

Monday, January 13, 2020

**MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE
BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION**, held January 13,
2020, at Bridgeport City Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace, Bridgeport,
Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:35 p.m. Present were Vice President Hernan Illingworth, Secretary Bobbi Brown, John Weldon, Joseph Sokolovic, Sybil Allen, Chris Taylor, and Joseph Lombard. Albert Benejan arrived subsequently as noted.

Acting Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

Mr. Sokolovic moved to extend the time for public speaking portion. The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown and unanimously approved.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Gary Peluchette, president of the Bridgeport Education Association, said he was present with other members and the members of the executive board. He read a letter in support of Mr. Testani. He described Mr. Testani as a pragmatic and logical leader of the district. He said grievances have been resolved through discussions with the superintendent.

Mr. Benejan arrived at the meeting.

Sangeeta Bella, Discovery Magnet School principal and vice present of the BCAS union, said BCAS was in support of Mr. Testani. She said he has brought much-needed stability to

the district. She said Mr. Testani is very knowledgeable, resourceful, and brings an understanding of the school community and its needs. She said Mr. Testani had reorganized the special education department in the last five months. She added that under his leadership the morale of the school community has been boosted.

Wanda Simmons, a parent and education advocate, said she supported Mr. Testani, but had issues with the process by which he was chosen as the permanent superintendent. She it was nothing personal, but she questioned whether someone with no qualifications would be given a position in Southport or Westport. She said there was an agreement in place in July stating Mr. Testani would not apply for the superintendent vacancy.

Lawrence Richardson, girls' basketball coach at Central High and a mentor volunteer, appeared with Board of Education security colleagues to support Mr. Testani. He said his relationship with Mr. Testani goes back to when he was in 7th grade. He said he would not put his name on the line for someone he did not believe in. He said Mr. Testani was a pillar of the community who had a pure heart and pure intentions.

Matthew Langston, a business owner, taxpayer and a member of Faith Acts for Education, said he was disappointed in the hiring process of the superintendent. He objected to the board changing the hiring process, not conducting a search, and not considering a public voice. He said the board was dysfunctional and enumerated the ways in which this description applied.

Tynekia Long said she had known Mr. Testani since she was in 7th grade at Read School in 1997. She said she

supported him because he had climbed the ladder and because he was always responsive. She urged everyone to be more open-minded and to come together as a community.

Maria Pereira, a member of the City Council, said she was born and raised in the city and was a product of the Bridgeport Public Schools. She said the vast majority of employees of the district do not live in Bridgeport, nor do their children attend school in the district. She said the opinion of people who live here matters. She said the board was a criminal cabal, some of whom don't live in Bridgeport, that was making critical decisions about the 21,000 students. She said she stated from the Day One that the plan would be to appoint Mr. Testani. She said both Ms. Allen and Mr. Benejan said on video previously they would not support Mr. Testani to be permanent superintendent.

Jason Ayala, a 2011 graduate of Central Magnet and a business owner, said the community was disappointed in the board. He said the board was not transparent because it made a critical decision behind closed doors and he objected to the process by which Mr. Testani was selected as the superintendent. He said Mr. Testani may be the best person, but no search for candidates took place.

Dasha Spell, a Bridgeport resident, business owner, and a former candidate for the Board of Education, said she rushed down to last week's meeting when she heard of the discussion about the superintendent. She said she believed a superintendent should have credentials and the work experience for the job. She said the board had failed to give its five-year plan to the city as required.

JoAnn Kennedy said the board had to answer to the community and to God for the decisions that it makes. She said she had nothing against Mr. Testani, but she objected to the lack of transparency in the process and failure to follow the board's own rules. She said it was disturbing that the board was on track to expel as many as a hundred students this year.

Kate Rivera, a mother of four, an educator, and former Board of Education member, said we all know Mr. Testani is a great guy, but the issue is getting the biggest person possible to lead the school district. She said such a person should have a state certification and a doctorate in education. She said it was abhorrent that there was no search or public input. She said the district's employees speaking in favor of Mr. Testani had a huge conflict of interest.

Kyle Langan, an educator in Bridgeport and former member of the City Council, said the issue is not whether Mr. Testani is doing a good job or not. He said the issue was the board lied to the public during the summer when it said it would make a national search for a superintendent. He urged the board to respect its promise and respect the people of the city and conduct a national search.

LaDonna Santiago, a coach, mother and security officer, said she supported Mr. Testani. She said she was not going to go into the political stuff and it was nice to have a boss who she could go to if she has an issue.

Rev. D. Stanley Lord, president of the Greater Bridgeport NAACP, said he had no qualms with Mr. Testani, but he did have qualms with the process of saying one thing and doing something else. He said a person's word is their bond. He

asked the board to do as it says and we will do as we will because we will have to vote.

Steve Blum, auto shop teacher at Bassick High for thirty years, said people with the title doctor had worked in the district over the years, but some of them closed tech shops. The tech teachers have been reduced from 42 to 8. He said Mr. Testani saved his shop and job when he did not have support from his union. He said many times Mr. Testani had gone into his pocket to help students in need. He said his program at Bassick was successful and had saved thousands of kids.

Tina Manus noted she had a Ph.D and was a resident of Stratford who loves trade teachers. She said she runs a political action committee that that has raised money that helped 337 students and 27 schools through Donors Choose. She spoke in favor of an international field trip to Ireland for students at Bridgeport Military Academy to be led by Ms. Bresky. She added she had worked for Mr. Testani and said she was not surprised by the large amount of support he was receiving from workforce.

Mr. Taylor moved *“for each member of the board to address in their words how they came to the conclusion to put Mr. Testani here without the transparency and address the questions were brought out by Mr. Morales and Faith Acts and Stanley Lord and Wanda Simmons from the NAACP.”* He said they deserved an explain to show the rational thought behind it. The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan.

Mr. Sokolovic said our chance to explain what we were doing was before it took place. He said the item should have been put on the agenda in advance. He said the board was not acting in a transparent manner.

Mr. Illingworth said because of the amount of people who have taken the time to come to the meeting tonight he believed the matter should fall under the purview of the chair report, which would not require a two-thirds affirmative vote.

Mr. Benejan said he was very proud about all the parents who were in attendance. He said as a parent in the audience in the past he was often disappointed that the board did not provide answers when requested.

The motion was approved by a vote of 6-2. Voting in favor were members Allen, Benejan, Weldon, Illingworth, Taylor, and Lombard. Voting in opposition were members Brown and Sokolovic.

Mr. Illingworth indicated he was overruling Mr. Sokolovic's opposition to the procedure being used to address this under the chair's report. Mr. Illingworth said it was a special situation and it would show respect to the community.

Mr. Lombard said he did not vote for Mr. Testani to be the interim superintendent, but he voted for him this time. He said he did not go against his word, but that he learned more and realized that Mr. Testani did not apply for the position, but was appointed to the position by the board. He said the decision was made for consistency, continuity and civility. He said the board made a decision that did not break or infringe any rule or regulation.

Ms. Allen said she had known Mr. Testani as a colleague in the district as a teacher. She said she worked in the school district for 37 and 1/2 years and she voted for Mr. Testani for his loyalty to the students, his perception, and his leadership.

Mr. Taylor said he originally supported Denise Clemons Graham because she was from Bridgeport. He said he was never in favor of a nationwide search because he is about Bridgeport. He said he believed in promoting from within. He said at the end of the day what sold him on Mr. Testani was the fact that Dr. Johnson and Mr. Chester would not advance Vernon Thompson, who had to leave to go to Hartford. He said soon after being appointed Mr. Testani brought Mr. Thompson back to the East End. He apologized to the public for the way the process to hire Mr. Testani occurred.

Ms. Brown said she believed Mr. Testani was a great guy, but she could not support something she was not as part of, the decision to hire him as acting superintendent and the proposed nationwide search.

Mr. Sokolovic said he believed Mr. Testani was doing a fine job and he had been pleasantly surprised. He said he voted no because he was a man of his word because he voted for a contract for one year. He said without a search we cannot know if Mr. Testani is the best person for the job. He compared the slim binder of accomplishments in Mr. Testani evaluation to a larger binder containing the evaluation of Dr. Johnson. He said the board was failing in its job by not conducting a thorough evaluation of Mr. Testani.

Mr. Weldon said as the past chair he was involved in selecting Mr. Testani as the acting superintendent and then developed a working relationship with him. He said he gained insight into Mr. Testani's motivations and intentions and leadership style. He said he spoke to people such as suppliers that were floored that they could get a call back from a superintendent. He said he was impressed that Mr. Testani had effectively reassembled a central office staff and

has reduced chronic absenteeism. He said he voted for a three-year contract to give the district stability

Mr. Benejan said before becoming a board member he was a parent and a leader. He said issues with parents that were brought to Mr. Testani were dealt with personally, including meetings with the parents. He said he was impressed that Mr. Testani attended the senior night recognition for students. He said it was a shame that some people did not work together with the board as occurs in other towns. He said he did not agree with Mr. Sokolovic that the board was failing.

Mr. Illingworth said he supported prohibiting the acting superintendent for the permanent position because the last nationwide search, which cost about \$50,000, resulted in hiring the interim superintendent in any event. He added that Mr. Testani did not apply for the position, but the decision was made by the board when Mr. Testani was out of the room during his midyear review. He said there was a consensus in the room that Mr. Testani was doing a great job.

Mr. Illingworth said he wanted it made clear that the decision was not made in executive decision, but in public. He said he doesn't get every decision right, but he tries to make the best decision possible. He apologized for misleading the community by supporting the prohibition against the acting superintendent being appointed the permanent superintendent. He said he had served with four superintendents, including two with doctorates, but had never seen the morale in the district as high as it is now as a result of his visit to district schools.

APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:

Ms. Allen moved approval of the minutes of the Special Meeting of December 7, 2019. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic.

The motion was approved by a 6-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Illingworth, Weldon, Allen, Brown, Sokolovic, and Benejan. Mr. Lombard and Mr. Taylor abstained.

Mr. Lombard moved approval of the minutes of the Special Meeting of December 9, 2019. The motion was seconded by Mr. Taylor.

The motion was approved by a 7-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Illingworth, Weldon, Lombard, Allen, Brown, Sokolovic, and Benejan. Mr. Taylor abstained.

Mr. Lombard moved approval of the minutes of the Regular Meeting of December 9, 2019. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic.

The motion was approved by a 7-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Illingworth, Weldon, Lombard, Allen, Brown, Sokolovic, and Benejan. Mr. Taylor abstained.

Mr. Lombard moved approval of the minutes of the Special Meeting of December 14, 2019. The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen.

The motion was approved by a 7-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Illingworth, Weldon, Lombard, Allen, Brown, Sokolovic, and Benejan. Mr. Taylor abstained.

Mr. Benejan moved approval of the minutes of the Special Meeting of January 6, 2020. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic.

The motion was approved by a 7-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Illingworth, Weldon, Lombard, Allen, Brown, Sokolovic, and Benejan. Mr. Taylor abstained.

COMMITTEE REPORTS/REFERRALS:

Mr. Illingworth said the Facilities & Security Committee and the Governance Committee would both meet on February 2nd.

Mr. Sokolovic referred the regulations on field trips to the Governance Committee.

Mr. Illingworth said the Finance Committee was scheduled to meet this Wednesday.

Mr. Sokolovic referred the matter of overtime by department to the Facilities Committee to see if the spending was staying within the board's parameters.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Teaching & Learning Committee would meet on the third Tuesday of each month.

Mr. Weldon said the Personnel Committee would meet on the fourth Wednesday of every month. Mr. Testani said there are some outstanding interviews that needed to be concluded.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Students & Committee would meet on the third Thursday of every month, including this Thursday.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Ad Hoc Committee on Males of Color would meet on the fourth Tuesday of every month.

SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT:

Mr. Testani said he appreciated the level of respect most of the people who came out tonight conducted themselves with regardless of their views. He said the executive session last week was not a performance review, but to show pertinent items to the board about culture and climate. It did not include setting goals. He said the entire district has been working on attendance, getting more students to school and reducing chronic absenteeism. He said when there are days with three or four thousand students are absent.

Mr. Testani recognized Ana Sousa-Martins and the ESL/Bilingual Department for their workshop for teachers and support staff on being more effective in working with students who come from outside the country. He said over 700 students since July have entered the district from out of the country.

Mr. Testani said he was giving kudos to the science teachers for the science fairs going on all over the district. He recognized Kelly Mulligan, a science teacher at Marin School, which will present at a national convention in Boston.

NEW BUSINESS:

Mr. Weldon moved *"to consider Item 10-D, BEA contract overview, before any other business."* THE motion was seconded by Mr. Lombard.

Mr. Taylor said he believed the teachers who were here about the field trips should be accommodated next.

The motion was defeated by a 7-0 vote. Voting in opposition were members Allen, Illingworth, Sokolovic, Taylor, Weldon, Brown and Benejan. Mr. Lombard abstained.

Mr. Testani said the agenda items on field trips were brought directly to the board because the committees have not met recently.

Mr. Taylor suggested the board approve the three trips which he believed had been vetted by competent people. Mr. Sokolovic said he had issues to discuss.

The next item was on an overnight field to Boston, Massachusetts, for Bridgeport Military Academy.

Chief Johnson, the naval science instructor, described the trip to Boston on January 22nd and 23rd. He described the connections to his class's curriculum. The tour of the *U.S.S. Constitution* will be relevant to the War of 1812 and naval heritage. There will be training from the sailors on how to present the colors, which the school's unit will do at a Boston Celtics game. He described the number of students and chaperones.

In response to a question, Chief Johnson said the bus will be provided by the Connecticut National Guard and there would be no liability to the board.

Mr. Sokolovic said he objected to policy changes that reduced the time period to notify the board of overnight trips.

Ms. Allen moved “*to approve the overnight field trip to Boston, Massachusetts, for Bridgeport Military Academy.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Taylor and approved by a 7-0 vote.

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

The next item was approval of an international field trip to Ireland for Bridgeport Military Academy.

Mr. Sokolovic moved that “*the international field trip matters be tabled so it could go through the committee process.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Lombard.

Mr. Taylor said the board should not have to vet every field trip, which he described as counterproductive to moving this organization forward. He said he had confidence in the administrators to handle the safety issues.

Mr. Benejan said the board received the material in advance of the meeting and he trusted those organizing the trip. Mr. Weldon said those present would give the same information they would give at a committee meeting and then have to come back to the full board.

The motion was defeated by a 7-1 vote. Voting in opposition were members Allen, Benejan, Illingworth, Lombard, Taylor, Weldon and Brown. Voting in favor was Mr. Sokolovic.

Brianne Bresky described the field trip to Ireland proposed for April 9th to April 17. She noted the packet was originally submitted in October. She said she and her colleague ran a

successful trip to Italy last year with the same company that will be used this year.

Ms. Bresky described the interdisciplinary experience the students would receive, including with Mr. Kadam, a science teacher.

Mr. Weldon moved “*to approve the international field trip to Ireland for the Bridgeport Military Academy.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Taylor.

Mr. Sokolovic said he was uncomfortable because when the board rushes it makes mistakes. He said he had did not have enough time with the documents provided to ask an intelligent question.

Mr. Benejan said he trusted the teachers at BMA because of the great job they were doing and he was confident in their attention to safety.

Mr. Testani noted Ms. Bresky was an award-winning teacher in the district. Ms. Bresky described some of the safety precautions that were used last year which would be used again on this trip.

Ms. Brown described travel she made to West Africa while she was in Harding High that was very valuable in her education.

In response to a question, Ms. Bresky said the cost per student is about \$3,000, which the students can pay on a monthly basis. She said several of the students have raised the money to pay for the trip.

The motion was approved by a 7-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Illingworth, Brown, Benejan, Weldon, Allen, Taylor and Lombard. Mr. Sokolovic abstained.

The next agenda item was an international field trip to London for Fairchild Wheeler.

Kristen Kushan, a teacher at the IT School, described the trip to London in April, which would be through EF Tours. She described the educational objectives of the trip, which include STEM activities.

Mr. Weldon moved *"to approve the trip to London for the Fairchild Wheeler campus."* The motion was seconded by Mr. Taylor.

The motion was approved by a 7-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Illingworth, Brown, Benejan, Weldon, Allen, Taylor and Lombard. Mr. Sokolovic abstained.

The next item was an overview of the Bridgeport Education Association contract overview. Attorney Floyd Dugas was present.

Mr. Sokolovic said he had a medical issue and had to leave the meeting.

Atty. Dugas said the contract begins in July 2020 and is a four-year contract. He said under state statute if there is not an agreement after negotiations the process moves to mandatory binding arbitration. However, once that process began a comprehensive agreement was reached. He said the agreement by statute has to come out as an award and will be approved unless the City Council by a two-thirds vote rejects the award.

Atty. Dugas said he was trying to balance the city's ability to pay, be competitive with salaries and guarantee step movement to teachers, while obtaining short-term and long-term savings.

Atty. Dugas described provisions on wages and step movement. An increase in the teacher contributions towards health insurance was negotiated. Changes were also made to retiree health insurance. He said longevity for new hires was eliminated.

Atty. Dugas said several provisions benefit special education teachers, including a requirement about IEPs, additional time to complete paperwork, and a study on caseload.

Atty. Dugas said overall there is about \$675,000 in savings to offset the wage increases.

Atty. Dugas said a difficult decision was made to agree to pay fifty percent of the salary for release of the union president. He said other city bargaining units include that provision and it was a trade to get long-term savings on retiree health insurance.

Mr. Taylor introduced Wanda Simmons, the head of the Greater Bridgeport NAACP education committee. He said she was a dear friend and very reasonable to work with. Mr. Benejan said Ms. Simmons was a wonderful leader.

Mr. Taylor moved to adjourn the meeting. The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan and approved by a 6-0 vote.

The motion was approved by a 6-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Illingworth, Brown, Benejan, Weldon, Allen, and Lombard. Mr. Taylor abstained.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:38 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

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