

Thursday, August 13, 2020

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held August 13, 2020, at Bridgeport Regional Vocational Aquaculture School and video call, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:16 p.m. Present were members Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Hernan Illingworth, Secretary Bobbi Brown, Joseph Sokolovic, Joseph Lombard, Sybil Allen, and Albert Benejan. Jessica Martinez arrived subsequently as noted.

Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

Mr. Weldon said Mr. Illingworth and the Governance Committee would deal with the fifth item on the agenda at their next meeting.

Ms. Martinez arrived at the meeting.

The next agenda item was to award purchase of commodity food items for the 2020-21 school year. Mr. Weldon said the item was heard by the Contracts Committee last night and Mr. Garrity made a presentation. Mr. Weldon said they are food items that go out every year and the items proposed to be purchased were the low bidders with the exception of a meatball item. The bid chosen in the meatball category was the lowest in exactly what was being asked for.

Mr. Illingworth moved *“to approve award of purchase of commodity food items for the ’20-21 school year as outlined in the package presented in the package by Mr. Garrity.”*

The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on purchase of non-commodity food, paper goods, and cleaning supplies for the 2020-21 school year. Mr. Weldon said all the items proposed to purchase came in as the low bid.

Ms. Brown moved “to *authorize award of purchase of non-commodity commercial food, paper goods, and cleaning supplies for the 2020-21 school year.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was an update on the district’s reopening plan.

Supt. Testani said Lisa Morrissey, the city’s director of public health, has joined the meeting. He said she was a contributor to the reopening task force and a great partner in developing the safe reopening.

Ms. Morrissey said the entire department was ready to provide support to all the schools in Bridgeport.

There were technical difficulties with the audio broadcast.

Ms. Martinez moved to recess the meeting. The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

The meeting was recessed at 6:28 p.m.

The meeting was reconvened at 6:44 p.m.

Ms. Morrissey said right now Connecticut as a whole is looking good in terms of testing results. She said Bridgeport

positively rates remain low and there have not been major changes over the last four weeks. Numbers remain within state guidelines for reopening. She said she would be advising Mr. Testani and the board on a weekly basis as to where Bridgeport stands.

Ms. Morrissey said the data includes rates at the neighborhood level.

Mr. Testani said the district has worked hard and is excited to welcome our students, staff and families back for the 2020-21 school year. He said these are unprecedented times for opening schools. He noted there was a two-hour session today with the BEA. The superintendent said BEA leader Ana Batista has worked closely with him on reopening.

Ms. Batista said the people outside the building were expressing their freedom of speech, but are not acting on behalf of the BEA.

Supt. Testani said parents have an option whether to send their children back to school in person or engage in remote learning at home. He said he respects the decision of every parent.

The superintendent noted the harms attributed to closing schools by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. He said it is well documented that lack of in-person educational options disproportionately harm low-income and minority students and students with special needs. He said many students lack their own device and do not have reliable internet connectivity. He said the district would be much better equipped with devices and connectivity than in March.

Supt. Testani said Bridgeport students rely on schools for more than just education, including critical services that develop social-emotional skills. He said the staff plays a critical role in addressing neglect and abuse. Last year, referrals to the state of abuse and neglect in the home was over 150. He said food and nutrition provides essential nutritional needs for thousands of children. School provides children with recreational opportunities that may not be available in some neighborhoods.

The superintendent said reopening schools creates an opportunity to invest in the education, well being, and future of our children. He said he believed schools could safely be reopened, while taking every safety precaution.

Supt. Testani said the hybrid model was introduced this week. High school students whose last name begins with A to L will attend in person Mondays and Tuesdays; students whose last name begins with M to Z will be on remote learning. All students will be on remote on Wednesdays to allow for deeper cleaner and sanitizing. Students on remote learning Monday and Tuesday will attend in person on Thursday and Friday. Students with IEPs and in ESL/bilingual will have the opportunity to attend all four days.

The superintendent said remote learning expectations will include communications from the school and the district, students reading at least 30 minutes every day outside of the learning process and to participate in video, real-time lessons every day, all day. He said students should collaborate with the teacher and peers using digital tools on Teams. All students should wear appropriate clothing. Students should ask for help and support when needed, and

should complete their assigned work to the best of their ability and by the due dates indicated.

Supt. Testani said teachers and support staff should provide timely feedback on student work and requests. Remote lessons should be age and grade appropriate. Teachers will be available to communicate with students and parents during the scheduled work day.

The superintendent said parents need to review the remote learning plan and request their child's student number for future reference, which can be found on Power School. Parents need to update their contact information and coordinate a time for the administration of district assessments for their child. He urged that parents ensure that students get the right amount of sleep and exercise.

Supt, Testani said it was important to note that attendance will be kept for all remote learning days through Power School and will be consistent with in-person attendance. He said hard copies of work can be dropped off at schools between 8:00 and 12:00 Monday to Friday with advance notice.

The superintendent said a regular grading scale would be used. He said last year was ended with a board-approved modified grading scale. He said assignments must be completed in a timely manner or they will be marked a zero.

Supt. Testani said data indicates that students who do not have an effective learning year with a good teacher fall behind; if it's two years, they are at risk to drop out of school.

The superintendent said the hybrid model is not being used at pre-K to 8th grade because 45 percent of parents have

opted for remote learning, so full-time attendance can be kept a low size. He said the district is prepared to pivot to a hybrid if in-person attendance grows too much.

Unfortunately, six thousand families have not chosen an option; if a choice is not received by August 20, those students will be placed on remote learning.

Supt. Testani described the purchase of face shields, masks, packets of wipes, sanitizers, Plexiglas dividers, and sanitizing stations.

Mr. Benejan said he was not in support of reopening schools due to safety concerns.

In response to a question, the superintendent said he realized parents are in a difficult position with an overwhelming task. He said he understood health and safety is first and foremost, but he has seen basketball courts and splash pads in the city packed, along with camps and daycare facilities. He said he believed there was no substitute for a highly trained teacher in a classroom; it was not like a robot on an assembly line.

Ms. Martinez said she had concerns with the level of expectations on parents, but we're all going to have to do our part.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said we're asking parents to self-monitor their children and asking staff to self-monitor and stay home if they feel sick. He said it is now documented that Fairfield County is under control with COVID after being the hardest hit in Connecticut. He said the rate of pay for substitute teachers has been increased to try to attract quality substitutes, including the use of building-based subs.

Ms. Martinez said she had discussions with staff members who were outside the building tonight and exchanged opinions with them.

The superintendent said schools are going to have to open at some point and noted he heard some parents indicate they would not be willing to take a vaccine even if it were available.

Mr. Sokolovic noted he was choosing to send his child to school because he believed the plan was safe and because there is no substitute for in-person learning. He said parents should have the right to choose. He objected to parents who make different choices attacking each other on the internet.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said in warm weather some buildings may have to go to half a day or close entirely due to air circulation concerns. He noted the Commissioner of Education was very supportive of the district's plans. He said class sizes would not exceed 50 percent of the contractual limit. Mr. Sokolovic said due to the parent choice numbers there will be classes with less than ten students.

Ms. Brown noted the stress of young parents who have multiple jobs and have to teach their children. She said she had heard from a lot of parents in this category. She said this was a situation the board had never faced before and she urged everyone to work together.

Supt. Testani said the district is working closely with the BEA and the relationship is strong, which will go a long way in getting through this. Ms. Batista said the session today with teachers and the superintendent was helpful.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said staff support services that are available in person will be available virtually for students at home. He said that one reason for the emphasis on attendance is to identify students who are not engaged. He said grab-and-go meals will be available as well as after-school activities for students via the internet.

Ms. Allen said there are many parents who cannot help their children. Supt. Testani said that situation can arise where parents choose remote learning but do not have the ability to support it. He said creating a safe environment will make those parents realize that it's okay to send their child to school.

Mr. Testani said there has been technology training for parents and videos are available on the district's website. He said remote learning is a tough way for a child to go to school.

Jeff Postolowski, IT director, said there is going to be an academic support number for parents and there is an academic support team for teachers. He said multiple sessions were held for parents on technology with language barriers.

Supt. Testani said CARES funding is being used for kindergarten paras to support teachers.

Mr. Illingworth thanked Ms. Morrissey for her work and assistance to the district. Ms. Morrissey said the guidelines for reopening schools depend on fewer than ten new COVID cases per 100,000 for the population per day. She said the data would be continually monitored.



Mr. Illingworth said parents were going to need a lot of support with the hybrid model or distance learning. He said it seemed the district was being proactive in this area. He said all the data and guidelines seemed to indicate things were working, so it should be about parents' choice. He said it hurt to receive an e-mail from a parent that indicated he did not care about children's lives. He said the children who lost 30 percent of their school year are never going to get that back. He said if the data supports reopening schools, then we must do that. He said it was sad that the community was divided and not supporting each other.

Mr. Illingworth thanked the superintendent for his leadership.

In response to questions, Supt. Testani said face coverings are required for students as soon as they get on a school bus or on the campus if they do not ride the bus. Failure to comply will result in the student being placed on remote learning. He said parents will not be allowed to walk their children to classrooms and they will have to make appointments to visit the schools. Parents will have the option of participating in PPTs in person or remotely.

Supt. Testani said the PTSO/PAC situation needs further discussion, perhaps at the Students & Families meeting.

The superintendent said there will not be temperature checks at the door, but the 4,000 thermometers given to the district by the health department have been distributed to parents. He said teachers will be allowed to check the temperature of children with the infra-red thermometers in their classroom. He said students will be provided with breaks with classes so they can take their masks off and so they are not cooped up in a classroom all day.

Mr. Weldon said he had been working remotely for the last five months. He said it was important to have a structure, including dressing as if going to work, which changes your mindset. Working in a designated area is also helpful.

Mr. Weldon said choices in life are not always easy, but the district had structured the reopening to give choices. He noted people with underlying conditions have the option of going out on family medical leave.

Mr. Weldon said he wanted to clarify that under the law the district is required to provide physical, in-person learning. It can be supplemented by distance learning, but we are not allowed to take away the choice of in-person learning. He said any request for a waiver to that statute is not likely to be granted by the state Department of Education.

Supt. Testani said there are 169 school districts in Connecticut and the vast majority of them, including wealthy districts, are creating schedules with in-person learning to meet the needs of their children. He said the district's children could not afford to fall farther behind.

Mr. Weldon said it seemed there was a consensus to move forward as we are, with the plan being fluid enough to change if developments warrant. Mr. Benejan said he wanted it noted that he did not agree with reopening the schools.

The next agenda item was on the 2020-21 fall sports program.

The superintendent said there had been a lot of discussion statewide on this issue. He said the football committee of the CIAC voted to postpone the season from the fall to the

spring. The full board of the CIAC reversed the decision and said football would take place in the fall. Today the state Department of Health advised against playing in the fall.

Supt. Testani said the overwhelming number of districts and superintendents are questioning the CIAC's decision. He said he would be the first one to make the decision that we cannot play football this fall. He said if the Big Ten cannot play football, the district's schools should risk playing this fall. He pointed to issues with safely transporting teams and sanitizing locker rooms. He said the game itself does not call for social distancing.

The superintendent said volleyball is also not conducive to social distancing. He noted the gyms will not be used for physical education, so it would be contradictory to play volleyball.

Ms. Allen said she would not want to jeopardize a child playing contact sports.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said he would like to work with the BEA in negotiations to pay some coaches to continue to work with small cohorts of athletes for conditioning so they will be prepared to play when the opportunity comes.

Supt. Testani said soccer was being played throughout the summer safely, so that will be played. He noted there are less children to transport for soccer away games. Cross-country will go forward.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said a passing league as typically done in the summer for football might be possible.

Mr. Illingworth, Mr. Weldon, and Mr. Sokolovic said they supported the superintendent's decision.

In response to a question, Ms. Morrissey said she felt comfortable with the reopening plans provided by the public, private and charter schools. She said from a deep dive into the numbers and looking back for the past six weeks there is nothing that jumped out that was a concern with school reopening shortly. She said the numbers will be closely monitored.

Mr. Sokolovic said we need information put out to counter the misinformation being spread by special interest groups. He suggested more informational sessions around the city. He said some people are still questioning whether we have enough masks because they haven't read the plan.

Supt. Testani said he would likely resume Facebook Live events to explain the plans further.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:24 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod