

Wednesday, August 19, 2020

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held August 19, 2020, at Bridgeport Regional Vocational Aquaculture School and by video call, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 5:05 p.m. Present were members Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Hernan Illingworth, Secretary Bobbi Brown, Joseph Sokolovic, Sybil Allen, and Chris Taylor. Albert Benejan and Joe Lombard arrived subsequently as noted.

Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

Mr. Weldon said he agreed to hold a special meeting on an item submitted by Mr. Taylor for closing the district in favor of a full distance model. He said he subsequently was informed by counsel that it was his opinion that such an action would be against the law, and that was confirmed by the state Department of Education.

Mr. Benejan arrived at the meeting.

Mr. Weldon said he advised Mr. Taylor that he and two other members had the right to compel a special meeting of the board and that was done.

Mr. Taylor thanked the chair for scheduling the meeting and his board colleagues. He said he did not feel comfortable with reopening the schools at this point. He said he has talked to bus drivers, paras, teachers, and security officers. He noted many businesses and 999 Broad Street are closed, while the public was not present at this meeting. He

said New Haven and Chicago were not going to open their public schools. He admitted he did not have the votes to accomplish the closure, but he suggested Bridgeport not be the guinea pig for a state that does not fund us. He said he hoped the board could make a collaborative effort that works for everybody.

Mr. Benejan said he agreed with Mr. Taylor. He said this was nothing personal, but caring about kids. He said he lost a relative from the virus

Ms. Martinez said she supported both the school opening and those who want their children to learn remotely. She said the voice of staff members does matter. She said the district had created a safe plan to reopen and she agreed to the meeting so there would be information and to have voices heard that have particular concerns.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said he did not conduct a survey of teachers because he did not feel it necessary to them on whether they would be willing to come back to their jobs.

Ana Batista, the BEA president, said she received about 700 responses to the union's teacher survey.

Ms. Martinez said the voice of the teachers outside the building still matter to her. She had concerns about teachers with low immune systems or who take care of a handicapped child or family member at home. Ms. Batista said teacher safety is key. She said those with safety concerns have to go through a process with human resources depending on their health condition.

The superintendent said health accommodations have to go through human resources. He said as of yesterday about twenty teachers had requested accommodations and they will be looked at individually. He said caring for someone at home does not qualify under the Americans with Disability Act. He noted employees on FMLA are not paid.

In response to a question, Supt, Testani said the district is looking at how many school-aged children of teachers who are on remote learning can be accommodated somewhere in the district, with supervision, at a small fee.

Ms. Batista said the union was in the process of negotiating an MOU. She expressed concern that in a school like Batalla, which is close to capacity, if the number of attending students was over fifty percent. She said with the hybrid plan a lot of teachers don't have a place to bring their own children, which is why Mr. Testani is trying to develop a plan in this area. The superintendent said he is working with Lighthouse to provide the child care services for the teachers.

Mr. Taylor said he believed the superintendent had put together a fabulous plan.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the claim that Batalla and Marin Schools were at 80 percent capacity for in-person attendance was totally inaccurate. As of today, Batalla had 366 students opting for in-person learning. He said he understood New Haven was late in ordering PPE, unlike Bridgeport, and they presented that argument at the state level.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the district was still waiting for answers from parents as to whether they wish to have their children use bus transportation.

Mr. Sokolovic said student safety was not black and white/yes or no. He said children who are not allowed to attend to school are also in danger, including by suicide. He said more children are at risk of child abuse by not attending school. He said she believed the reopening plan would be safe for children.

Mr. Sokolovic said the safety of teachers was very important. He said the superintendent had described all the PPE and products that have been purchased. He said he is afraid every day he goes to work at the New York City Transit Authority, where many employees have died. He noted he was sending his son to school and he expected teachers to enforce mask wearing. He said he believed some of the teachers outside are legitimately afraid because they don't have all the information. He said some teachers are under the impression they're going to have twenty or thirty kids in a classroom, which is not the case.

In response to a a question, Supt. Testani said a COVID test is a snapshot in time. He said the rapid test – the antigen test – is not accurate and is given to people who are sick, so doctors know how to treat them. He said there is a twenty to thirty percent chance there will be a false negative or false positive. The PCR molecular test results take several days up to a week to be received. You could be negative the day of the test and the positive the day you get the results and not even know. He said unlike the NBA, which operates in a bubble, we do not have the capacity to test everybody, every day, nor the ability to force people to take tests.

Supt. Testani said phone calls are being made every day to determine the choices of parents. It is unknown exactly how many students are in the district currently. He said there are zero classes that have as many as twenty students scheduled to attend in person.

In response to a question, the superintendent said building subs were being assigned, as well as a pool of substitute teachers exclusively for the district. A substitute might monitor a class with a teacher at home participating remotely if they're available to do it.

Ms. Brown said we still don't know all the answers about the COVID virus. She said she understood both sides of the issue. She noted the board was not the experts on the virus. She said she supported the teachers outside. She added no one person had the answer to what we were facing as a team.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said filters in HVAC systems are changed frequently, more that what is recommended.

Mr. Illingworth said we had to rely on information from professionals. He noted the data shows the rate is under one percent and the city's health director supports the reopening. He said he has seen the PPE that has been stockpiled by the district. He said the administration had put a lot of work into getting ready.

Mr. Illingworth said he appreciated staff and parents who had reached out about the issue. He said the governor has put us in a spot to reopen the schools. He said the superintendent would not be able to convince the Commissioner of Education to keep the district closed to in-

person learning, particularly after losing 30 percent of last year. He said the district had a good plan and keeping students home had a negative impact. He added that the health director will be monitoring the situation in regard to outbreaks.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said there will be a nurse in every school, every day. Every school has to designate an isolation room for any student or staff member that exhibits symptoms. He said work on the bus routes is delayed based on survey responses. There will be conversations with the bus company to discuss the need to add or reduce routes or add different tiers. He said high school busing should be fine given the hybrid model, which will allow adding more buses to elementary routes to keep social distancing.

Supt. Testani said the district was one of the first in March that closed schools. He said the district was very proactive as Fairfield County numbers started to grow.

Mr. Weldon said the purchase of PPE and the reopening task force shows the proactive approach in the district. He said the reopening plan was extensive and he thanked everyone who worked on it. He said the plan is nimble enough to be switched on a dime if we have to.

Mr. Lombard joined the meeting.

Mr. Lombard said he had been listening to the meeting while he was working. He said he wanted to echo Mr. Illingworth's comments about the position of the governor and the commissioner about safely reopening schools. He said not reopening the schools would involve requesting a waiver from the state based on specific reasons, not just fear.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said a requirement to sign a waiver to attend to school was a fabrication often seen on social media. He said the only thing parents had to sign for was a copy of the remote learning expectations document.

Mr. Taylor apologized to the superintendent and his colleagues for any indication that he did not have the utmost faith in the board and the superintendent. He said he believed we had the best plan in the state and the best supplies of PPE. However, he said he initially thought the disease was a joke until he spoke with people who lost loved ones.

Mr. Taylor said he didn't think there would be any impact whether we start in September or October. He said he was not prepared to take the chance on a catastrophic situation if school reopens in September. He said he represents a very ethnic community, including undocumented people, who did not fill out the survey. He said Stanley Lord of the NAACP indicated people in the black community do not want to return to school. He said everyone he had talked told them they would be willing to wait until late September or October. He said this would allow the board to see how the districts that opened up do.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said he believed anyone who contracts the virus is covered by some specific legislation, but he would need a more detailed answer from human resources.

In response to questions, Supt. Testani said there are no cops in schools as the SROs patrol the areas around schools. He said sick children who come to school will be

taken to the isolation area immediately for evaluation. He said reports are made to the superintendent and the health director about students in isolation. He said most parents did not submit comments when they submitted survey responses.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said he believed the district would have to go before the review panel at the state if it chose to start the year fully digital. He said he would like to know what metric would be used if October was chosen as the opening date. He said the infection rate in the state and in Bridgeport was under one percent.

Mr. Weldon said the data we have indicates the district is ready to open. The superintendent said he had received inquiries about teachers who were traveling to other states. He said basketball courts in the city are full and Marin's football field is packed. He said other parents are objecting to canceling sports.

Mr. Weldon said if with all this activity the infection rate is below one percent, how will opening school change that.

Mr. Taylor said Mr. Testani could tell the state board that the board told him not to reopen the schools and that is all he would have to tell them. He said this was not personal and he would make sure the superintendent had the backup of Bridgeport people. He said if there were no episodes in thirty days, he would personally schedule a meeting to reopen and support it one hundred percent. He said Bridgeport should say it was doing something different and out of the box and give it thirty days. He offered to accompany Mr. Testani to the state board.



Supt. Testani said many districts were opening next week, so there would be some data available on how things are going.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the IEP would direct accommodations for any special education child who cannot wear a mask.

Ms. Martinez said this meeting was incredible and made a whole lot of difference. She noted a lot of people were watching the meeting remotely.

Mr. Taylor moved *“to close the Bridgeport Public School system in favor of remote learning until furtherer notice.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan.

The motion was defeated by a 6-3 vote. Voting in favor were members Benejan, Taylor, and Allen. Voting in opposition were members Martinez, Sokolovic, Brown, Weldon, Lombard, and Illingworth.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 6:24 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod