the ratios of students to teachers were an appropriate comparison because the pool of available, certified teachers across the state doesn't reflect the student population. He said this was a delicate topic that we need to be sensitive and savvy about.

Mr. Sokolovic noted the overall objectives established by the board for the committee, before Dr. Fabian joined the board, was to use data-driven information to apply an equity lens to the entire Bridgeport Public School system and identify any and all policies, procedures, programs or services that have a disparate impact on any distinct group of students or staff. He said the charge to the committee included referrals to other committees, creating focus groups, and/or referral of items to the full board. He said goals in 2020 were to establish baseline data to see where the disparate impacts are.

Mr. Sokolovic said the committee could come up with strategies to address the small pool of limited applicants. He said studies show that students learn better from people that look like them. He said there were legal pitfalls in attempting to become more diverse, but everything should

be looked at. He suggested looking at the ratios of students taking AP courses as an example.

Dr. Fabian said Mr. Sokolovic's definition is very broad and expansive and the committee would be running the district, not the superintendent, in attempting to address things. He said he obtained statistics that there are about 87,765 certified teachers in the state, of which 4.39 percent are Hispanic. In Bridgeport, 12 percent of teachers are Hispanic. He said those figures indicate the system is doing well in attracting and retaining diverse teachers.

Dr. Fabian noted 3.83 percent of certified teachers in the state are African-American and the district has 13 percent African-American teachers. He said in the state 9.64 percent of teacher are diverse, while Bridgeport has 28 percent.

Dr. Fabian said given the available pool we are doing very well. He said he did not believe diversity is all about numbers and metrics. He said a definition of diversity can be a guiding post for us to be aiming at. He said aiming at eradicating all disparate impacts would be a clear violation of certain federal laws. He said the goal should be to get the whole school community to support, understand, and embrace diversity, while keeping an eye on the metrics.

Dr. Fabian said because there is value in diversity, other people want it too, and it should be conceded where the district is doing well.

Mr. Sokolovic said his goal is not to do better than all districts, but to do the best we possibly can to get more teachers that look like students.

Mr. Weldon said the district was doing well in hiring minority teachers and it was quite more than a smidgen above what is available in the state. He said it is completely unrealistic to believe that 50 percent of our teachers be Hispanic. He said the numbers meant that likely most students who would be exposed to a Hispanic teacher at some point. He said it was good to expose students to all kinds of teachers because they will encounter all kinds of teachers in their life after school. He said this is what a diverse experience should be about.

Mr. Weldon noted some examples of diversity he had encountered in New York City and said Bridgeport by comparison has a smaller pool and often students are limited to their neighborhoods which are often racially defined. He suggested a bigger focus on bringing in diverse people with accomplishments to show students the sky is the limit.

Dr. Fabian said some schools have job fairs that go out of their way to attract diverse presenters. He said he had given a lot of thought to these issues and the hardest part of the process is coming up with a definition of diversity, which is not an easy thing to do. He recommended the book *System Thinking for Social Change* by David Peter Stroh.

Dr. Fabian said people have told him in a large population of diverse students diversity might consist of exposing them to the non-diverse employees. He said Mr. Sokolovic was right that studies demonstrate that students do better with role models in their lives. He said the community could help draft an idea of what they would like diversity to be.

Mr. Sokolovic said he believed diversity is differing groups, ethnicities, races, religions, colors, creeds and differences between everybody. He said we were missing the definition

of equity: equitable outcomes for all students. He said looking at equitable outcomes will be data-driven. He said we were still looking at a 40 percent spread between Hispanic teachers and students and a 20 percent spread between African-American students and African-American teachers. He said trying to close that spread is not taking anything away from the superintendent, but trying to discuss ideas.

Mr. Sokolovic said there was barely a disparity in African-Americans in the administrative level compared to African-American students, but there was a disparity in Hispanic administrators. He said a disparity does not mean we're doing something wrong; it just means it exists.

Dr. Fabian said he agreed that equity is more easily measurable than diversity or inclusion. He said the district was quite rich in diversity. He said statistics could be gathered in graduation rates, AP classes or other factors. He said it is difficult to find one defining event that causes disparities because of the many social factors. He said the comparison should include state data to see how the district compares to others.

Dr. Fabian said inequities could be looked into, but the task could not be accomplished overnight. He suggested expanding the pool of thinkers beyond this committee.

Mr. Weldon suggested obtaining comparison data from Stamford, Waterbury, New Haven, and Hartford. He said sometimes perceptions about inequities are not reality and in those cases a spotlight could be put on things to point out misunderstandings. Dr. Fabian said a districtwide survey might be valuable.

Dr. Fabian said he would try to come up with proposals for definitions on diversity, equity and inclusion to circulate. He said right now there is a lot of emotion, but no real guidance that gives a baseline.

Dr Fabian said he wanted to make sure our actions are moving things forward and not causing a divide and resentment.

Mr. Weldon suggested Dr. Fabian ask the superintendent about the details of the presentations to the district by Derrick Gay, who presented on diversity, which may have included a survey.

In response to a question, Dr. Fabian said the committee would meet regularly in accordance with his availability and schedule. He said his goal was to have this be a six-month project prior to his departure from the board in November. He said he would like to leave a mark and he believed we can make headway.

Mr. Weldon noted to Dr. Fabian that if a scheduled meeting could not be held, it could be held on another date after checking with the other committee members.

Mr. Sokolovic moved to adjourn the meeting. The motion was seconded by Dr. Fabian and unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 6:52 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

*Approved by the committee on January 31, 2022*