

Wednesday, May 18, 2022

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held May 18, 2022, at Central High School, 1 Lincoln Boulevard, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 5:31 p.m.

Present were Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Bobbi Brown, Secretary Joseph Lombard, Joseph Sokolovic, Albert Benejan, Sybil Allen, Michael Maccarone, and Erika Castillo*. Christine Baptiste-Perez arrived subsequently as noted. Ms. Castillo arrived at the meeting in person subsequently as noted.

(*remote participation)

Supt. Michael J. Testani was present.

The sole agenda was discussion and possible action concerning the employment, performance, or evaluation of Michael Testani as a public officer or employee of the Bridgeport Board of Education.

Upon inquiry, Supt. Testani said he was fine with having the discussion in open session.

Mr. Weldon said the superintendent sent an e-mail regarding the provision in his contract which allows for the board to enter into a new three-year agreement with him. He noted that under Connecticut law a superintendent's employment contract may not be more than three years. He said there are currently two years left on the superintendent's contract.

Mr. Weldon said there had been discussion about any new agreement being contingent on a performance evaluation. Mr. Weldon distributed copies of the evaluation template that was used previously.

Mr. Weldon inquired whether the board members were comfortable with providing Mr. Testani a new three-year agreement, with any other terms and condition being contingent on a performance evaluation. Members Castillo, Maccarone, Allen, and Lombard indicated they were. No members expressed opposition.

Mr. Sokolovic said the cart was before the horse, because the board has the right to an evaluation and to have data provided to us. Mr. Weldon noted the contract was structured to have the evaluation done in July and August, while talking about a renewal before June 30th.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez arrived at the meeting.

Mr. Sokolovic said he would be amenable to discussing with the attorney the entire contract. He said he would support a negotiation session with the board and the lawyer, without Mr. Testani present, to develop a negotiating strategy. Mr. Sokolovic said he was comfortable with Supt. Testani being here after the evaluation.

Mr. Weldon said he believed there was a consensus with retaining Mr. Testani for the next three years, but with the terms and conditions of the contract to be contingent on a performance evaluation.

Mr. Weldon said the evaluation template distributed was used previously; he recommended it be used again.

Supt. Testani said from speaking with superintendents in the state the evaluation and its feedback is to help with professional growth and development of the superintendent. He said if the board has any questions to continue beyond the next two years, he did not know what he'd be able to do in the next four weeks in order to shape things that differently due to the end of the school year.

Mr. Weldon noted we were six weeks out from the first year of the superintendent's contract. He said there was time to do the evaluation before the end of the first year.

Mr. Maccarone suggested using March as an evaluation period.

Mr. Sokolovic said Supt. Testani was a relatively new superintendent, so a contract should not be extended before an evaluation is done, like any employee.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez read from C.G.S. 10-157. She said the CAFE training the board received indicated it would not send a negative message to the district if a superintendent's contract were not renewed for another three-year period. The training indicated it is only alarming to the district if a superintendent is within his last year of contract without being renewed. Since three members were completely new to the board, she asked what are we going to evaluate him on aside from personality.

Mr. Weldon said last year the superintendent gave a 90-minute presentation for his evaluation which addressed the categories. He suggested a time frame be established for the evaluation and what we want to see from the superintendent.

Mr. Sokolovic said the three new board members had no input on the evaluation format. Mr. Lombard said the evaluation format was the guidepost that the superintendent used, but to change it now would not be fair.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said she would like to have input on the evaluation, including being mindful of how other superintendents in similar-sized districts are evaluated. She said she did not want her ability to evaluate to be foreclosed on the format established by the prior board. She said Great City Schools and CAFE provide information on how to evaluate superintendents. She said she wanted to be able to do same thing here.

Mr. Weldon said the evaluation was developed based on a rubric for superintendent evaluations. Supt. Testani said the format is used by many districts in the state. Mr. Weldon said most districts have an executive session with their superintendent and they go over things that were good and things that were not good.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said because of the size of the district we must go about it differently.

Ms. Castillo said if the evaluation form is changed it should be done based on a legitimate resource and references.

Mr. Sokolovic said the contract indicates the board shall evaluate and assess in writing the performance of the superintendent at least annually with mutually agreed upon criteria.

Supt. Testani said the evaluation format was agreed upon much earlier in the school year. He said he believed it occurred in January.

Mr. Sokolovic said the new board members could come up with things that fit into the existing criteria.

Ms. Brown moved *“to allow new members a week to come with additions or modifications they think should be made to this.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez moved to amend to add, after consultation with CABE and Great City Schools.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez amended the motion to indicate she would like two weeks to consult with those organizations. Mr. Sokolovic seconded the amendment.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested a board professional development be held with CABE around superintendent evaluations.

Mr. Weldon said the board was supposed to evaluate the superintendent within 60 days from July 1st. He said we're doing this beforehand because people are of the mindset that we should do this before entering into a new contract.

Mr. Weldon said he would schedule a workshop with CABE before proceeding if board members wanted.

Mr. Lombard said we seem to be saying that no decision on the contract would be made until after the evaluation.

Mr. Weldon said the board would get good guidance from the CABE workshop.

Ms. Castillo arrived at the meeting in person.

Supt. Testani said the tool is based on the goals for the year, which are the mutually agreed upon goals. She said he would be blunt to say the fact that there were elections in November is not his problem. He said a new rubric should apply to next year. He said the competencies set forth in the evaluation are no different than those used in New Haven, Hartford, Darien, Greenwich, or any district because leadership is leadership.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested starting with a new motion from scratch. He said there was a consensus to go to CAFE.

There was a discussion of the current motion and amendment. Ms. Baptiste-Perez said the amendment was to allow for two weeks in order to consult with CAFE and Great City Schools on how to evaluate.

The amendment was approved by 6-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Allen, Sokolovic, Brown, Benejan, Maccarone, and Baptiste-Perez. Mr. Weldon voted no. Mr. Lombard and Ms. Castillo abstained.

Mr. Weldon said the motion had been amended to two weeks for the evaluation to be potentially modified based on what we learn from CAFE.

Mr. Lombard said it was obvious we need to get input and have the evaluation be growing and evolving, but it should not be revised for this year's evaluation.

Mr. Weldon said any finalized evaluation document would have to be voted on. He said there may not be any revisions.

Supt. Testani said the evaluation would have to be tied to Connecticut standards because Great City Schools deals with different schools across the country.

Mr. Weldon said the plan was to meet with CAGE and discuss the evaluation rubric with them.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said this was the first time she was seeing the evaluation rubric. She said the key point was mutually determined guidelines and criteria. She said she would like to see what similarly sized districts use.

Mr. Lombard said the situation would be a bait and switch if the evaluation process was changed at the last minute.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said nothing was set in stone and the board could add criteria for next year or perhaps nothing would change.

Mr. Weldon said the current motion would allow for board members to provide additional input into how this evaluation document is written and structured. People are free to contact CAGE and any other organizations. He said he would arrange a workshop on superintendent evaluations in general. All to be done within two weeks. He said any finalized document would have to be voted on by the board and agreed to by the superintendent.

Supt. Testani said there was nothing he was concerned about in his performance, but the tool is the tool. He said the teacher evaluation tool is the same for every grade level or content area. He noted that last time Mr. Sokolovic wanted to add criteria on advocacy for funding and it was added. He said there needs to be focus areas.

The superintendent said doing it like this just creates chaos and, no matter how well you work and perform, it still always ends up like this, which is discouraging. He said this is what the public and the staff sees, which is portrayal that we cannot even agree on a rubric for scoring for evaluation.

Mr. Lombard said we should be mindful of the timeline because it does not send a message of support to the superintendent. He said potentially dragging out the matter should not happen.

Mr. MacCarone suggested Mr. Testani begin to prepare his presentation. Supt. Testani said he was going on vacation on July 14th.

Mr. Benejan said we want Mr. Testani back because of what he's done for the Bridgeport schools. He said he is not perfect; nor is the board perfect. He said former superintendents did not make decisions and it was a mess. He said he approved of getting information from CAFE and Great City Schools, but we need to make a decision. He said everyone here knows what Mr. Testani did in a short period of time and the extra mile he has gone for everyone. He said he wanted Mr. Testani here for many years.

Ms. Brown said we talked about the same thing last year, including discussions about Covid and residency. She said this is what we said we would do.

Mr. Weldon said the evaluation was created by the board. Supt. Testani said domains relevant to superintendent evaluations were included.

Ms. Castillo said the rubric is probably pretty close to what are used with other superintendents. The superintendent

said there may be greater emphasis in different domains in other districts.

Ms. Castillo said she supported the meeting with CABE and agreed with Mr. Lombard that any changes in the evaluation should be for future years. She said the results from the evaluation are what should be used for modification, if any, to the superintendent's contract.

Mr. Weldon said he anticipated finalizing the evaluation document on June 1st after the presentation by CABE.

Mr. Weldon said he believed the motion was to reconvene to revise the evaluation in two weeks. He said he would schedule a workshop with CABE on a superintendent evaluation.

Mr. Weldon said after discussion he was more in favor of voting no, while getting CABE in here and using their guidance to make a decision, which would be in a public meeting.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said there was big resistance to any potential change with the automatic assumption that makes her feel like there's something being hidden. She said it was clear from the statute that it has to be mutually agreed and it would not necessarily be negative; even extra credit could be given. She said the resistance from board members is her concern. She said she wanted to be educated on decisions and open to other options. She said she did not want to be negative towards our superintendent.

Mr. Weldon said he would not like to be told six weeks before the end of the year that his agreed-upon evaluation would be changed. He said he would feel offended if he was

the superintendent. He suggested adjourning and having a discussion with CABE in the future.

Mr. Weldon moved to adjourn. The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen.

Mr. Sokolovic said there was a motion on the table. He said he had further discussion. He said we're getting sidetracked and defensive. He said Ms. Baptiste-Perez did not say there was something untoward going on. He said seven people said they supported the superintendent and were ready to move and now the narrative is we can't agree on it and don't support the superintendent.

Mr. Sokolovic said this city has a terrible reputation for corruption and we have to deal with perceptions. He said the board is perceived as going along with the superintendent each and every time. He said personally he thinks the superintendent is doing a good job, but he cannot vote on the contract if we don't do it in a dispassionate way. He said if new board members don't want to add to the evaluation, they don't have to add anything.

Mr. Maccarone asked which evaluation items are not agreed to. He said he believed the evaluation was an awesome evaluation.

The motion failed by a 5-4 vote. Voting in opposition were members Weldon, Lombard, Allen, Maccarone, and Castillo. Voting in favor were members Benejan, Brown, Baptiste-Castillo, and Sokolovic.

Mr. Weldon said he would schedule a meeting with CABE.

Mr. Sokolovic moved to have *“the board meet with the attorney to discuss negotiating strategies for Supt. Testani’s contract before we sit down with the superintendent.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Baptiste-Perez and unanimously approved.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 6:40 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

DRAFT