

Tuesday, November 17, 2020

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held November 17, 2020, by video conference call, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 7:00 p.m. Present were members Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Bobbi Brown, Secretary Joseph Lombard, Albert Benejan, Joseph Sokolovic, Chris Taylor, and Sybil Allen.

Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

Ms. Allen moved *“to recess the public meeting and move into executive session for the purpose of discussing the matter of Luz Tedesco vs. the Board of Education, with those being present being the Board of Education, the superintendent. Attorney Joseph Mirotti, staff member Ulysses Rogers from the payroll & benefits office.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Taylor and unanimously approved.

The executive session began at 7:03 p.m.

The board reconvened in public session at 7:21 p.m.

Ms. Allen moved *“to approve the settlement of the matter of Luz Tedesco vs. the Board of Education in accordance with the recommendation of counsel discussed in the executive session.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Taylor and approved by a 5-0 vote.

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

The next agenda item was a report by the superintendent on district operations related to COVID-19.

Supt. Testani said he wanted to discuss the decision to suspend in-person instruction temporarily and move to full remote at the end of this week. He said it was a difficult decision to make, but after conversation with the department of public health and state officials the decision was made because of the spike of cases in Bridgeport, which is being hit harder than other Connecticut communities.

The superintendent said in some buildings the impact of the virus has been minimal. The hybrid schedule at the high school has allowed very little disruption to their schedules. Full in-person instruction for elementary education was previously available for those parents who so chose.

Supt. Testani said the intention is to reopen the schools sometime in January. He said moving to fully remote will create hardships for some families. He said he has discussed with the executive team a phase-in of reopening at some point in January. A tentative reopening date will be announced in December. Most likely, pre-K, and special education, and high school students would come back first in a hybrid model(except for pre-K), with K-8 students returning about a week later in a hybrid model.

The superintendent said lots of commentary has been made on the decisions, but not all commentary is respectful, with some of it being rude. He said folks who have no regard for the other families that do follow the district's webpage and social media pages have been blocked. He said everyone has a right to their opinion, but everyone's decisions should be respected. He said the e-mail sent yesterday about

closure was not intended to blame teachers. He said he had seen screenshots of people calling for mass callouts, although fortunately that was not experienced.

Supt. Testani said he had spent over three hours answering questions from BEA members and was invited to the BEA office four times for roundtable discussions. He said no one was being blamed, but said he did apologize to the teachers who took offense.

The superintendent said a lot of contact tracing had been done of positive cases of staff members and it has uncovered that staff members have said they were in contact with colleagues who tested positive. He said adults need to be responsible and stay six feet apart and be wearing a mask. He said this is not always feasible when dealing with students, but it is feasible when dealing with other staff members.

Supt. Testani said he acknowledged that it is a very emotional and stressful time. He said he socializes with a small group of family and friends, and everyone has the right to do so, but it should be done responsibly and not in large groups. He said a recent staff member who tested positive said she had a party at her home with several teachers and families in close contact, which impacted the operation of a school.

Mr. Weldon said he interpreted the superintendent's letter as saying the closure is being made because of things that occur outside of school buildings. Supt. Testani said it was the overwhelming consensus of health officials that COVID-19 coronavirus is not being spread through schools and they are the safest places to be. He said the spread is because of outside sporting events and outside social events.

Mr. Sokolovic said we all need to be mindful in our communications because the great majority of staff and parents are going above and beyond the call of duty in the pandemic. He described the awesome 7th grade staff at Park City Magnet, which has worked as a cohesive unit. He said there is light at the end of the tunnel and we can get through this all together.

Mr. Taylor asked the board to observe a moment of silence for Sheriff Dennis Scinto, a pillar in the community who was loved, who passed away today.

Mr. Taylor said he supported Supt. Testani and believed he has done a fabulous job, even though he was being brutalized on social media. He said although he did not support opening schools in August, he respected the vote and kept his mouth shut.

Mr. Taylor said he agreed with the decision to close, but he would not support a layoff any Board of Education employee because it is our job to take care of them.

The superintendent said we need to maintain a sense of normalcy for our families and he discussed the importance of clerical staff, paraprofessionals, custodial staff, and food and nutrition staff, along with teachers and administrators. He said this is why staff will be required to report to buildings after Thanksgiving, which he said was a good way to operate remote school instruction. He said people are not going to be left out during the cold.

Supt. Testani said he sends a positive message at the end of every week to the entire school community.

Mr. Taylor said he was glad to hear there would be no layoffs.

Mr. Weldon noted there was no vote on the agenda; the meeting was just an update and opportunity for board members to ask questions.

Mr. Taylor left the meeting.

Mr. Benejan said the superintendent had been doing an amazing job from Day One. He said Supt. Testani had resolved things that would take others years and months to resolve because they were scared to fix it. He noted he did not agree with reopening the schools this year, but he respected the decision of the board. He said everybody is stressed about the situation. He said he appreciated the e-mails that Mr. Testani sends to the board, including on the weekends.

Mr. Weldon said two and a half months ago we were trying to get students back to school, if they were willing to go, to get them back to a sense of normalcy and receive in-person learning. He said things were being monitored and fortunately we were able to give people advance notice of the changes that were being made. Some districts just shut down their schools the night before, creating a hardship for parents.

Mr. Weldon said the decisions being made are not easy, but so far the right calls are being made.

Ms. Allen said the superintendent has done a wonderful job.

Mr. Weldon thanked all the teachers, administrators, and staff members who have been going through a difficult time and acknowledged their hard work.

Supt. Testani thanked the board for their support and said he tries to make decisions based on the best interests of everyone, including staff and 20,000 students and their families. He said it was human nature for people to look at things from their own personal perspective only. He said the pandemic was a historic time and students are facing something they will never have to face again.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 7:54 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod