

Monday, April 27, 2020

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE  
BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held April 27,  
2020, by video conference call, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:42 p.m. Present were Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Hernan Illingworth, Secretary Bobbi Brown, Joseph Sokolovic Joseph Lombard, Albert Benejan and Sybil Allen.

Acting Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

**PUBLIC COMMENT:**

Marge Hiller said the Department of Education approved \$13 billion in approved coronavirus relief. She said she understands \$9.3 million is coming to Bridgeport, which is great news for teachers and students, and this is the right time for the board to restore the funding for the School Volunteer office.

Wanda Simmons thanked Mr. Testani. She said several parents contacted her and they were all serviced by the district and able to get devices for their family. She thanked Ms. Hall and Mr. Gerrity for collaborating with a food task force.

George Markley, vice president of the School Volunteer Association(SVA), said he has been a mentor to students in the district for thirty years. He said the staff members of the School Volunteer office have been paid by the SVA for the last two years, which has exhausted all of the SVA's reserves. He said the \$175,000 in salary and benefits needed to be restored to the budget. He said, despite the

name, the SVA needs professionals to run the day-to-day operations. He said if the SVA office disappears the same will happen to the volunteers.

Veronica Mojica, a lifelong resident of Bridgeport, said she believed the district's high schools are terrible so her children have attended Kolbe and Notre Dame. She added that Little League will probably be cancelled this year as well. She said she believed the graduation ceremonies were very important events and should be held at all the high schools in the city with social distancing incorporated.

Shavonne Davis said on April 24th she received a call from Harding High indicating her son was absent even though he did not have any virtual classes.

Chaila Robinson said she and other parents believed the distance learning was rolled out prematurely, without training for teachers or students. She said the expectation that went along with the distance learning regarding attendance resulted in students being incorrectly marked absent. She suggested a better way be figured out how to hold a prom for the students. She said she hoped schools would not be opened against this year and she urged the board to consider what would happen if parents decided it was not appropriate to return their children to school.

Mr. Benejan made a motion *"to add a discussion and possible action of the Title I parent allocation funds to the agenda."* The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown and unanimously approved.

## **APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:**

Mr. Illingworth moved to approve the minutes of the Regular Meeting of March 9, 2020. The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan. A correction was noted. The motion was approved by a 6-0 vote.

Voting in favor were members Weldon, Allen, Brown, Sokolovic, Illingworth, and Benejan. Mr. Lombard abstained

Mr. Illingworth moved to approve the minutes of the Special Meeting of March 23, 2020. The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan and unanimously approved.

Ms. Allen moved to approve the minutes of the Special Meeting of April 1, 2020. The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown and unanimously approved..

Ms. Allen moved to approve the minutes of the Special Meeting of April 14, 2020. The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown and approved by a 6-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Sokolovic, Brown, Allen, Benejan, and Lombard. Mr. Illingworth abstained.

### **CHAIR REPORT:**

Mr. Weldon said he participates in weekly conferences with CAFE and discussions about graduations have taken place throughout the state. He said, along with Mr. Testani, we want to try to figure something out.

Mr. Weldon thanked the district's staff, the food service workers, Mr. Benejan for passing out masks last week, and the teachers for working in a very different environment.

Mr. Weldon said he received a communication from a teacher that indicated they were glad the district used Teams as the platform for holding distance learning.

### **COMMITTEE REPORTS:**

Mr. Illingworth said a meeting of the Facilities Committee would be scheduled in the near future.

Mr. Sokolovic referred an item to the committee that the district make sure our buildings will be ready when they need to open.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Finance Committee met on April 15th. There was an update on the budget and the impact of COVID on the budget. He said the next meeting would be held on approximately May 13th.

Mr. Illingworth said as soon as the superintendent had something to report on Series 1000 he would schedule a meeting of the Governance Committee.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Teaching & Learning Committee met on April 16th. Distance learning, grading, special education, graduation, and grade advancement were discussed. The next meeting should be on May 19th.

Mr. Weldon said the Personnel Committee has not met. He noted there is a new HR director. The next scheduled meeting is May 27th.

Mr. Benejan said the Students & Families Committee met last Thursday. He said there was discussion of parent leaders and their contact information, the Title I and Priority

Grant, and the parent convention. The next meeting will be on May 28th.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Ad Hoc Committee on Males of Color has not met since the virus struck.

## **SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT AND AGENDA:**

Supt. Testani said it has been a challenging time for everybody. He said the Bridgeport community had come together in this difficult time in supporting each other in every way we can. He said there have been bumps in the road because the issue came out of nowhere.

Mr. Testani said he hoped there would be some sort of gathering of students and teachers together before we close out the school year. He said opening schools again will be more challenging, though.

Mr. Testani said he spoke to Mr. Hammond on facilities and summer cleaning will begin as soon as the state announcement is made that schools will not open again in this school year. Tradespersons have been sent out to buildings to perform tasks that would have to have been done in the summer taking full advantage of the time off. A project for masons on Central High steps has been prioritized.

Mr. Testani said there are a lot of uncertainties about the budget, but CARES Act money will be available for compensatory services for special education and to fill in gaps created by the closure of over 30 percent of the school year. He said it is very important that people don't think we're getting an influx of money. He said it was possible that state allocations of money would be cut.

Mr. Testani said the CARES Act money may only be enough to keep us whole from the loss of other monies. He said this had to be stressed to the local city government. He said our kids need more, not the same or less, because they have to get caught up academically and social-emotionally. Mr. Testani said children are on the front line of the virus.

Mr. Testani said the distance learning plan is available on the district's website. He said staff training in the fall and winter on the Teams platform was provided to teachers. He said high school teachers have been using Teams for about five to six weeks, but it is challenging to work remotely with young elementary children, which is why printed materials are provided.

Mr. Testani said graduation is constantly on his mind and he has discussed the subject during his recent meetings with groups of high school students. He said it was possible the graduations would be held in July or August, but the students indicated they would not be interested in an event after the beginning of the next school year. He said the students had provided some creative ideas for holding ceremonies.

Mr. Testani said he would be requesting interviews be held at the Personnel Committee for administrative openings.

The next item was a question-and-answer period with the superintendent.

In response to a question about the large size of the packets that have been distributed to the students, Mr. Testani said the work is supposed to cover two weeks, in order to reduce

the number of pickups and drop-offs to maintain social distancing.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said the Connecticut Partnership donated devices will be used for high school students only, with deliveries taking pace in May, June and July. He said there will be a one-time fee of \$25 every year to cover insurance for the device. Devices for elementary schools are being purchased through board and city funds.

Mr. Testani said schools needed to get updated e-mail addresses for parents into the system.

Mr. Illingworth said he appreciated Mr. Testani's leadership during the crisis. He noted the \$25 fee for insurance was implemented because the devices are able to taken home, unlike previous devices used by students within the schools.

Ms. Allen urged the students be referred to as such or children, not kids.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said taking elementary attendance online is difficult because many of the students receive printed materials. He said at the high school teachers are following a regular schedule. e said if students do not log in on Teams during the class time they will be marked absent. He said early in the process students were not waking up early enough to log in. He said Central High started classes at 9:00 a.m., not 7:53, and the classes run about fifteen to thirty minutes.

Mr. Testani said he had heard from high school students there were distractions when participating in an online class from home.

Mr. Testani described the support provided to special education students, including speech and language support, social workers holding groups, resource teachers modifying work, and paraprofessionals helping students on Teams. He said unfortunately nothing can replace face-to-face contact.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said discussions about summer programming have taken place. He said we're prepared to run programs for early reading, special needs students, and high school credit recovery via devices if necessary. He said thought has been given to using concepts of distance learning in the future for students, including for homebound students, snow days, and engaging parents in conferences.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said over 4,000 devices had been given out to students. He said the printed materials are distributed on a two-week cycle, but when returned they are left to sit for a period of time for safety purposes. He said grading options have been discussed at the state level, but it will likely be a local decision. He said discussions have taken place about adding more commentary on elementary and middle school report cards.

Questions were submitted by the public and read by Jeff Postolowski.

Chaila Robinson thanked Mr. Testani for stepping up for the children and asked that the attendance issue be addressed. Mr. Testani said attendance would be addressed first thing tomorrow.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said special education and social work services are being delivered remotely either through Teams or Face Time.



In response to a question, Mr. Testani said students who do not return packets cannot be graded. He noted students had the option to e-mailing photos of their completed work to teachers.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said it was way too early to make a decision to send students back into schools. He added that going forward the standard practice of a child arriving at the school in the morning until the end of an after-school program will be likely have to be altered in the future.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said when devices are issued to high school students the first few days will be used to familiarize them with the online platforms, including online textbooks.

In response to a comment, Mr. Testani said it was important to understand the COVID situation was not going to be over anytime soon and the goal is to make sure students are supported when they return back to school given the additional issues presented to parents.

Mr. Postolowski read a comment by a parent who said for the first time in weeks they had felt good about what their daughter was receiving from the teachers.

Ms. Brown said from her interactions the biggest thing students are dealing with is anxiety and depression. She asked how they would be helped in the transition to return to school.

Mr. Testani said his focus will be to get teachers back in buildings, with social distancing, and have support and professional development available. He said a lot of CARES

funding will be used in the social-emotional areas to support students and families.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said the last day for distance learning and school is currently June 25th.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said there were no provisions to waive the \$25 fee for the devices that will be issued to high school students.

### **NEW BUSINESS:**

The next item was discussion and possible action concerning Title I allocations. Mr. Benejan said the goal was to have PAC leaders spend their Title I funding. He said PAC leaders were being presented with obstacles by having to obtain quotes for purchases. He said he learned unspent funds would be returned to the district and Ms. Siegel, and not remain with the school to roll over for next year.

Mr. Testani said some Title I monies roll over to the next year and are utilized for things that are eligible in the grant, including to offset deficits in the operating budget. He said the majority of schools have spent a good portion of their parent engagement money. He said purchases over \$1,000 or from the same vendor are governed by city ordinance and require three quotes.

Mr. Testani said one option for unspent funds is to purchase a laptop device dedicated to the PAC or PTSO.

Mr. Benejan said the PAC leaders were doing their best to spend the money. Mr. Testani said obtaining an alternative quote could be done by printing out the prices from internet sites of other merchants.

Mr. Testani said there would be a need to transition back into the school in the fall, so unspent Title I funds for the parent convention would be set aside to do things in this area.

Mr. Sokolovic said the CARES Act has suspended Title I deadlines and allows rollover of funds, so parents should not have to rush to spend these dollars.

Mr. Sokolovic moved to have Mr. Testani direct staff to prepare a journal entry to reserve those monies to be added to the Title I dollars next year for the schools that have not expended those monies.”

Mr. Testani said there is a 15 percent waiver to move money around Title I to things like devices. He said Mr. Sokolovic was asking to increase the budgets of school parent organizations who were not going to meet the original deadline without the pandemic, since only two weeks remained before April 1.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Title I funds were the only source of getting parents involved in the district. He questioned taking 15 percent of the expenditures for devices. She said parents should not suffer for the decisions of a few parent leaders or staff members.

Mr. Illingworth said he agreed with both sides here. He said some schools seemed to have low expenditures both this year and last year. He said he would like to see unused money used for nothing else but parent engagement.

Mr. Testani noted the high school parent engagement funds in the Priority Grant did not roll over. He said the total

amount across elementary schools was about \$23,000. He said a series of workshops to help parents could be held and materials purchased to help parents cope.

Mr. Illingworth said he was concerned because he heard of a school where only 20 percent of Title I funding was spent. He urged a meeting be held with the school leadership and the parent leaders.

Mr. Testani said a substantial amount of P-10s have been submitted since the Students & Families Committee meeting, which will reduce the number below \$23,000.

Mr. Sokolovic said the point of his motion was that the dollars should stay with parent engagement activities.

Mr. Sokolovic said it was very rare that somebody was going to you hand something. He urged parents to take what they are entitled to as PAC leaders.

Mr. Illingworth seconded the motion.

Mr. Weldon suggested the motion be rephrased more to the spirit of what is trying to be accomplished without directing them to make journal entries.

Mr. Sokolovic withdrew the motion; Mr. Illingworth withdrew his second.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *“to have Mr. Testani ensure that all unexpended parental engagement funds are only spent in the future – any remaining dollars – only on parental engagement activities and not be redirected to anywhere*

*else in Title I funding.*" The motion was seconded by Mr. Illingworth.

The motion was unanimously approved.

Mr. Benejan said he wanted to be sure the \$9,000 for the parent convention was spent on parents. He said he did not want to hear later Ms. Siegel had the money or it was used to pay bills. He said he will work with the parent leaders to help them with the procedures of how to spend the money. He thanked Mr. Testani for doing an amazing job.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 9:12 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod