

Monday, August 19, 2019

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held August 19, 2019, at Bridgeport Regional Aquaculture Science & Technology Education Center, 60 St. Stephens Road, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:09 p.m.

Present were Chair John Weldon, Secretary Joseph Sokolovic, Hernan Illingworth, Joseph Lombard, Sybil Allen, Maria Pereira, and LaMar Kennedy. Vice Chair Jessica Martinez arrived subsequently as noted.

Acting Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

Ms. Allen moved *“to go into executive session for discussion and possible action on the matter of Deborah Santacapita vs. Bridgeport Board of Education, case number 319 CV0033JBA.”* Invited to participate were the board, Mr. Testani, and Attorney Richard Buturla of Berchem Moses.

The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The executive session began at 6:10 p.m.

The board resumed in public session at 6:31 p.m.

Ms. Martinez was now present.

Ms. Allen moved *“to settle the claim of Deborah Santacapita*

*vs. Bridgeport Board of Education in accordance with the discussion in executive session, that would be an authorization for counsel to finalize that settlement and the authorization for the chairman to sign any documents related to it.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was discussion and possible action on approval of balanced FY19-20 budget.

Chief financial officer Marlene Siegel provided an update on the 2018-19 budget. She said the year has ended in balance for the eighth consecutive year. She said it was not necessary to withdraw \$1 million from the Internal Service Fund(ISF), the prior year's surplus, as originally planned to balance the budget.

Ms. Siegel said the surplus amount in the ISF remains at \$2 million, which will be applied to assist in balancing the 2019-20 budget.

Ms. Siegel said lower than anticipated expenditures included legal services, which saw a decrease from \$1.3 million to \$400,000. Homeless transportation costs were reduced by \$200,000. Medicaid reimbursements increased as the result of a one-time supplement.

Ms. Siegel said out-of-district special education expenditures remained high, \$27.9 million for 412 students; a growth of 12.5 percent. She said there were helpful factors, however, including the increase in the state cap on expenditures. She said the net amount of out-of-district expenditures turned out to be lowered than projected.

Ms. Siegel said there was an intensive initiative underway in

2019-20 to address the causative factors of out-of-district placements.

Ms. Siegel said the budget gap plan for 2019-20 was presented to the board. She said it was important to understand that the total monetary need has been reduced by about \$1 million due to the availability of \$2 million from the ISF's prior year surplus. She added state action to the MREF rate for non-certified staff retirements resulted in savings of about \$200,000.

Ms. Siegel said as of today there are currently 23 teacher positions that will be covered by long-term subs, with about 20 remaining vacancies. She said these positions will generate savings. There are also para vacancies which will be covered by substitute personnel.

Ms. Siegel said deficit prevention mode, which was originally projected to save \$1 million, is now increased to \$1.6 million. She said other savings were achieved via central office restructuring and conversion of 12-month assistant principal positions to 10-month positions via attrition.

Ms. Siegel said some services were transferred into grants funds where permissible and legal.

Ms. Siegel said the city contributed \$100,000 towards the 2018-19 payment for the literacy initiative.

Ms. Siegel said the plan includes anticipated reductions in special education expenditures expected from a concerted effort to institute and enforce guidelines within an accountability framework for schools.

Ms. Siegel said the budget gap plan includes redeployment

of three therapeutic support facilitators to SOAR classes and the elimination of one teacher position at Bridgeport Learning Center. Two pre-K classes in the PDG program were eliminated. The schools that lost a class are Cross and Columbus, for a savings of \$80,000.

Ms. Siegel said a teacher position at Marin for the TAAG program, which has not been filled for close to two years, was eliminated.

Ms. Siegel said there is a vacancy for an in-school suspension officer and the position will be eliminated, but Title IV funding will be used to restore an officer within a new context.

Ms. Siegel said it is projected that vacancies in facilities will be filled but there will be savings from the ordinary process of filling positions.

Ms. Siegel said two vacant positions for security guards would be eliminated, as well as two clerical positions.

Ms. Siegel said it is expected that the city will pay the cost for the annual lease of the Connecticut Avenue facility.

Ms. Siegel said the savings from assistant principal vacancies being filled with ten-month positions are about \$150,000.

Ms. Siegel said a director position has been eliminated in the district office.

Ms. Siegel said the city will make a direct purchase through their budget of athletic uniforms, which will replace \$10,000 in the district's operating budget.

Ms. Siegel said the target goal for savings in special education is \$600,000.

Ms. Siegel said the result included in the document would achieve a balanced budget. She said she had to emphasize that the plan starts the year in a structurally balanced budget, however, the budget is in a precarious state due to under resourcing, minimal reserve funds, and competing needs. The budget is still subject to multiple stress factors.

Ms. Siegel said the grant appropriations for major grants are not yet known. She said she remained hopeful that the appropriations will remain stable or increase, but there is always the possibility of a decrease. She said it is known that the Title IV appropriation is roughly equivalent to the 2018-19 appropriation.

Ms. Siegel said the current projected registers for Fairchild Wheeler are significantly lower than the prior year. She said we are working with the principals to increase enrolment for in-district and suburban students. If registers don't increase, the grant allocation will decline.

Mr. Illingworth said over the years the square footage of the district's buildings has increased, but the amount of custodians have decreased. He said there is going to come a time when the schools will not be kept clean. He said he also had concern about the reduction of security guards. Ms. Siegel said she was in agreement with those concerns. In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the security positions to be eliminated were vacant. She said historically vacancies have occurred in facilities during the course of the year.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the city agreed

in principle to paying for the Connecticut Avenue lease, but they have not agreed to funding the nurses at this point.

Ms. Pereira said her comments were not directed at Ms. Siegel who has to paint a rosy picture. She said it was smoke and mirrors and the budget is not balanced.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the payments being made by the city are not transfers to the board and are not locked into the MBR (minimum budget requirement). Ms. Pereira said it was a 23-day trick before a primary election by a mayor facing a challenge. She said he was using the black and brown kids as part of the primary. She said Ms. Siegel knew this was a violation of the law because every dollar has to be transferred to the board. She said the mayor and the City Council, who have zero authority over board expenditures, are deciding how they're going to fund the public schools and under what items.

Ms. Pereira said actually the transportation office did an amazing job and saved almost \$2.3 million when the transportation changes were made. She said even though the city would be contributing \$1.2 million we would be adding another \$900,000.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said he understood We Transport agreed to the \$200,000 reduction for this year only.

Ms. Pereira said the mayor promised her that he would fund the schools, but he has proposed four straight budgets without one additional dollar for 21,500 students, where 88 percent of them are black and brown.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said there are no

restrictions on filling teacher positions. When a principal is unable to fill the position and they have identified a long-term sub, they will make a request for the long-term sub, which will lead to savings. She said in June she could not predict with accuracy the positions covered by long-term subs. She said the current number is 23. She said the projected savings in paras has been increased from \$1 million to \$1.6 million.

Ms. Pereira asked if the transportation cuts are restored if Fairchild Wheeler would follow the same distance requirements as Central, Harding, Bassick and BMA. Ms. Siegel said she believed it would be restored to the 2018-19 condition. Ms. Pereira said there has never been a policy where Fairchild was allowed to have an exception.

Ms. Pereira said Fairchild students who live four to six blocks away would receive bus transportation while other high school students would walk up to two miles.

In response to a question, Mr. Kennedy said his son was bused to Fairchild Wheeler in the past, but he had not calculated whether the distance was over or under two miles.

Mr. Illingworth said prior to Fairchild Wheeler opening the board had a concern due to the absence of sidewalks on Old Town Road and it voted to make an exception. He said it was Ms. Baraka who pushed for the exception.

Ms. Pereira said there are sidewalks all along Huntington Turnpike and Frenchtown Road. She said it was about equity.

Following discussion of the science and math directors, Mr.

Sokolovic said the board voted to specifically keep the science director.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the Bridgeport Learning Center(BLC) was not saving millions in out-of-district placements. She said it was discovered most students who attended BLC moved to out-of-district placements. She said BLC should be completely reviewed and reexamined.

Ms. Pereira said this was the first time she had ever heard anything negative about BLC.

Ms. Allen said if BLC was eliminated the children would have to be sent out of district. Ms. Siegel said it was not an elimination, but a reduction.

Ms. Pereira said many BLC students return to their regular schools. Ms. Siegel said that was not correct and that was the issue. She said the special education department is reviewing it.

Mr. Sokolovic said many times Mr. DiDonato convinced a parent to keep their child in BLC instead of an out-of-district placement.

Mr. Illingworth said the district had gotten into trouble in the past after cuts in special education. He said he considered Mr. DiDonato a watchdog of special education. He asked the superintendent to provide the data about BLC.

Mr. Kennedy said he met with Mr. Testani regarding BLC and as a special education teacher who started at the school he was in agreement with the reduction.



Ms. Siegel said when she came to the district she understood the primary purpose of BLC was to service students in general education and ultimately return them to their home schools. She said a formal evaluation to assess the outcomes achieved was needed.

Ms. Pereira said the evaluation should be done before cutting, not after. Mr. Kennedy said based on staffing levels and student-to-teacher ratio it was the right decision based on the district's budget.

Ms. Pereira said pre-K classes should be kept where the communities are most impoverished and most in need. She said classes would be kept at Black Rock and High Horizons, while there would be a cut at Wilbur Cross. Ms. Siegel said Cross has pre-K slots available in community sites and the decision was made by the department of early childhood.

Ms. Pereira said Black Rock was the most affluent community in the city, while Cross and Columbus, both in impoverished areas, were losing classes. Ms. Siegel said those two schools had not filled their class. Ms. Pereira said it was a reflection on the early childhood office.

Ms. Siegel said the classes have been eliminated. Ms. Pereira said the board did not vote on that. Mr. Weldon said the board does not have to vote on every minute action that staff takes. Ms. Pereira said the board had a fiduciary responsibility under state statute.

Ms. Siegel said the PDG grant ended on June 30th. The class at Cross would have been eliminated in June 2020.

Mr. Testani said the classes at Black Rock and High

Horizons were completely enrolled when the decision was made. Three students at Cross were diverted to a community-based agency and there were less than a handful enrolled at Columbus.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the TAG teacher at Marin had been on leave for two years, and the position was filled by a sub. Ms. Martinez said she was not happy about that. Ms. Pereira said this was a cut in one of the most impoverished schools in the city. Ms. Siegel asked what the board would like to cut instead.

Mr. Lombard said he had only been on the board since March and it was amazing that so many millions were able to be resolved like that. He said he wondered why we had so much emotional conversations about cuts in the first place if it could have been done anyway.

Ms. Martinez said it was not fair to cut TAG opportunities at Marin School.

Ms. Pereira objected that the city payment of \$263,000 for the leased facility would only be for one year and not included in the MBR. Mr. Testani said he requested this of the city on July 9th and it was agreed upon.

Ms. Pereira said in 2009, out of nowhere, Mayor Finch forced the board to pay for school nurses, contrary to prior practice. She said this led to a \$2 million cut in the board's budget. She added the city gets reimbursement from the state for the nurses paid for by the board.

Mr. Sokolovic said the importance of funding being in the MBR is that students will need buses next year and the board will need a leased facility next year. He said without

the money in the MBR it is not guaranteed.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said the athletic uniforms have been purchased and the district is waiting to take possession of them. Ms. Pereira said \$100,000 was spent on our kids' uniforms, yet we don't even know if they went out to bid as required under state law. Mr. Testani said the uniforms were discussed on July 9th. He said the home and away uniforms for Harding, Central and Bassick will carry us for the next four years.

Ms. Pereira expressed concern that Child Find provisions would not be followed if special education changes were instituted and the proposed out-of-district placements were implemented. She questioned whether laws are being broken again as under Supt. Vallas. She said \$1 million in savings was projected in this area.

Ms. Siegel said \$600,000 is the projected amount, with \$400,000 in redeployment to pay for the new classes. In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said \$3 million more was spent on out-of-district placements last year. Ms. Pereira said the history of special education expenditures always shows growth. Ms. Siegel said the new director is an expert in special education and has developed a series of guidelines and protocols to orient administrators.

Ms. Pereira noted the city spent \$100,000 on McGraw-Hill literacy. Ms. Siegel said the district had encumbered funds for this and paid for it in 2018-19. She said the city accepted a journal entry of \$100,000, which freed that amount from our budget in 2018-19.

Ms. Pereira said we have given the transportation office and parents 14 days to review every single bus route and stop.

She said notifications may not reach everyone in time. She said the most senior person in the transportation office put in her retirement papers because this was the final straw. She said there would be chaos on the first day of school.

Ms. Siegel said there is a plan to issue notifications if the board approves the transportation actions tonight. She explained the planning that has taken place to avoid chaos.

Mr. Sokolovic said Ms. Siegel asked the board to get the deficit within \$2 million. Ms. Siegel said the shortfall was \$5.5 million in June with the expectation that the annual reassessment over the summer would reduce the monetary need. She said projections such as legal services were reduced and adjustments were made due to rollover amounts.

Mr. Weldon said the summer reassessment covered \$2.4 million, which in large part brings us to zero.

Ms. Pereira said Ms. Siegel sometimes did not understand the digital divide and expressed concern that parents would not receive notification of the transportation changes. Ms. Martinez said there may be chaos, but she was going to remain positive about the administration and staff handling it.

Ms. Martinez said she wanted to be appreciative of the work done by Mr. Testani and Ms. Siegel and the relationship that is there now with the administration of the city. She said she did not trust the city administration to do what they say by our students every year, but positive strides have been made and she was grateful. She said we have to hold the mayor accountable and ensure that it is guaranteed next year.

Ms. Martinez moved to approve this minus number 20. She said she wanted Marin children to have access to the TAG program. Mr. Weldon noted the action had already been taken.

Ms. Martinez moved *“to approve this budgetary gap proposal with the reversal of number 20 and with the reinstatement of number 36, the bus transportation routes.”* She said she would like to cut the Black Rock preschool in lieu of the position at Marin. The motion was seconded by Mr. Kennedy.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *“to amend to remove item 31, district offices.”* He said a two-thirds vote would be needed to reverse prior action.

Mr. Sokolovic moved to amend *“to add the language to have this approval dependent upon the mayor and the City Council including these expenditures that they’re making now in the MBR as required by law and put it back in their hands.”* He said our children deserve buses every single year.

Ms. Pereira seconded the amendment to remove Item 31. The motion was approved by a 6-2 vote. Voting in favor were members Lombard, Allen, Martinez, Pereira, Kennedy and Sokolovic. Mr. Illingworth and Mr. Weldon were opposed.

Mr. Sokolovic said the second amendment was that the board’s approval of this budget is subject to the city’s accepting and adding to the MBR all money expended on behalf of the Board of Education.

Mr. Weldon said if this amendment were to pass and the city

does not make it part of the MBR, the whole budget would not pass. Ms. Martinez said that it would mean the city is not serious about our children and it would mean it was a political ploy.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the total expenditures the city committed to were \$1,663,000.

Ms. Pereira said that amount should be locked into the MBR. She said she did not believe Mayor Ganim would say no 23 days before the primary.

Mr. Sokolovic said if the mayor does not agree, the board can call a special meeting and implement all the cuts the mayor and the City Council forces us to make.

Ms. Pereira said the mayor did a promotional video doing a budget transfer. Ms. Siegel said the transfer was into a city account.

Ms. Martinez urged accepting the city's olive branch. She said Mr. Testani has built a relationship to the city.

Mr. Sokolovic said if the money is not credited towards the MBR next year the board would start \$1.6 million in the hole just to maintain current services.

Mr. Testani said this is not the most ideal situation in terms of funding. He said whatever the motivation is on the city's side at some point we have put all this aside and build a relationship in order to receive what we need for our children.

Mr. Sokolovic said his amendment was *"to approve the budget pending the city transfers \$1.663 million over to the*

*Board of Education as part of the MBR for the '19-'20 school year."* The amendment was seconded by Ms. Pereira.

The amendment was approved by a 5-3 vote. Voting in favor were members Allen, Lombard, Pereira, Sokolovic and Kennedy. Voting in opposition were members Martinez, Weldon and Illingworth.

Mr. Weldon said the motion is now to approve the budget gap as presented by Ms. Siegel, with the elimination of number 3, adding 20, and reinstating 36 in transportation, and with the requirement that the city credit \$1.663 million to the MBR.

Ms. Pereira said at this point the City Council would only have to appropriate \$1.463 million because \$200,000 could be handled via journal entry.

Ms. Pereira said she believed Mayor Ganim would accept the expenditures as part of the MBR. Ms. Martinez agreed.

Mr. Weldon summarized the motion to accept the budget gap plan as presented by Ms. Siegel, minus Item 31, adding 20(TAG program), and reinstating 36, the transportation, and with the requirement that the city credit \$1.463 million to the board in the MBR.

The motion was approved by a 7-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Kennedy, Pereira, Sokolovic, Martinez, Illingworth, Allen and Lombard. Mr. Weldon was opposed.

Mr. Sokolovic moved to recess the meeting for five minutes. The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

The meeting was recessed at 8:22 p.m.

The meeting was reconvened at 8:33 p.m.

Ms. Martinez, Mr. Kennedy, and Mr. Illingworth were not present.

Mr. Weldon said the next item on bus transportation was now a moot point because we have to wait to see what the city will do with respect to the MBR.

The next agenda item was on commodity and commercial bids. John Garrity, nutrition director, was present.

Ms. Pereira asked Mr. Garrity to send only the two or three top bids with a cover sheet from the department telling why the bidder was chosen. If the more expensive bid is chosen, the justification should be provided.

Mr. Garrity requested approval of the bids submitted to the board.

Ms. Pereira said she understood New Haven used an ordinance for nutrition bids that included minority business provisions.

Mr. Weldon said federally funded items cannot have a geographical preference and the city's ordinance would not be permitted. He said New Haven may not have a geographic preference.

Mr. Garrity said the items highlighted in yellow were the recommended awards, which in some cases are higher priced.



In response to a question, Mr. Garrity said he made the selections and determined on some items to go with a higher price to get better quality. One example of this was in the bid for meatballs.

Ms. Pereira said last year Wade's Dairy was selected even though it was \$50,000 higher. She noted this year the entire bid would go to Cream-O-Land of New Jersey. Mr. Garrity said other than driver turnover, the company's deliveries were satisfactory.

In response to a question, Mr. Garrity said it would cost \$68,479 more to select Wade's Dairy.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *"to accept the recommendations made by Mr. Garrity on the commercial and commodity bids."* The motion was seconded by Mr. Lombard.

The motion was approved by a 4-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Lombard, Allen, Weldon and Sokolovic. Ms. Pereira abstained. She said she did not have enough information on the bids.

The next agenda item was discussion and possible action on signatory authority for the Connecticut State Education Department Bureau of Health, Nutrition, Family Services, Adult Education, Child Nutrition Programs. Mr. Weldon said this was a change in signatory authority since Dr. Johnson is no longer the superintendent. He said authorized signatories would include Mr. Testani, the board's secretary and Ms. Siegel.

Mr. Garrity said such signature is needed on his department's claim for reimbursement.

Mr. Weldon moved *“to approve Mr. Testani being granted signatory authority for the Connecticut State Education Department Bureau of Health, Nutrition, Family Services, Adult Education, Child Nutrition Programs.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Pereira and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was the rental of the Harding High soccer field.

Mr. Testani said after research by Mr. Wallack, there will be no custodial costs unless something needs to be opened on the weekend; no police or security costs would be incurred. He said the negotiation on the rent was underway and an agreement was close. He described the proposed rent as a pretty generous offer by Beach Side.

Mr. Testani said he did some reference check on Beach Side’s rentals of other facilities and heard favorable things.

Ms. Pereira said the committee discussed having the proceeds placed in the district’s athletic programs. Mr. Testani said he would like to see the money put into athletics as an addition and not in place of other monies.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said Mr. Wallack’s recommendation is to avoid the use of a portable toilet.

Mr. Testani said once an agreement is reached, the attorneys would review it . He said there would be an insurance rider of \$2 million.

Ms. Allen moved *“to authorize Mr. Testani to negotiate a rental agreement with Beach Side of Connecticut Soccer Club, Incorporated.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said it would come back to the board for final approval.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:54 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod