

Monday, March 21, 2022

MINUTES OF THE EDUCATIONAL DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held March 21, 2022, at Central High School, 1 Lincoln Boulevard, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:34 p.m. Present were members Chair Joseph Sokolovic, Bobbi Brown, and Erika Castillo*. Board members John Weldon, Albert Benejan* and Christine Baptiste-Perez** were present.

(*Remote participation and in-person participation as noted.

**Remote participation.)

Dr. Carmen McPherson was present.

Ms. Brown moved to approve the minutes of the meeting of February 22, 2022. The motion was seconded by Ms. Castillo and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on adding Eid al-Fitr as a school holiday.

Mr. Sokolovic said this was brought to him by Park City Magnet students, where his son used to attend. He said the presentation was based on a project led by 7th and 8th grade social studies teacher Erik Johnson.

Mr. Johnson said it was Room 101-A's rendition of Project Citizen, which teaches students to become active members in a democratic society; how to perform research, deliver research to government, and how to create an action plan to create real, lasting change in our communities. He said his homeroom brought the idea to him of making Eid al-Fitr a day off from school in Bridgeport.

Mr. Johnson said Eid al-Fitr is marked on the city calendar, but it is the only day marked that is not granted as a school holiday. He said all Muslim students interviewed said Eid al-Fitr should be a day off from school. He said students who are absent on this day are currently marked absent, while people from other religious persuasions are not marked absent on holidays in their faiths.

Mr. Benejan arrived in-person at the meeting.

Mr. Johnson said if the day off is granted the community will recognize the importance of Eid al-Fitr and it will show respect and equality to our friends and classmates who are Muslim.

Mr. Johnson said opponents of the concept may point to the costs of closing the district for a day. He said survey data shows it was important to inform people that the day is a major event. He said it was found via survey 11 out of the 99 8th graders at Park City Magnet were Muslim; the majority were Christian; and none of the 5th to 8th grade students were Jewish. He said all 99 students surveyed agreed Eid al-Fitr should be a day off from school.

Students Manaf and An presented on alternative policies. The three alternatives presented were making the day before Thanksgiving a half day; adding an extra day at the end of the school year; and removing a day from spring break. The disadvantages of each option was discussed in the project and the advantage was noted as Muslims being allowed to celebrate Eid al-Fitr without being counted as absent.

Students then presented their proposed policy, which is to have a day off for Eid al-Fitr since it doesn't violate the U.S. Constitution and it helps Muslims celebrate their holiday. Muslims would not be unfairly marked absent or miss school days. It also respects various religions and won't cause debates or anger. It would not affect the number of school days.

Another student discussed disadvantages to the proposed policy, including Eid al-Fitr not being on the same day or even month in each year; and adjusting the school calendar by removing another day off might upset others who celebrate Three Kings Day and Italian Heritage Day.

The student said the 7th and 8th grade classes voted on where to replace the extra day of school if Eid al-Fitr is declared a day off. There were 32 votes for Italian Heritage Day; 26 votes for the Wednesday before Thanksgiving; 14 votes for the Friday of the President's Day weekend; and 6 votes for the end of the school. The class decided removing a cultural holiday would not be the right thing to do and the day before Thanksgiving would be the best option.

Students presented their action plan for creating Eid al-Fitr a day off, which included gain approval from the committee and bringing the matter to the full Board of Education. If the proposal is not approved, the presentation would be reconstructed and improved and presented again or submitted to representatives in the Connecticut General Assembly.

Mr. Sokolovic said he was raised as a Christian and he would find it strange if he had to go to school on Christian holidays while school was off on Jewish or Muslim holidays. He said he believed granting the holiday would be cost-

neutral because it would swap one day off for another day off.

Mr. Johnson said students spoke to the district's budget manager and they were informed that it costs about \$1 million in personnel costs for a day off.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested using the Thursday before Presidents' Day as a trade. He noted the day before Thanksgiving used be a half day off from school.

In response to a question, a student said only one school was surveyed.

In response to a question, a student said for the next few years Eid will be observed in the winter or fall.

Ms. Castillo arrived in-person at the meeting.

Mr. Sokolovic said he was sent a schedule by the Islamic Center which plotted out the date of Eid al-Fitr until 2040. He said he would provide this to the board members. He noted the dates of Jewish holidays and Easter also fluctuate.

Ms. Castillo said the Thursday before Presidents' Day and day were before Thanksgiving were the best options.

Mr. Weldon said this has been an ongoing discussion since the fall. He said the district being closed for Rosh Hashanah was driven in the past by the number of staff members who were Jewish and would take that day, which would cause a severe staffing shortage. He said the same would apply to the Christmas week.

Mr. Weldon said perhaps the policy marking students absent who take this with their families should be changed, along with no critical work being issued leading up to the holiday. He said another issue is other religions in the city, including Buddhism, which might force 90 percent of students to not be in school for a very small group of people. He described this as a slippery slope. He said changing the policy on absences could be applied to other religions without affecting the district as a whole.

Mr. Weldon said there could be collective bargaining matters that might have to be discussed and it would be disingenuous to try to wrap this up tonight. He noted Supt. Testani may not have seen the arguments made tonight. He said he met, along with Mr. Testani and Ms. Brown, earlier in the year on this issue. He said tonight's presentation was very good and well thought out.

Mr. Sokolovic said equity is not easy. He said the precedent was set by Three Kings Day. He said it would not result in learning loss because it would swap one day for another. He said we're here for students and to give them what they need, not for teachers. He said he estimated about ten percent of our student population is Muslim. He said the current policy was not equitable or fair.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said she agreed with Mr. Sokolovic that decisions on equity are not easy. She said she would like to know the percentage of Muslims in Bridgeport and the percentage of Muslim public school students compared to other demographics. She said even though the majority of Bridgeport teachers do not look like the students does not mean they are not obligated to respect some other religions or religious holidays. She said the lack of diversity in

teaching staff should not be the deciding factor in observing a holiday.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said when she was in elementary school, she did not want to miss a day of school and always had perfect attendance, so she understands the apprehension of having to miss a day of school.

Mr. Benejan said he agreed with Mr. Sokolovic and Ms. Baptiste-Perez. He said he was very proud of the students.

In response to a question, a student described the process of how they created the presentation and the final proposal made to the committee. Mr. Benejan urged that a parent who was present sit closer to the committee.

Ms. Castillo read definitions of equity and equality. She said the idea of a day off was seeking equality. She said concerns about being marked absent and missing work for a religious holiday was the issue, and not necessarily giving the entire district a day off. She said she would like to hear what the demographics of the district were as well.

Mr. Sokolovic said we can assume there are more Muslim students than Jewish students in the district. He said the students were seeking equity, not equality. He noted there were three or four Jewish holidays and four or five Christian holidays on the calendar. He said the students were asking for one third of equality.

Mr. Sokolovic noted half the districts in Connecticut do not get the day before Thanksgiving off. He asked if Mr. Johnson could provide demographic data on Muslims in Bridgeport and in schools by Monday.

Mr. Weldon said it was not fair to try to cram something through tonight after having just seen the presentation. He said 54 percent of the student body is Hispanic and would observe Three Kings Day whether it was on the calendar or not. He said the Jewish holidays were negotiated in the past by the teachers' union. He urged the board gain more information and be thoughtful about this. He said he did not get the feeling tonight that compromise or thoughtfulness is being considered by everyone. He urged the matter be considered at a subsequent committee meeting.

Ms. Brown commended the students for their presentation. She said the argument could be strengthened by a wider survey of the district. Ms. Castillo said she was also proud of the students for making their case. She said the board has to make decisions on hard data.

Mr. Sokolovic said the questions being raised are bothersome because they go to the ingrained institutional biases the committee was created to resolve. He said there was no doubt our calendar had Christian and Jewish holidays, but not Muslim holidays. He said it should go to the full board for consideration.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez asked when Three Kings Day became a day off and how the decision was made. Mr. Weldon said he did not know. Ms. Baptiste-Perez said it was typically a day celebrated by Catholics, not all Christians. She asked how many teachers in the district would be affected by Jewish holidays.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said Ms. Valle informed her that Three Kings Day was implemented over twenty years ago.

Mr. Sokolovic said he believed we have all the information we need to make a decision.

Mr. Sokolovic moved “to move to the full board adding Eid as a day off from school and let Mr. Testani choose from the four days previously mentioned in order to make it happen or add a day in the beginning or the end of the school year.” He said further data could be brought to the board at its Regular Meeting.

The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown.

Mr. Weldon said it is not appropriate to push this discussion to the full board before all the other questions have been answered at the committee level. He said it was disingenuous to the young people to give them the impression this is how government works, which includes further data and an answer from the superintendent. He noted the school calendar for the coming school year has been approved by the board and would not be addressed again until January if we’re going to change something going forward.

Mr. Sokolovic said the matter should have been brought to the committee, not in a meeting behind closed doors in December. Mr. Weldon said representatives from the Islamic Center said they would bring the matter to the board meeting, but they never did so.

Ms. Castillo moved an amendment suggesting the choice of the date to be substituted as a day off happens at the next committee meeting. She said this would clarify the doubts that people still have before solidifying the decision. Mr. Sokolovic and Ms. Baptiste-Perez said this was an entirely new motion.

Ms. Brown said she would withdraw the second to the motion. She said she the previous discussion was with adults, and this was the first time she was hearing from the students.

Mr. Sokolovic said another motion was not needed and he would bring the matter back to the committee, perhaps in about two weeks.

Mr. Benejan said he would like to see the committee receive more information.

Ms. Castillo moved to recess for five minutes. The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown and unanimously approved.

The meeting was recessed at 7:35 p.m.

The meeting resumed at 7:45 p.m.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez left the meeting.

The next agenda item was a staff training proposal from Carolyn's Professional Services. No one was present for this item

The next agenda item was on student AP courses and participation rates.

Dr. McPherson discussed data presented on a slide that was displayed. She said the data covers 11th and 12th grade students. The first chart covered first semester AP courses broken down by gender, special education, ELL, and race. The next slide covered the second semester.

Dr. McPherson described the pie charts which broke the students down by race.

Mr. Sokolovic said overall the numbers look pretty good, but there are some troubling areas.

In response to a question, Dr. McPherson said BMA did not offer AP courses in semester one but did in the second semester Mr. Sokolovic noted the comprehensive high schools trailed magnet schools significantly.

Mr. Sokolovic said the data indicated that at the Biotech school had a disproportionate number of females compared to males in the first semester and second semester. He said there were other disparities in the granular data at some schools.

In response to a question, Dr. McPherson said in high schools some students receive recommendations to enroll in AP courses. She said sometimes even with support students will opt out because the courses are challenging. She said there are not gatekeepers keeping students out of the courses. Students and parents are informed of the opportunities in the sophomore year.

Ms. Brown said she was recommended for an AP course when she was at Harding.

In response to a question, Dr. McPherson said there are more specialized AP courses at Fairchild Wheeler than at the comprehensive high schools.

Mr. Sokolovic said it would be helpful to have a list of all the courses at each school to make sure they are being adequately dispersed throughout the system.

Mr. Sokolovic said the data was presented just the way he likes it. He asked that the demographics of the city be placed alongside the district data.

Ms. Castillo said it seemed like the pie charts were pretty representative compared to the student body at large.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:04 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

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