

Thursday, October 1, 2020

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held October 1, 2020, by video call, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 5:02 p.m. Present were members Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Hernan Illingworth, Secretary Bobbi Brown, Joseph Sokolovic, and Albert Benejan.

Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

The first agenda item was discussion and approval of the FY2020-21 budget. Mr. Weldon said the item was presented last week at the Finance Committee.

Marlene Siegel, chief financial officer, said she would describe briefly the 2020-21 budget gap plan, which was displayed on the screen.

Ms. Siegel said the district ended the 2019-20 fiscal year with a surplus of about \$6.7 million and opened the 2020-21 fiscal year with a structurally balanced budget. The plan includes a monetary need for \$14.5 million for the 2020-21 budget.

Ms. Siegel said the revenue, budget adjustments and savings, including the surplus, total a shortage of about \$2 million, which is subsequently covered.

Ms. Siegel said the Alliance/ECS addition was about \$2.3 million, \$500,000 lower than originally anticipated and there are city contributions of about \$3.5 million.

Ms. Siegel said the \$2 million shortage is eliminated by actions including deficit prevention mode. After taking further actions, the result is a projected surplus of about \$3.4 million. She said there are variables that impact the budget throughout the year, but she was cautiously optimistic that the \$3.4 million will remain on reserve and available to apply to the 2021-22 budget.

Ms. Siegel said food and nutrition in 2019-20 was turned from a projected shortfall into a surplus of approximately \$900,000, which also includes a potential liability of payments to personnel of \$200,000.

Ms. Brown said she believed Ms. Siegel clarified the confusion that was published online about the budget at a prior meeting.

Mr. Benejan said he was glad Ms. Siegel clarified how the board is spending the money. In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the budget contained a chart on grants that will be shared with the Finance Committee at the next meeting.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said surplus funds have been placed primarily in the Internal Service Fund (ISF) and Title I as part of carryover. She said she was able to work with Ken Flatto, the city's director of finance, to move the surplus into the board's ISF.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the district is audited every year by Blum, Shapiro, which is currently engaged in the 2020 audit. She said Liz Maurer files reports which are certified by the superintendent and the auditors are now involved in the final stage. She said the auditors

review procurement and payroll transactions, and budgetary information.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel and Ms. Maurer said the board's books have never been found to have a major discrepancy by audits.

Supt. Testani said the only reason the district ended with a surplus was because it was closed and able to successfully negotiate a reduction in payments with the transportation company and other savings from not being open. He said Ms. Siegel and her team is great on being cautious and keeping everyone fiscally responsible. He said he objected to things on social media questioning the board's surplus. He said the district remains underfunded.

Mr. Weldon said the \$6 million surplus equates to roughly 2.5 percent of the budget. He said he has advocated for the auditors giving a presentation to the board when they complete their work.

Mr. Illingworth moved "*to adopt the Fiscal Year 20-21 budget based on the presentation given by the CFO.*" The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on separating in-person and remote learning in Grades pre-K to 8. Mr. Weldon said the superintendent was not requesting any board action on this matter.

Supt. Testani said there was some early panic and anxiety about teaching about 45 percent of students by live streaming, particularly in primary grades. He said he believed teachers were becoming more comfortable with the

situation. He described it as challenging like a new job for teachers.

The superintendent said in the next couple of weeks there will be about four hours of professional development for teachers. He said technology is getting into the hands of all students, and the new devices are arriving at a more manageable rate.

Supt. Testani said the executive directors have been working with principals to support the needs of the building administrations.

Mr. Weldon said tomorrow would mark the completion of four weeks of schools being open. He said he believed overall it had been very successful and staff has risen to the challenge.

Mr. Sokolovic said as a parent of a public school student he had seen both remote and in-person instruction because of the closing of Park City Magnet. He said the teachers are doing a bang-up job. He said he had observed teachers returning assignments and grading papers online even late at night. He said this gets lost in the complaints on social media.

Mr. Illingworth said the teachers were doing a phenomenal job in coping with the situation. He said it is not easy teaching students remotely, especially younger children.

Supt. Testani said we're trying to provide more guidance to primary grade teachers to break up the day differently.

The superintendent said as of yesterday there are a little over 10,500 students attending regularly in person and about

8,800 remote students. He said parents were asked to commit to an in-person option by yesterday, which would run through the December break. He said parents can opt for remote learning at any time. Principals have discretion to make decisions in this area.

Supt. Testani said a dashboard has been launched on the website giving the number of in-person learners, the number of COVID-positive students and staff, and the number of locations impacted.

The superintendent said there is a checklist on the website informing parents that students who are ill should not come to school in person. There is also a family guide in English and Spanish for distance learning. He said the district was being as transparent as possible and providing as much information as possible. He said when the district learns of a positive case there are very specific protocols and decisions that are made in conjunction with Ms. Morrissey and the staff at the city's health department.

Supt. Testani said he would be releasing a letter tomorrow indicating that through contact tracing there are no cases directly related to the reopening of school. He said from discussions with colleagues in other districts the cases are typically tied to outside activities.

Mr. Weldon noted when cases are discovered they are handled on an individual basis based on what is best for each building and each situation.

In response to a question, the superintendent said he believed the students had done an excellent job in wearing masks and following rules. He said from what he has observed students are coming to school with their own

masks, although the district has masks available in each school.

Mr. Illingworth said the superintendent and the administration had done a phenomenal job in being proactive. He said the numbers speak louder than words, and the schools are safe.

The superintendent said he has observed the custodial staff being diligent about the sanitizing of buildings. He said people are feeling more confident day by day in the schools.

Supt. Testani said as of the latest numbers there were 16 COVID confirmed cases districtwide, four of which are staff. There have been three cases that have had symptoms.

Ms. Brown said Mr. Testani and the staff had been doing a good job of getting ahead of the story, particularly in light of confusing information online.

Mr. Benejan said he believed it was obvious when Mr. Testani showed up at a building that everything was okay. Supt. Testani said his visits to schools are not announced in advance.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani he had nothing to gain and a lot to lose if the district does not report a positive case.

Mr. Sokolovic said it appears there is one building that had three cases, which was an outlier. Supt. Testani said that case involved siblings. He urged people who get a phone call about contact tracing to cooperate because there is no blame game.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 5:59 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

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