

Monday, November 23, 2020

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held November 23, 2020, by video conference call, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 4:10 p.m. Present were members Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Bobbi Brown, Secretary Joseph Lombard, Albert Benejan, Joseph Sokolovic, Jessica Martinez, and Sybil Allen.

Mr. Weldon said the topic for discussion was interviews to fill the board vacancy created by Mr. Illingworth's resignation. He said there were 13 candidates. Ms. Smilien was unable to attend the meeting. He noted Ilena Cotto had not dialed in as of yet.

Mr. Weldon listed the candidates: Ra'Shaun Custis; Sosimo Fabian; JoAnn Kennedy; Christine King; Jose Lopez; Tyler Mack; Tavonna McKenzie; Chantel Mendez; Tressa Pankovits; Dasha Spell; and Cynthia Torrez.

Mr. Weldon said four questions will be asked of each candidate. The first question was to tell us about yourself, your educational and professional background, and why do you want to be on the Board of Education.
and background.

Ra'Shaun Custis said he was a graduate of ECSU and attending UB for a master's degree in social studies and to be certified as a teacher. He said he would be pursuing an 092 certificate with the hopes of being a principal. He said he would like to be on the board because he is a Bridgeport

resident and to give back to the community and be a voice for youth today.

Sosimo Fabian said he graduated from Canisius College; received a Ph.D. at Georgetown, did a post-doctoral fellowship at Hunter College and was an adjunct professor. In 2004, he graduated from CCNY law school and has been with the Corporation Counsel in New York City for 17 years. He said he had been in Bridgeport for 17 years and had sent both his children through the Bridgeport public schools. He said he wanted to be socially active and socially progressive in education, and promote the best interests of our children.

JoAnn Kennedy said she attended Waltersville School, East Side High School, graduated from Harding High School, and is currently studying at Housatonic Community College. She said two of her children graduated from Bassick High and she has experience with home-schooling and a charter school. She described her experience in the district as a volunteer parent leader; PTSO president; regularly attending Board of Education meetings; a member of the board ad hoc committee on Males of Color; a certified cheerleading coach; and a prior candidate for the Board of Education. She said she given her familiarity with the Board of Education she would be a great asset to the community and the board.

Christine King said she has been a resident of Bridgeport for over 16 years, her two children have gone through the public school system, and she has also home-schooled the children at various points. She said she is currently an educational consultant on math instruction and has an undergraduate degree from Temple University and a degree from Columbia University. She said she has been in education since 1993, having entered education through Teach for America.

Ms. King said because of her experiences and dedication to the community she wants to make sure the children, parents, and teachers have the best possible opportunities available to them. She said she viewed the board as a support to what the school district is trying to accomplish.

Jose Lopez said he was a product of Bridgeport Public Schools from K to 12 and sat as a student rep on the Board of Education. He said he received an undergraduate degree at Felician University and is working on a master's in public administration. He has been an intern in the New Jersey legislature and currently works at the Bridgeport Public Education Fund and supervises a program involving mentoring for academic achievement and college and career success program.

Mr. Lopez said he wanted to be on the board because he loves the students and the city. He said sometimes the student voice is forgotten when the board makes decisions.

Mr. Mack said he was a graduate of High Horizons, Bullard Havens, and Eastern Connecticut State University. He said he wanted to be on the board because his mission was make sure youth and especially minorities have access to their dreams. He said he was a living testament that dreams come true. He said he was 24 years old and can relate to students and faculty and staff. He said he was a lifelong Bridgeport resident who loves the city. He currently works as legislative aide to the Senate president pro tempore, Martin Looney, in Hartford. He described his work as behind-the-scenes, including food drives. He said he had a young son and he wanted to make sure he gets the best education possible.

Tavonna McKenzie said she was a current student at CCSU with a focus on special education. She said she was a lifelong resident of Bridgeport and a graduate of Central Magnet. She described working two jobs and also attending Housatonic at one point during her college career. She said she worked in the school system as a certified paraprofessional with the intention of becoming a certified teacher. She said she had experience being on a board fighting youth homelessness and gave her insight in how to allocate resources and funds

Chantel Mendez said she attended Bridgeport private schools and her daughter attended public schools from kindergarten to 8th grade, and now attends a charter school due to the underfunding of Bridgeport public schools. She said she has worked in the healthcare field and worked as a union organizer with SEIU 1199. She added she does a lot of volunteer work with Faith Acts and has built relationships with families, and has met Supt. Testani and many of the board members. She said she wanted to do the work that hasn't been done in this community.

Ileana Cotto joined the meeting. Ms. Cotto said she was born and raised in Bridgeport and was a mother of four public school students. She said she works fulltime for Bridgeport Hospital and is a fulltime college student at Housatonic. She said she would like to be on the board to be involved and to make a difference.

Tressa Pankovits said she came in Bridgeport in 2012 and became a homeowner here in 2013. She graduated from a state college in California, became a television journalist in various cities, did political work in Chicago, worked in state government in Illinois, went to law school and practiced law, and then became an education consultant. She said she

worked Haiti and in Chile as a consultant as well, and also in districts in Illinois and Texas. She said she worked on adult education with the Department of Justice and was chief of staff for an education nonprofit called Advancement Via Individual Determination. She said she currently works for the Progressive Policy Institute of Washington, D.C., doing research and writing about education policy.

Ms. Pankovits said she believed the way her career unfolded would bring a unique perspective to the board. She said she grew up in a household that was very housing and food insecure. She said we had to concentrate like a laser beam on educational outcomes.

Dasha Spell said she was a lifelong resident of Bridgeport, graduated from Bassick High School, Southern Connecticut University, and has a master's degree in counseling. She said she was licensed in mental health and addiction counseling. She has a private practice and is a program manager for a nonprofit agency in New Britain. She said she has partnered with many local school districts to do therapy work in school buildings.

Ms. Spell said she wanted to be on the board because the kids need investment and continual support. She said she knew from other districts what money and resources look like and what Bridgeport needs. She said the board has to work as a team with the city. She said she helped facilitate a day of healing this summer in Bridgeport that brought resources into the community. She said what happens in the street affects the classroom, which she saw personally as a Head Start teacher.

Cynthia Torrez said she was a graduate of Blackham School and UConn. She said she taught for four years at Curiale

School, which was probably the most rewarding four years of her life. She learned how much hasn't changed since she was a student and how much policies and practices affect the classroom day-to-day. She said she received a master's in social work at Columbia University and is now working in that field.

Ms. Torrez said she wanted to bring her perspective as a teacher and former student who understands the policies and practices that affect students, especially in the era of COVID. She said she would bring her collaboration skills and work skills to the board.

The second question for the candidates was, what do you think is the biggest challenge that Bridgeport Public Schools faces and how do you think the board should address it.

Ms. Cotto said the biggest challenge is online learning. She said not all parents have access, despite the best efforts of the schools, and the students don't have anyone to help them at home during remote learning. She said the teachers do not have the kids' attention when teaching remotely.

Mr. Custis said he was not sure what was the biggest challenge and how the board should address it because there are so many challenges and education is such a revolving door. He said we can best support the kids by giving them a supportive team. He said COVID exposed a lot of things we were not fully prepared for and made us think outside of the box on education.

Dr. Fabian said one of the biggest challenges facing education is an unwillingness to experiment. He said systemic change is needed in systems and methods. He said we need to be mindful all communities have different

needs and he advocated for controlled experimentation. He said many changes would be confronting education as we move forward.

Ms. Kennedy said she believed the biggest challenge was finance. She said with Bridgeport being the largest district in the state and the district being the largest employer in the city we need money. She said the board needs to be more creative in bringing money to our schools and making them better. She said we need people to fight for financing our children.

Ms. King said she believed the biggest challenges are not COVID, but the idea of innovation. She said Bridgeport receives a little less than half of what is received by more affluent school districts. She said authentic learning experiences for kids should be established via community partnerships, including in all grades. She said people on the board are needed to talk about innovative ideas. She urged students be given a voice in the education process.

Mr. Lopez said one of the largest issues moving forward is the achievement gap created by the pandemic. He said community resources should be leveraged to combat this via partnerships with students. He said almost every student could potentially be assisted through some sort of third party programming. He said lobbying for finance can be done more effectively by demonstrating the partnerships and the utilization of all the resources in the community already.

Mr. Mack said one of the biggest challenges that the district faces is vision. He said he believed the board should work with the superintendent to create a five-year plan, which will include goals to keep the students engaged, make the faculty and staff feel supported and listened to, and

continuous involvement of parents. He said he knows from firsthand experience when you ask for money in Hartford or grants from foundations they want plans. He said we need vision and plans to improve the chances of getting more money.

Ms. McKenzie said the biggest challenge is parent, community, board and school partnerships. She suggested incorporating board meetings and providing information to parents during parent-teacher conferences. She said parents can be made aware of resources that are available. She also suggested the creation of a teacher board that can be a liaison between parents and the board. She said another idea would be to have a board representative communicate with teachers and families and take their concerns back to the board.

Ms. McKenzie said test scores and grades are a big problem for the system, and she suggested surveys of teachers and students, and creating interactive programs that will help boost scores. She suggested the use of students who are thriving to do tutoring and receive college credit.

Ms. Mendez said she was asked the same question earlier this year at the Senate Appropriations Committee. She said Bridgeport is severely underfunded and has been so for years. She said since this is a community of black and brown children, which is beyond unfair. She said the governor gave the \$2 million last year, but the board was asking for \$7.5 million, which is not enough. She said the board could have a better relationship with the City Council to face the huge funding issue.

Ms. Pankovits said she agreed with prior speakers about innovation and vision. She said the role of the board is

support the teachers and students, but also to set the vision; to steer the boat while they row it. She said goals and metrics for success are needed, along with accountability. She said the education gap in this state has been 35 points ever since 1992 and it has not changed. She noted the challenges presented by low-income students. ELL students, and students with IEPs cannot be met by \$14,000 a year. She said students need academic growth, college readiness, improved workforce readiness, and to hold ourselves accountable.

Ms. Pankovits said the Senate Republicans in Washington have set \$70 billion for K-12 public education, while the Democrats wanted \$182 billion, which means the \$70 billion is a minimum and the district will get another large influx of money. She said she agreed with the need for a five-year plan, but the budget should be built with the new money to ensure the it is based around improving academic outcomes. She said robust interventions are going to be needed after the issues with COVID.

Ms. Spell said parents and teachers have told her that the inconsistency has impacted the students with in-person, hybrid and remote learning. She expressed concern about the social-emotional situation. Students who do not have siblings are by themselves learning at home. She said students with multiple siblings are often in the position of helping their parents raise their siblings. She said the inconsistency of not knowing what is going to happen hinders the students. She suggested looking into the possibility of using hybrid for the rest of the year to provide consistency.

Ms. Spell said the board's budget situation is very tricky because it is broken down into state, local and special grant

funding. She said if the city can give money every year to the police department, they can give money to education. She said if more money was given to education, there would be less needed for policing. She said a lot of students lack basic life skills, including basic hygiene, and community resources could be used to address this. She said as a mental health provider she knows Bridgeport is eligible for trauma resources. She noted the Lighthouse program receives a six-figure grant and it could be expanded to more schools.

Ms. Spell said we have more teachers who do not look like our students in the classroom, and the state has created a program for new graduating students. She suggested offering a contract and a housing program to new teachers.

Ms. Torrez said the biggest issue facing the community is the lack of collaboration between parents, teachers, and elected officials. She said more transparency was needed. She urged the community be mobilized to rally behind funding for education. She said she believed we were doing our best during the pandemic, but collaboration was needed to gain funding, and transparency was necessary to clarify grants and financial issues. She said the district's website was hard to navigate. She said, in short, accountability, transparency and network building was needed.

The third question was, is there a particular initiative that you would want to see pursued by the board. Mr. Weldon asked everyone to try to confine their answers to about two minutes if possible.

Ms. Cotto did not respond.

Mr. Custis said it was always going to be about the students and that's where the focus should always be. He said he

had a lot of hope for Bridgeport and the board and everyone should all work together because the stronger the team is, the better Bridgeport will become.

Dr. Fabian said he would like to see a focus on more positivity, highlighting the many success stories in the district. He said he graduated from Kennedy High School in the Bronx, which was not highly regarded, but many people from there went on to successful careers. He said instead of identifying all the problems we know exist, we should also identify the success stories accomplished from the resources that are provided.

Ms. Kennedy said the males of color are the most targeted community in the world and the school-to-prison pipeline is a real thing. She said she would like the board to focus on this. She said we need to aggressively address the issues boys have in the district. She said before COVID the district was coming close to having one hundred expulsions last year. She said there was nothing wrong with black and brown students and boys, and we need to hear their voice.

Ms. King said the initiative the board needed to address was technological inequity. She said we're seeing the fallout of this now, and goes beyond devices and internet access, but also knowledge and knowhow, including how to think and innovate about technology. She said she always believed even before the pandemic that there should be no snow days, but always a continuation of learning, which can be done remotely.

Mr. Lopez said he would like to pursue more student involvement in the board, including creating a group of high school students who could meet and tell the board its concerns. He said the City Council has been trying to

develop a similar concept. High school students could be used in mentor-like roles. He said being a student member of the board was one of the most eye-opening experiences he's had.

Mr. Mack said he believed there was a need for a five-year plan and a vision. He said an example of a goal in the plan could be greater transparency, which would create trust from parents and staff. He said the more progress people see, the more they will be engaged with the school district and be willing to provide greater funding. He said the plan created could be taken to the state and the City Council when asking for more funding.

Ms. McKenzie said the board should take the initiative to incorporate school and community liaison opportunities. She said the most thriving school systems have parents involved in their children's education.

Ms. Mendez suggested the board be more transparent with the community, because as a parent she has been on the outside looking in, and she had to use an organization like Faith Acts to understand she has the right to understand what's going on. She said the community should be kept in the loop and this would lead to greater support.

Ms. Pankovits said keeping with her theme of improved academic outcomes for students and a better shot at gaining the American Dream there have been several studies that show minorities perform better on standardized tests and other measures when they have at least one teacher who looks like them. It has been shown that if a low-income black male student has at least one black teacher in 3rd, 4th or 5th grade that there's a 40 percent less chance that student will drop out of high school. She said she knows the board is

working on this with an Equity Committee. She said there are best practices out there that can be incorporated. She said this is not only a social justice issue, but has been shown to have academic impact. She noted the use in other cities of teacher residency programs.

Ms. Spell suggested an initiative where we're invested in ourselves, and the conversation around COVID and the planning for going forward. She said January would be budget season, and the five-year capital plan and the budget have to be submitted to the city. She said the biggest issue is creating consistent plans around COVID.

Ms. Torrez said she used a mentoring program with Bassick students working with her elementary students once a week. She said she does a mentoring program for high school students now. She said the mentors could be the liaison between the parents and the students and their needs. She added kids need to see other kids like them being successful.

The final question was to please provide any closing remarks and an opportunity to ask the board questions.

Ms. Cotto did not respond.

Mr. Custis thanked the board for the opportunity and the assistance of Ms. Rita Valle. He said he learned a lot from the process and listening to everyone. He said it was beautiful we were all here for Bridgeport.

Dr. Fabian thanked the board and said the panel of applicants reflect the diversity and passion of the community. He said if selected the board would get the fullest of his

attention and a commitment to think about education in this city. He said he would support whoever gets this position.

Ms. Kennedy thanked the board and said she appreciated all the candidates. She said because of her love and compassion for this work she was almost at a loss of words. She said she loved the students and the city, and wanted to do the work.

Ms. King said she appreciated this experience. She said she understood there was quite a wealth of choices in the pool of applicants. She said it had inspired her to get further involved to make more of an impact whether she is the choice or not. She appreciated that everyone was given an opportunity to express themselves.

Ms. King asked if people could get involved in committees to support the board. She said she was willing to share her e-mail address with other candidates to continue the discussion.

Mr. Weldon said the standing board committees are exclusive to board members. He said the board could look into her idea and the idea could be referred to the Governance Committee for exploration.

Ms. Martinez said some time ago some board members suggested incorporating the participation of parents and students participation in subcommittees but it was never translated into an actual policy.

Mr. Lopez thanked the chair and the board for taking the time to conduct the interviews. He thanked the other applicants for their commitment to making sure that our students receive the best representation and are thought of

in every decision. He said he would like to reaffirm his dedication to the Bridgeport Public Schools. He said he continued to believe in the students in Bridgeport.

Mr. Mack jokingly asked the board to please pick him. He said he was very active and would love to do this. He said he said when advocating at the state capitol for more educational funding, it would seem very unlikely due to his background growing up in a household with three boys and his mom as a single parent. He said his dad passed away when he was in college, but he still pushed ahead to help the public and to excel in life. He said the forum shows there are people in the community that want to be involved that care about the future. He said he will be around and involved even if he is not picked.

Ms. McKenzie thanked the board and said it was great to have the opportunity to hear from everyone. She asked how the board works with the Democratic Party to meet goals.

Mr. Weldon said we don't interact with the local Democrat or local Republican town committees, but work with the state legislative delegation to try to come up with initiatives at the state level.

Ms. McKenzie said she was under the impression it was a Democratic organization. Mr. Weldon said local political parties selected candidates to put on the ballot for the Board of Education and other offices.

Ms. Mendes thanked the board for the opportunity and said she was honored and privileged to even be considered. She said it was good to see there are people in the community who care about the community so much that they want to be on the board. She said she will continue fighting for the

children and the funding they need even if she is not picked. She suggested there be a task force of students and parents to give input on what we would like to see happen.

Ms. Pankovits asked how responsive the state legislators are in regards to advocating for Bridgeport up in Hartford. Mr. Weldon said it varies depending on what competing priorities are. He said the last meeting was about a year and a half ago and the representatives were very receptive. He said to their credit it is not the easiest thing to do when competing against other state legislators.

Ms. Pankovits thanked the board and said she felt part of the community tonight. She said she would remain a resource to the board if she could ever provide research or legislative information, or anything that could be of assistance to the board.

Ms. Spell said she thought the panel of candidates was phenomenal. She said she ran last year for the board against Ms. Brown, Mr. Benejan, and Ms. Allen. She said she did it because she loves our kids and the community. She said whoever becomes the next board member she will support the board.

Ms. Torrez said the work does not end here. She said she began the meeting very nervous, but after hearing great ideas she thought she was at the right table. She said she hoped the work would continue and there would be collaboration.

Ms. Martinez said she was emotionally inspired and the candidates reminded her why she started to begin with. She said she took notes and all the candidates were incredible. She said Bridgeport needs a revolution, which begins with

every single one of us. She noted the attributes of the candidates, and said so many of them are politically savvy. She said this position should not be held by a typical politician. She said she was emotional because she has been discouraged from the fight for many years. She said the candidates reminded her why she never gave up as a Bridgeport parent. She said Bridgeport needs people with passion and a vision, and a sense of direction. She urged the candidates not to give up and to work beside her.

Mr. Benejan thanked everyone for applying for the position. He said they all did an amazing job. He said we're all here for the children and it is his passion. He said he believed candidates wanted the best for our children. He said he recalled Mr. Lopez being a student rep and Ms. Spell's passion for our students.

Mr. Weldon said the board would select a candidate at its upcoming Regular Meeting this evening in a public vote. He said candidates can watch the meeting via the live stream link on the district's website. Whoever is selected will receive a link to join the meeting and they will be sworn in.

In response to a question, Mr. Weldon said he consulted with the board's attorney and as a justice of the peace he can administer the oath; a witness is not needed, and it need not be done in person. He said he will file an affidavit with the town clerk that the candidate has been sworn in.

Mr. Weldon said the agenda included a notice that the board may deliberate in executive session, although it does not have to. He asked if any board member was interested in holding an executive session.

In response to a question, Mr. Weldon said the board could deliberate publicly, but doing so publicly in the Regular Meeting was not possible because it was not publicly noticed.

Mr. Sokolovic said because the discussion would involve pros and cons of individuals he believed it was best done in executive session. He motioned "*to move into execution session for discussion.*" The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

The executive session began at 6:14 p.m.

The board reconvened in public session at 6:41 p.m.

The candidates were not present at this time.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 6:42 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod