

Monday, September 14, 2020

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held September 14, 2020, at Bridgeport Regional Vocational Aquaculture School and by video call, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:37 p.m. Present were members Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Hernan Illingworth, Secretary Bobbi Brown, Jessica Martinez, Albert Benejan, Sybil Allen, Joseph Sokolovic, and Joseph Lombard.

Acting Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Mr. Weldon said public comment was only allowed on agenda items. He said due to the way the board was operating with remote public comment he was trying to keep the focus on agenda items only.

Ms. Martinez said she believed the public had a lot of questions.

Gail Janensch said she has contacted many board members to get students registered to vote.

Craig Kelly said he was in support of the Males of Color Committee. He noted most students in the district are students of color. He said the committee would help the students grow and cultivate their skills.

Sauda Baraka said as a former twelve-year board member and former board chair she was opposed to dissolving the

Males of Color Committee. She said it was imperative to have a committee devoted to males of color, which includes public participation. She said the committee supported gathering and analyzing data to develop best practices to impact the success of males of color. She said the goal was to establish a district office on the issue. She said white supremacy reared its ugly head until Dr. Johnson became superintendent and provided funding. She said the committee had no opportunity to review the white paper before it was submitted. She said the committee needed to move forward on its recommendations, particularly to establish an office.

Lyle Hassan-Jones spoke in support of the Males of Color Committee. He said it helps young boys of color who need support and helps them avoid gang violence and other social ills and can put them on a path to lead a law-abiding and productive life. He said this is needed this now more than ever with this climate of racial injustice, systemic racism, and outright killing of black males. He said this is a win-win for all of us in Bridgeport, with 78 percent of the population being black and Hispanic.

Connie Johnson said as native of Bridgeport she takes pride in being a person of color. She said she supported Ms. Baraka's comments on the importance of the Males of Color Committee. She said anyone else outside of a male of color should not even suggest a change in the committee. She said the process of whitewashing that took place in Detroit that she observed is now being done in Bridgeport.

Terry Walden said as a committee member he was opposed to any change in the name and focus of the Males of Color Committee. He said the committee had put in a lot of work in, including the white paper that was created.

JoAnn Kennedy, born and raised in Bridgeport, said she participated in the Males of Color Committee and descried some of the committee members who were doing the work. She said the focus of the committee should be males of color because once the problem is fixed everybody benefits and they are the population most at risk. She said the committee was not made aware that the white paper was being presented to the board.

APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:

Ms. Allen moved approval of the minutes of the Regular Meeting of August 24, 2020. The motion was seconded by Mr. Illingworth and unanimously approved.

Ms. Allen moved approval of the minutes of the Special Meeting of August 24, 2020. The motion was seconded by Mr. Illingworth and unanimously approved.

CHAIR REPORT:

Mr. Weldon said schools have been opened. He acknowledged the hard work being put in by the students and staff despite the difficult situation and the adjustments that have been necessary.

COMMITTEE REPORTS/REFERRALS:

Mr. Illingworth reported on the Facilities Committee meeting of September 3rd. He said there were items later on in the agenda that he would seek approval for.

Mr. Benejan referred to the Facilities Committee a report from the IT Department and information about security.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Finance Committee would meet at an undetermined date next week.

Mr. Illingworth said the Governance Committee met on September 3rd and discussed Policy 5158 changes and started a conversation around the control transfer policy.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Teaching and Learning Committee would meet at an undetermined date next week.

Mr. Benejan said the Students and Families Committee would meet on September 24, 2020.

Ms. Martinez said she would like to refer the possibility of public comments going through the Students & Families Committee and to consider holding board meetings at a larger location to get public comments in person. She said she had received a large number of inquiries from the public about what is going on in the district.

Ms. Brown said she had a referral about outside organizations doing presentations in the schools such as for voter registration or the grandparents program. Supt. Testani said that could be discussed through his office.

Mr. Sokolovic reported on the Ad Hoc Committee Great Cities School/Males of Color. He said this would be his last report on the committee because he was resigning as chair effectively immediately. He said he had nothing left of value to contribute to the temporary committee.

Mr. Sokolovic said the committee was established in mid-November 2014 by Ms. Baraka as a temporary committee with work expected to last about one year. He said while

Ms. Baraka was chair there were some accomplishments, including a wonderful community forum. When Ms. Baraka left the board in December 2017 the white paper was incomplete. Work by the committee stalled in the next year when the new chairman did not call a single meeting.

Mr. Sokolovic said he became chair when the prior chair was elected to another office. He said he revitalized the committee through working with a great group of hardworking people and much was accomplished. New mentorship programs were established, a second community forum was held, and the white paper was completed within 18 months. He said he fought hard to keep the temporary committee in existence during that time period.

Mr. Sokolovic said it was now time to move forward with work on the issues raised in the white paper through a new committee. The new committee, if approved, will be a standing board committee on educational diversity, equity and inclusion, and will take on all issues with males of color as a natural focal point. All programs established by the ad hoc committee will continue.

Ms. Martinez thanked Mr. Sokolovic for his thorough report. Mr. Sokolovic said it was his idea to change the name and focus of the committee. He said he was insulted to hear about a white male suggesting a name change because it was a white male that kept the committee going. He said having a permanent committee was important because the problems could not be solved overnight.

In response to a question, Mr. Sokolovic said the mentorship program by the Buddy Jordan Foundation should be continuing, although he did not know the exact arrangements due to the virus.

SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT/AGENDA:

Supt. Testani said he has discussed the Males of Color Committee with Mr. Sokolovic. He said the district is committed to all the programming that has come out of the committee, including the mentoring program for middle and high school students, and expanding the work in the future.

The superintendent said we are five days through the school year. He said there have been bumps in the road, including with technology, but things are going extremely well. He said he had visited about 16 schools so far, and it has been incredible to see the excitement on students' faces at being back in school. He said 99.9 percent of the teachers are excited and enthusiastic.

Supt. Testani said two staff members at Tisdale School tested positive over the weekend and the school has switched to fully remote for the rest of the week. There was a deep cleaning of the building. Optimus Health will hold testing at Tisdale for anyone in the district who wishes to be tested.

Supt. Testani said a student tested positive at Park City Magnet. The district worked with the department of health to implement protocols. He said the four core teachers who rotated into that class were quarantined and the students in the classroom will receive remote learning for the next two weeks. The school will also be thoroughly cleaned and a testing site will set up in the parking lot on this Friday.

The superintendent said he has worked BEA president Ana Batista and the CEA rep Eric Marshall on precautions to protect staff and their families. He said the preparation that

took place in the summer was valuable in dealing with the incidents that have taken place.

In response to a question, the superintendent said the quarantine at Tisdale is for people who came in close, extended proximity to the individual who tested positive, not the entire school. The school was closed because two persons tested positive within the same school in a close period of time because it is considered an outbreak by the health department.

In response to a question, the superintendent said only 7th and 8th grade classes were put on remote learning.

Supt. Testani said the decisions were made after discussions with the Health Department's director, Lisa Morrissey.

The superintendent said unfortunately there is a lot of misinformation that is being presented on social media about the district. He said even when he has reached out to parents regarding social media posts it has proven counterproductive. In many cases accurate information is being drowned out by misinformation. He said deliberate processes and protocols are in place. He said privacy laws about people who test positive make it difficult to immediately provide information to the media.

Supt Testani said he was trying to streamline the information flow so it comes from his office or the health department. He said that as stated at numerous board meetings the district has sufficient PPE in all our buildings and sufficient supplies. He said this was contrary to the claims of an anonymous staff member to News 12. He said he gives a ton of credit to

principals for their efforts in distributing PPE, making sure plexiglass is in place, and distributing devices.

Mr. Benejan said he was going to be very honest; he said he was disappointed the superintendent was saying everything is fine. He said some staff would love to present to Mr. Testani what is going wrong, but they are afraid to approach him about the real situation. He said principals are closing doors to the concerns of parents.

Supt, Testani he did not say things were perfect. He said contrary to a question, Curiale School did have a nurse. He said a full-time nurse is being sought for every school but unfortunately they can't be found, despite reaching out to outside agencies. He said during the COVID climate nurses can make a lot more money working in hospitals and other places. He said right now some nurses are splitting their time between buildings. The district has an obligation under the law to provide nurses to Catholic schools in the city, so Black Rock School is sharing a nurse with nearby St. Ann's.

Mr. Benejan said since schools have been closed for five months at least 90 percent of everything should have been ready. He said the situation was not acceptable. Supt. Testani said he did not understand what was not ready.

Mr. Illingworth said he appreciates the efforts of the superintendent and everyone because it is not an easy situation. He said he believed the plan has been applied with the incidents at two schools. He said the superintendent could never control social media; he urged the Facebook Live events continue. He noted that some people never wanted to reopen the schools and would attempt sabotage what we're trying to do. He said he had personally seen the PPE that the district has accumulated.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said there has been an increase in the number of students attending in person since opening; some schools and some grade levels more than others. So far numbers have not reached close to class size, but some students rotate into remote learning for one day a week. He said live streaming in pre-K to Grade 3 simultaneously with in-person classes is not effective. He said there was a meeting to discuss options and a plan will be created to present for consideration. He said the situation was an extreme hardship for those elementary teachers. He added any change in the schedule would be a couple of weeks down the road to give parents plenty of notice.

Mr. Lombard said people have strong emotions on both sides and sometimes misinformation is intentionally planted.

Ms. Martinez said despite the frustrations and the setbacks it is not fair to say we were not prepared to open. She said oftentimes members of the public, including parent leaders, come to the board members. She said she believed the district was doing all it can.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said there is a nurse coverage in every school. He said he will find out tomorrow if Beardsley School has a full-time nurse or not.

In response to a question, the superintendent said children are allowed to be closer than six feet to each other when everyone is masked.

Ms. Martinez said she had received a lot of e-mails indicating that the superintendent did not care, which she said was not the case. She said she wanted to be sure we

were respecting the opinions and voice of even the naysayers. She said it hurts to hear people going against each other in Bridgeport, and there should be more unity and effective communication among the board members.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said Multicultural Magnet was one of the schools where some classes are getting large and Dr. Planas is putting in a contingency plan to rotate some students out each day to maintain a safe class size. He noted the BEA did not sanction the rally that was held about safe schools. He said he respected everyone's right to freedom of speech as long as it doesn't impede on others' rights to a free public education. He said his letter was intended to remind people that we need to stand up for our children.

Supt. Testani said to put it in perspective the BEA has over 1400 members and a small group of maybe 40 folks feel things are not safe.

In response to a question, the superintendent said the situation is continually being evaluated on a district and building level every day. This is how the pre-K to Grade 3 problems were discovered. He said the high school situation seems to be better than it was in the spring.

Mr. Weldon said he appreciated the efforts of Mr. Testani and the executive staff; he said the board should be careful not to overload what the staff needs to do. He said he appreciated the long hours and all the work Mr. Testani was putting in. He suggested the weekly Facebook Live sessions be held again. The superintendent said one would be held this Friday.

Supt. Testani said the state health department has not changed on categorizing football as a high-risk sport. There are possibilities of football being played in February to April. Workouts for football players resumed today, with cohorts of no more than ten. Participants must be in-person students. He said conditioning for football at charter schools would not take place because we don't have cohorting or contact tracing. He said the district was currently looking to hire a football coach for Central High.

The superintendent said he believed some people were on the fine line between advocacy and incitement. He said he was disappointed that coaching staff are inciting parents about losing opportunities if they do not get to play football now. He said parents have called him every name in the book. He said he was a sports guy who coached at Harding for many years, but we cannot go against the recommendation of the Department of Public Health.

The superintendent said it was troubling that it appeared a letter written by a principal was sent to the *Connecticut Post* by one of two people to try to incite others to advocate for a personal wish. He said these things are happening at the same school with the same program. He said action will have to be taken to correct this behavior.

NEW BUSINESS:

The next item was discussion and approval of basketball court repairs at Curiale and Barnum Schools. Brett Gustafson, principal of Curiale School, said them after was discussed and approved by the Facilities committee. The courts will be provided by Full Court Peace at no cost to the board.

Mr. Illingworth thanked the outside organization for providing the courts. He said it was vetted through the facilities department.

Ms. Brown moved “*to approve basketball court repairs at Curiale and Barnum Schools.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was discussion and possible approval of revisions to Policy 5158, the policy concerning Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

Carli Rocha-Reaes, the new 504 coordinator, said the policy, which covers parties with disabilities, was last revised in 2012 and contained outdated contact information. Ms. Altro-Dixon was added as the contact for adults who had complaints with 504 procedures. The grievance policy has been revised and updated.

In response to a question, Ms. Rocha-Reaes said he could collect data on the percentage of students classified under 405 and provide it to the board.

Mr. Illingworth said the change was approved by the Governance Committee and is in dire need of updating.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the state requires a designated individual be listed, not a job title.

Mr. Illingworth moved “*to suspend the rules of reading the policy three times in the record.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and approved by a 7-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Lombard, Sokolovic, Benejan, Weldon, Brown, Illingworth, and Allen. Ms. Martinez abstained.

Ms. Allen moved *“to approve the revisions to Policy number 5158m which is the policy concerning Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as it has been presented by staff.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Illingworth and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on installation/dedication of bench at Fairchild Wheeler in memory of Patricia Lopez, a teacher at the Aerospace School. Principal Jay Lipp said Ms. Lopez, a second-year teacher, passed away last year. He said Teach for America has bought the memorial bench for her and it is proposed to place it right near the handicapped parking, which was approved by the facilities department.

Ms. Brown moved *“to approve the installation/dedication of the bench at Fairchild Wheeler Campus in memory of Patricia Lopez, a teacher at Fairchild Wheeler Aerospace.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was discussion and possible acceptance/approval of alterations to Dunbar Elementary School, state project number 015-0171A/EC

Mr. Illingworth said this went through the Facilities Committee. The project was completed and they need to close the books so the state can reimburse the city. There are no issues to report with the project.

Mr. Benejan said Mr. Wallack committed to providing the cost of the project, but he did not receive it.

Ms. Allen moved *“to accept and approve the project of alterations to Dunbar Elementary School, state project*

number 015-0171A/EC.” The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The next item was on approval of additions and alterations to Black Rock School, state project number 015-0172EA.

Ms. Allen moved “*to accept and approve the project consisting of additions and alterations to Black Rock School, which is known as state project number 015-0172EA.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Illingworth and approved by a 6-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Illingworth, Sokolovic, Lombard, Allen, and Martinez. Ms. Brown and Mr. Benejan abstained.

The next item was on approval/acceptance of code compliance alterations to Columbus School, known as state project number 015-0164EA.

Mr. Illingworth moved “*to accept and approve the code compliance alterations to Columbus School, which is known as state project number 015-0164EA.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen.

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

The next agenda item was on an MOU with BEA regarding work schedules.

Supt. Testani said the item was for information. An agreement was entered into with the BEA due to the COVID situation. The day for dismissal of elementary students is ending 35 minutes early, so teachers are guaranteed their prep time and duty-free lunch, while doing double duty with

remote and in-person teaching. He said this could be subject to change.

The superintendent said high school students are allowed into the classrooms a little early, so teachers are coming in by 7:30, with school being dismissed thirty minutes early. He said the board attorneys were involved in the negotiations.

Mr. Weldon said the board did not need to approve it because there is no financial impact.

Mr. Sokolovic said the agreement is a testament to how the board, the superintendent, and unions worked together during this time of stress. He said it put in perspective that the 50 or 60 persons protesting are not the majority of the union.

Mr. Weldon said he agreed and noted management and labor are often at odds with each other, but here they were working together for the best benefit of the district. He thanked the BEA president and Supt. Testani.

The next item was to dissolve the Ad Hoc Committee on Great City Schools/Males of Color and to create a standing committee on educational diversity, equity and inclusion.

Ms. Martinez moved to table this item until we get information on what the new committee would look like and how it would continue to include the males of color. The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown.

Mr. Illingworth said the ad hoc committee had been around for a long time and Mr. Sokolovic's leadership brought it to the finish line and developed the white paper. He said he

had some questions on the future committee, but he did not agree with tabling the matter.

Mr. Lombard said he wanted more discussion about this. Ms. Brown said she was not familiar with what was done previously before she came on the board.

Mr. Sokolovic said currently the ad hoc committee has no chair. He asked if there was a volunteer if the committee was going to continue.

Mr. Sokolovic said he believed the proposed standing committee would pick up where the white paper left off, which is laid out on page 43. It would include equity audits, implicit bias training, review of systems and structure, professional development, and other items. He said the committee would still deal with males of color, with all current efforts continuing. He said he hoped the committee would be diverse. He said the only board member on the ad hoc committee was a Caucasian.

Mr. Lombard said the public comment emphasized the need for a focus for males of color.

Supt. Testani said it was important to separate the programs from the committee. The programs will continue and be improved. He said he'd like to see larger numbers at the middle school level. He said he believed the new committee would include approaches for more at-risk students.

Mr. Sokolovic said he could not describe in detail what the new committee would look like because that will determine once its members are assembled. He said it would pick up after the white paper and include audits of what is working and not working.

Ms. Martinez said she could not vote on this because it is not clear what it will look like. She said she believed the ad hoc committee should have been gone long ago. She said she believed the new committee would take away focus from males of color.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested Ms. Martinez chair the Males of Color Ad Hoc Committee. Ms. Martinez said she needed more information to vote tonight. She suggested the new committee include subcommittees.

Mr. Sokolovic noted the majority of the writing of the white paper was done by district staff. He said some of the public speakers tonight did not attend a single committee meeting as far he knows. The superintendent said if it was going to be a committee of the board it can't rest on the shoulders of staff members who already have full plates.

Ms. Martinez withdrew her motion.

Mr. Sokolovic moved "*to dissolve the Ad Hoc Committee Great City Schools/Males of Color and in its place to create a standing board committee on educational diversity, equity and inclusion.*" The motion was seconded by Mr. Weldon.

The motion was approved by a 4-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Illingworth, Lombard, Sokolovic, and Weldon. Ms. Martinez was opposed. Ms. Brown, Mr. Benejan, and Ms. Allen abstained.

Mr. Sokolovic, Mr. Illingworth, and Ms. Brown expressed interest in serving on the new committee. Mr. Weldon said he would finalize the appointments at the next Regular Meeting.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 9:11 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

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