

Tuesday, October 13, 2020

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held October 13, 2020 by video call, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:31 p.m. Present were members Chair John Weldon, Secretary Bobbi Brown, Albert Benejan, Sybil Allen, Joseph Sokolovic, and Joseph Lombard. Jessica Martinez joined subsequently as noted.

Acting Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

Mr. Weldon asked for a moment of silence in memory of teacher Altia Rumph of Roosevelt School.

**PUBLIC COMMENT:**

Rev. William McCullough, president of the Interdominational Ministerial Alliance and founder of Faith Acts for Education, asked the board to revisit making major policy changes, including about control transfers. He said he knew the board has tough decisions to make, but it cannot make decisions behind closed doors without community input. He said a public forum should be held to hear from the public. He said the reasons why parents are trying to get their children in the same schools should be addressed.

Ms. Martinez joined the meeting.

Britney Berrios, a mother of a fifth grader at Black Rock School, said she had a big concern with the colder weather and flu season approaching. She suggested the elementary

schools look at going to the hybrid model. She noted a lot of schools are shutting down due to the virus.

Naomi Nieves, a Bridgeport parent and member of Faith Acts for Education, said she has worked in many capacities with the board, including at Central, Roosevelt and Dunbar. She said control transfers are important to parents who seek better options for children and they wouldn't be overused if the quality of the schools was up to par. She urged there be public input prior to any policy change and that the superintendent and board meet with Faith Acts.

Mr. Weldon said there would not be a vote taken on the control transfer tonight. The first of three readings would occur actually for the purpose of board members and the public commenting.

Ana Batista, president of the BEA, thanked the superintendent for agreeing to participate in a roundtable to hear teachers' perspectives on the reopening decisions and the impact of the pandemic. She said there was an agreement that teachers would not be responsible for direct or indirect instruction of students assigned to another teacher, which is not the current case. She said this policy is unsafe for teachers, students, and the wider community. She added the great majority of teachers are coming to work every day and instructing students live in front of them and also instructing remote students. She said the current situation is not sustainable, especially if cohorts are not honored and cases continue to rise.

## **APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:**

Ms. Allen moved approval of the minutes of the Regular Meeting of September 14, 2020. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

Ms. Allen moved approval of the minutes of the Special Meeting of October 1, 2020. The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown.

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

### **COMMITTEE REPORTS/REFERRALS:**

Mr. Sokolovic reported on the Educational Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee. He said the first meeting will be October 19th. One agenda item will be goals and objectives.

Mr. Weldon said the Facilities Committee passed out an item on the basketball court repair for Wilbur Cross for tonight's agenda.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Finance Committee will meet tomorrow.

Mr. Weldon said the Governance Committee brought forward the first read and discussion on the revised policy on control transfers.

Mr. Benejan said the Students & Families Committee had a good meeting and talked about the budget, the parent convention, and other items. He said Ms. Rocha is doing an amazing job in communicating with the PACs and PTSOs to help them with action plans, expenditures, budget, and protocols.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said he and Mrs. Rocha-Reaes would meet with all the PAC leaders on Thursday and they will be given a copy of the bylaws for their consideration and possible future approval.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Teaching & Learning Committee would meet on October 20th.

Mr. Weldon said there was a resolution of City Council members Valle, Nieves, Martinez, and Newton concerning a railroad track safety curriculum, referencing two specific programs. He said he would like to refer the item to the Teaching & Learning Committee.

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

Supt. Testani said Altia Rumph had been a sixth grade teacher at Roosevelt for the past six-plus years. He said the district was lucky to have a teacher of that caliber in Bridgeport. She was previously teacher of the year at an elementary school in Delaware and a 2010 Fulbright Scholar. She had recently become a new mom. The superintendent said our prayers go out to Ms. Rumph and her family.

The superintendent said some schools had been more problematic with COVID cases, while some schools have not been impacted yet. He said he has spoken the city's health director, Lisa Morrissey, extensively about how to proceed. There is pop-up testing at different schools in the district. He said his concern is the disruption to each school community when there is a positive test. He said there are staffing issues around teachers out on FMLA and calling out sick because of stress, and the lack of subs, and the HR

department has done extensive work on trying to alleviate some of the stressors. He added he was concerned that it would not be enough, particularly with the arrival of flu season.

Supt. Testani said he is proposing to move to a hybrid model on November 30th at the elementary schools. He said this will reduce density in classrooms. He said more tests are coming back positive due to the increased amount of tests. He said if the district has to pivot to a closure everyone will be prepared with the hybrid model in place. He said this gives several weeks for in-person learners who will transition to remote. He said the district will have devices to send home with every child by November 30th.

The superintendent said this would not be permanent for the entire school year. He said Ms. Morrissey indicated the flu season would run into the first two weeks in February. The situation could be reevaluated in January to create a shorter or longer period.

Supt. Testani said without board support behind this it becomes a more difficult lift. He said in this model teachers would report to work every day to work remotely from their classroom. He said this would help with the cohorting mentioned by Ms. Batista.

Mr. Sokolovic said he agreed it was a great idea. The superintendent, in response to a question, said students with IEPs and 504 students, and ELL students would have four-day access to school as is the case at the high schools. He said this would allow Wednesdays for cleaning.

Supt. Testani said the model was working well at the high schools.

Ms. Brown said she believed the hybrid model could really support students and parents.

In response to a question, the superintendent said when schools shift to quarantine and virtual instruction attendance is taken, and there is a Power School attendance-taking feature.

Ms. Martinez said she supported the changes that need to be made by the superintendent and his team. She said she was concerned about students struggling at home.

Mr. Weldon said he believed this was a wise, proactive decision.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said if a school was impacted twice it is only listed once on the dashboard on the website.

### **NEW BUSINESS:**

The next agenda item was on the basketball court repairs for Wilbur Cross Schools.

Supt. Testani said an outside organization is doing the repairs at no cost to the district. He said similar work at Barnum and Curiale is a big hit in the neighborhood. He said he would work with facilities and the city to have cameras and proper lighting because the court is behind the Cross building and in a remote area.

Ms. Allen moved “*to approve the basketball court repairs for Wilbur Cross School.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was first read/discussion of revised Policy 5116(a), control transfers. Mr. Weldon said the item was presented to the Governance Committee and was referred to the full board for three full reads.

Supt. Testani shared his screen with the policy for those watching via the internet.

Mr. Weldon performed the first read as follows:

“Control transfer policy, Policy number 5116a. Draft, October 5, 2020.

“It is the policy of the Bridgeport Board of Education that students shall attend schools based upon geographic district lines. Exceptions to this policy are permitted under this control transfer policy, which permits transfers to other schools within Bridgeport in accordance with the following.

“Once Bridgeport residency has been established in accordance with state law, students shall attend the school designated for that residence. Attendance areas are established by the Board of Education.

“A student may be granted a change in attendance area at the superintendent’s discretion if space and program are available, and for a specific demonstrable need.

“The superintendent’s decision shall be made with the best interests of the school district in mind. Irrespective of demonstrable need, a student may be permitted to complete the school year in their previously assigned attendance area if the student has moved within Bridgeport and has started the school year.

“No transportation shall be provided to these students.

“If the move occurs during Grade 5, Grade 7 or Grade 11, the student will be permitted to attend Grade 6, Grade 8 or Grade 12, respectively, in the school the student had been attending when the requirement that the student follow the middle school or high school assignment designated for the residence.

“Siblings are not included as part of this provision.

“In the interest of the student, the district anticipates maintaining an out-of-attendance area placement for the duration of the school level in which the out-of-attendance area placement is initially granted, such as elementary school, middle school or high school.

“However, a parent or guardian shall not accept an out-of-attendance area placement without the full understanding that such placement may be subject to an annual review by the superintendent or designee, and may be withdrawn if it is not in the best interests of the school district.

“Transportation of out-of-attendance area students will be provided to and from the alternate school by the parents or guardians. Again, the district will not provide transportation.

“In the event of redistricting, the board may consider modifications to this policy to accommodate circumstances created by the redistricting plan.”

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the current policy also required the parents to do the transportation for control transfers.



The superintendent said data management estimates that there are between 2,000 to 2,500 students right now that are attending schools that are not their area schools, which amounts to about ten percent of the district. He said this has caused some schools to be overcrowded and some schools to be under-enrolled. He said we're trying to get a better handle on this in conjunction with the need for redistricting to redistribute students to optimize class size and school space. He said the idea is to make all schools in Bridgeport of the highest quality.

Supt. Testani said last year every control transfer was looked at very carefully and when schools offered to parents that were not those requested the reason to leave the school all of a sudden wasn't exactly the way it was written in the application.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said control transfers for the current year have been suspended because of the circumstances related to COVID, however, all prior transfers have carried over. He said the policy calls for each one to be reapplied for each year, which has not been the case for over a decade. This leads to the control transfers accumulating.

The superintendent said the idea is to get a better handle on the control transfers moving forward.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the changes include keeping children who are in their last year of a school in a building. He said one school has four kindergarten and four first grade sections and three second grade sections, which creates a pattern of overcrowding, and

second graders have to be filtered out after they've been there for two years.

In response to a question, the superintendent said the transfers have been granted to siblings consistently. He said he wants to maintain as much as possible smaller class sizes and more individualized teaching. He said the main change is things were just happening and now things are spelled out specifically.

Mr. Benejan said he never received this policy via e-mail.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the discussion was held at the Governance Committee and some alternations were made to the initial proposal. He said we worked off the current policy. He said there needs to be a demonstrated need why the control transfer is being requested, which is not the case right now. He said it has been easier in the past to just grant the transfer if there is room in the class, without looking at if it's right move. He said children also get hurt when the transfers have to be revoked because of overcrowding.

Mr. Weldon said the documents were put in the board members' portal, with the board members receiving an e-mail with a link to the portal.

Supt. Testani said except for the revoking procedures the control transfer policy hasn't been looked at in probably over thirty years.

In response to a question, the superintendent said when a control transfer is revoked there is a process to notify parents so improvements can be made, but when it becomes final the transfer is done through Power School

and the parents would bring their child to the neighborhood school. He said that usually takes a significant period of time.

In response to a question, the superintendent said appointments are taken for parents who need to come into buildings for transfers, registrations or withdrawals.

In response to a question about the safety of students, the superintendent said the goal is to let the current control transfers run their course, but being very careful in allowing new ones. He said there are still administrative transfers that can be exercised for safety reasons.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said he was not aware of objections to the proposal other than the two speakers tonight. He said whether the policy is changed or not it doesn't guarantee that a control transfer is granted. He said in a lot of cases the transfers are because a shiny, new building opens up and parents would prefer the new school. He said once Bassick is built all the high schools will be completed. A capital plan is needed for some elementary schools that need to be upgraded.

Mr. Weldon said the purpose of second and third reads is to have this kind of discussion. He said public comment could be considered.

Ms. Martinez said she would put her parent hat on and speak as such. She said the second and third read is needed to allow community input. She said she utilized the control transfer for her own child when the quality of the education at Marin School was not adequate enough. She said she believed there were plenty of parents who were concerned about educational quality and bullying. She

added parents do not seek transfers solely because of new, shiny buildings.

Ms. Martinez said she had been fighting for equitable education across the board, along with organizations, Mr. Benejan, and Mr. Testani. She said this doesn't always mean more money. She said the board should be mindful it is the gatekeepers of children's education and their future.

Ms. Martinez said she objected to the phraseology about the best interests of the district. She said the district as a whole should be great for children. She said if transfers interfere with the numbers in the district things need to be figured out.

Ms. Martinez asked if the chair is listening to the parents of the district. She further described her son's transfer from Marin School to John Winthrop, which was for the best in the long run. She said the superintendent has been besides parents for years and has helped build her knowledge over years.

Mr. Sokolovic said some schools in the district do better than others.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani noted there are now additional magnet schools since the creation of the control transfer policy over thirty years ago, which creates more options for parents. He said siblings are an issue, but if it's about putting a child in a better school siblings aren't going to matter then because the same premise would apply to the entire family.

Mr. Sokolovic said he was undecided about the issue and it would behoove the board to hear more from the community, not from a group. He suggested a forum to listen to the

voters and taxpayers. He noted nonprofit organizations do not pay taxes to the city.

The superintendent said we should look at it from both ends – the parents who want control transfers and the parents in the schools that are receiving the majority of the control transfers. He said it would be interesting to learn if class sizes would be lower universally without control transfers. Lowering class sizes from 29 to 22 or 23 would benefit every child in the district.

Supt. Testani said if a student is being bullied that is an administrative transfer to protect the child, not a control transfer. The bully has to be addressed as well because there are other potential victims in the school.

Ms. Martinez said she agreed with getting input from all parents and voters, not just groups.

The superintendent said the control transfer only benefits parents who can commit to transportation. He said 2,500 students moving from their neighborhood school is unacceptable. He said the situation had to be brought under control.

Mr. Weldon said the wording of the policy could be changed. He said he did not believe the intent was to put the interests of the district ahead of the interests of students. He added he would like to see the procedure for control transfers added to the policy. The superintendent said that information is in the current policy.

Mr. Weldon suggested revisiting the issue of transportation. Mr. Lombard said administrative transfers could be considered for transportation. The superintendent said this

was currently not the case because the transportation would have to be door to door and it would be expensive.

Mr. Benejan said we have to work together for the best in Bridgeport schools. He said we don't want parents upset with us because we don't care about the safety of children.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said there is not complete, accurate data on control transfers, but he will give the board the information that has been gathered by data management. He said the process is not just for next year, but a long range project.

Mr. Benejan said his top priority is the safety of kids. He predicted there would be a lot of calls and e-mails about tonight's meeting.

Mr. Weldon said he believed the superintendent is trying to give himself more latitude in how people are selected to receive a control transfer. He said we need to find a way to make this work to get beyond how things have developed over the last ten to twenty years.

Mr. Sokolovic said it was a tough issue. He said the policy came out of committee rather fast.

Mr. Sokolovic moved "*to recommit the policy for further discussion and amending.*" The motion was seconded by Mr. Lombard and unanimously approved.

Mr. Weldon said the matter would go back to the Governance Committee. He said in the end we want the best thing possible with this. He noted the superintendent said current transfers remain in place, but the ability to apply in the current year has been suspended.

Mr. Lombard said he wanted to acknowledge the difficulty of the whack-a-mole that the superintendent has had to do during the current virus situation, due to the different opinions of the board members and the public, and he thanked him for his efforts.

Supt. Testani said he was doing the best job he can to protect students, family, and staff. He said he was trying to be open and honest with communications. He said it was tough because of the issues with the virus. He noted the state had its highest infection rate today since June.

Ms. Allen moved to adjourn the meeting. The motion was seconded by Mr. Lombard and unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:10 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod