

Monday, May 26, 2020

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held May 26, 2020, by video and audio conference call, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:39 p.m. Present were Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Hernan Illingworth, Secretary Bobbi Brown, Joseph Sokolovic Joseph Lombard, and Albert Benejan. Sybil Allen joined the meeting subsequently as noted.

Acting Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Dasha Spell urged that the board help with promoting Bridgeport residents to respond to the 2020 Census. She said Bridgeport could lose out on additional money due to lack of response, with the next census not occurring until 2030. She noted Mayor Ganim has done advocacy in this area.

APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:

Mr. Sokolovic moved to approve the minutes of Regular Meeting of May 11, 2020. The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown and unanimously approved.

CHAIR REPORT:

Mr. Weldon said he would defer to the superintendent on the evolving process about graduations.

Ms. Allen joined the meeting.

COMMMITTEE REPORTS:

Mr. Illingworth said the Facilities Committee and Governance Committee will meet on June 1st.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Finance Committee met on May 13th. He said there is somewhat pleasant news because it tentatively looks this is going to be one of the first budget years in a long time that we won't have to remove any staff. He said one area of concern is the lack of printed material being presented at the meeting for board members because the numbers are difficult to track. He asked that going forward that written materials be provided, even though numbers are fluid. He said the next meeting will be on June 3rd.

Mr. Illingworth said the Governance Committee will meet on June 1st.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Teaching & Learning Committee will meet soon.

Mr. Weldon said the Personnel Committee met on May 13th and interviewed for four executive positions and recommendations were submitted to the superintendent. The next meeting will be tomorrow, with interviews for principal positions.

Mr. Benejan said the Students & Families Committee will meet on May 28th.

Mr. Weldon said the Contracts Committee has yet to meet, however, the superintendent will be submitting some items soon.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Ad Hoc Committee Great Cities Schools/Males of Color will meet on June 9th.

SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT AND AGENDA:

Mr. Testani said he is finalizing letters to the four executive director candidates who have been chosen: Victor Black, Selena Morgan, Herminio Planas, and Melissa Jenkins. He said they will be continuing in their roles in a permanent position.

Mr. Testani said food and nutrition has done an amazing job and served well over 600,000 meals since the closure. Two additional locations at Discovery and Dunbar will be opened. He said which buildings will participate in summer meals is still to be decided.

Mr. Testani said the last date for students to complete and hand in work will be June 17th. He said the final classes will be held on June 10th. He said he believed the recent poor weather has helped keep kids engaged in distance learning.

Mr. Testani said principals are scheduling times for families to retrieve belongings that were left in schools or medications stored with the nurses.

Mr. Testani said printed materials will be distributed this week as well as donated book packs for K to 8 students. The latter was the result of the Connecticut Partnership's donation to the Alliance districts.

Mr. Testani said times will be set up for students to return district-owned devices. He said high school summer school

will be conducted online. This year there will be no cost for the virtual classes for credit recovery.

The superintendent said surveys of parents on reopening continue. He urged that parents not fill out the survey more than once.

Mr. Testani said due to the slow reopening of the state unfortunately live graduations will not be allowed. He said even districts that have not been highly impacted by COVID will be subject to the same state guidelines. He said the district will purchase signs for display on lawns or in windows to celebrate graduates. There will be a video montage of all graduates and taped congratulatory messages. He invited board members to record small messages as well. All the high schools are scheduling car parade events.

Mr. Testani said planning will be underway for reopening in the fall, including models where there is a full reopening, a hybrid model or distance learning.

Mr. Weldon noted Mr. Testani does Facebook Live events every Friday at 9:00 a.m.; links are available on the district's website.

Ms. Brown said she was glad to hear about the availability of devices for students in summer school. Mr. Testani said he believed summer school would be in good hands under the direction of Vernon Thompson.

Mr. Benejan said he had heard reports that staff were not responding to parents.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said there had been about 4,000 responses to the parent survey as of last week.

Mr. Testani described the ways the high schools are planning to distribute diplomas to graduates who arrive in cars.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said the virtual graduation ceremonies will be held by each individual high school.

In response to questions submitted by the public, Mr. Testani said right now board employees are not required to be tested, but state guidelines are being followed, with masks being provided. He said he assumed students when return to school buildings there would be temperature checks of people entering.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said if the district is allowed to be reopened the appropriate guidelines will be followed. He said opening the district in distance learning without face-to-face contact would be extremely challenging for students.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said a reopening with a split schedule would require concessions from the state Department of Education on required hours as well as buy-in from collective bargaining units. He said every-other-day schedules would probably infringe the least upon contractual rights.

Mr. Testani said currently summer guidelines require all students, parents, and staff on school grounds to wear masks unless they have a medical exemption. He said the district has ordered a half a million masks, but it would be challenging to provide everyone masks on a weekly basis.

Mr. Testani said he made clear to parents on Facebook Live that there was a difference between distance learning and homeschooling.

Ms. Allen noted split-sessions were used in the past for educational purposes.

Ms. Brown suggested students receive health information when they come back. Mr. Testani said the first week or two of school reopening would have to be around getting into a new norm.

In response to a question about testing, Mr. Weldon noted testing of staff would require negotiation with unions. Mr. Testani said he tested negative a few weeks ago.

NEW BUSINESS:

The next agenda item was on soliciting bids for non-commodity commercial food, paper goods and cleaning supplies for the 2020-21 school year. John Gerrity, director of food and nutrition services, asked for consent to move forward with the bids to be posted by the city's purchasing department. He said non-commodity food items are grocery and bakery items, fruits and vegetables, breakfast items, milk, and paper and cleaning supplies.

Ms. Allen moved *"to authorize the food and nutrition center to solicit bids for non-commodity commercial foods, paper goods and cleaning supplies for the 2020-21 school year."* The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was an addendum to the contract for transportation services with We Transport, LLC.

Mr. Testani said it was hope when schools closed that bus companies would be able to resume service when schools reopened. He said negotiations went back and forth with We Transport in order for them to maintain service when school resumes. He said school districts would be in trouble if the bus companies collapsed.

Mr. Testani said an understanding was reached with We Transport that the dollar amount to be paid would be 55 percent of the remaining days of school from closure, minus a few days over the 180-day threshold. He said this would allow employees to remain on the bus company's books so they can maintain service in the fall.

Mr. Testani said the agreement only covers the remaining days in this school year and does not bind the district in the fall.

In response to a question, Mr. Weldon said the daily rate was about \$113,000 a day for buses and it would be reduced to about \$62,000 per day for the 62 days of closure. Mr. Weldon said the total to be paid would be \$3,878,912.

Mr. Testani said the state did not take back funds from school districts with the understanding that we would continue to pay contracts to a reasonable extent. He said other districts paid more than the 55 percent that was received by We Transport. He said they had been a good partner with the district for the length of the contract.

Mr. Weldon said he understood We Transport furloughed employees so they are collecting unemployment benefits. He added that the company could possibly apply for some stimulus programs.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said the matter was not vetted through the Finance Committee. He said he felt compelled to negotiate given the order from the governor.

Mr. Weldon said the agreement was only put together over the past week and given the board meeting was coming up, and We Transport was in a cash flow crunch, he decided as chair of the Contracts Committee to let it go to the full board.

Mr. Illingworth said the concern was the district is paying the company while they elected to furlough all their employees. He said it might be double-dipping on their end.

Mr. Weldon said the agreement indicates the funds are for expenses actually incurred by We Transport to cover active drivers and the cost of health insurance, if any, and the cost of maintaining the fleet.

Mr. Testani said the district jeopardizes CARES Act funding if we don't hold up our end of the bargain. He said the district is being given money to cover expenses that are incurred due to COVID-19.

Mr. Illingworth said he was not against school bus drivers, but the district incurred additional costs from the pandemic, some of which may not be reimbursable.

Mr. Testani said he initially was inclined not to pay We Transport anything. He said the drivers were eligible for unemployment plus the additional \$600 payments. He noted the mayor received a letter from the Teamsters' union. Once the district received CARES funding negotiations began and the 55 percent figure was agreed to, which will mean We Transport will be there for the district when they are needed.

Mr. Sokolovic said the matter was broached in the Finance Committee, without the exact numbers. He added there are some silver linings for the district from COVID, including possibly getting through the year without laying people off. He said the 45 percent of the contract is basically gravy to the district. He added some people with the \$600 bonus are making more money than he is from going to work every day. He recommended approval.

Mr. Weldon said he was comfortable with the agreement if Mr. Testani and Ms. Siegel were.

Ms. Brown said she understood what the district and the bus company was up against. Ms. Benejan and Ms. Allen said they agreed.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said the rate was negotiated so favorably compared to other districts because some may have jumped the gun early and did not anticipate being closed for the whole year. He said he believed both the district and We Transport got a fair deal. He said he stressed to the City Council that CARES funding was not free money and contracts would have to be paid.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *“to approve Amendment I between the Bridgeport Board of Education and We Transport, LLC, as it relates to the COVID-19 pandemic and related declaration of public health and civil preparedness emergency.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

Mr. Illingworth moved to adjourn the meeting. The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan and unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:54 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

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