

Monday, September 27, 2021

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held September 27, 2021, at Bridgeport Regional Aquaculture Science and Technology Education Center, 60 St. Stephens Road, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 7:35 p.m. Present were members Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Bobbi Brown, Secretary Joseph Lombard, Sybil Allen, Sosimo Fabian, Jessica Martinez, Joseph Sokolovic, and Albert Benejan.

Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

Mr. Benejan requested a moment of silence for the passing of Leola Young, PAC president of Claytor School; Jamie Colon Rivera, a school-bus driver for the district; and Jamel Hayden, a Central High student.

Ms. Brown asked for a round of applause for the student representatives joining their first board meeting in a very long time.

APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:

Ms. Brown moved to approve the minutes of the Regular Meeting of August 23, 2021. The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen. The motion was approved by a 7-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Lombard, Brown, Allen, Sokolovic, Fabian, and Benejan. Ms. Martinez abstained.

Mr. Benejan moved to approve the minutes of the Special Meeting of August 23, 2021. The motion was seconded by

Ms. Allen. The motion was approved by a 7-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Lombard, Brown, Allen, Sokolovic, Fabian, and Benejan. Ms. Martinez abstained.

Ms. Brown moved to approve the minutes of the Special Meeting of September 15, 2021. The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen. The motion was approved by a 6-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Brown, Allen, Sokolovic, Fabian, and Benejan. Ms. Martinez and Mr. Lombard abstained.

CHAIR REPORT:

Mr. Weldon introduced the board's student representatives. He said the purpose of the student representatives was to contribute their thoughts to the meetings and to learn from the process.

Mr. Weldon recognized Brett Gustafson, the principal of Curiale School. Mr. Weldon said in the week before school opened, he received a communication from a parent that the family was visiting Afghanistan and conditions deteriorated and they were not sure if they would be back. Mr. Gustafson played an integral in facilitating communication between the family and forces working to extract them. The family was able to make it back to Bridgeport safe and sound.

Mr. Gustafson introduced the family to the board. He said it brought him joy to have them back at Curiale School.

COMMITTEE REPORTS:

Ms. Brown said the Ad Hoc Committee on Districtwide Branding will meet on October 20th.

Mr. Weldon said the Contracts Committee met last week and there are items on the agenda this evening.

Dr. Fabian said the Educational Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Committee has not met recently, but he would like to have one last meeting before he leaves the board to put together a commitment statement.

Mr. Weldon said the Facilities Committee would meet on October 4th, including a presentation on the work done over the summer. Mr. Benejan requested a presentation by Lt. Grech on security. Ms. Martinez said she would like to hear a discussion to fix the heat in the schools during the summer period.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Finance Committee met last week and there are agenda items tonight. The next meeting will be on October 13th.

Mr. Weldon said the Governance Committee would meet on October 4th and will discuss the newly revised student handbook.

Mr. Weldon said the Personnel Committee met and made recommendations to the superintendent. Supt. Testani said the new principal at Park City Magnet is Deanna Chuka, formerly an assistant principal at Naugatuck; and the new assistant principal at Fairchild Wheeler is Michael Kennedy, a veteran science teacher from Fairfield Public Schools.

Mr. Benejan said the Students & Families Committee met on September 23rd and covered a long agenda. He said the next meeting would be on October 21st.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Teaching & Learning Committee met and received good news with out-of-district placements reduced by eight students, which has not happened in a very long time. The backlog of IEPs caused by Covid has also been reduced. He said staffing is still an issue because the district does not have adequate funding to pay teachers what they deserve. The next meeting will be on October 19th.

SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT/AGENDA:

Supt. Testani said there have been losses to the SRO division of the police department, which is an area of concern. He said he has worked on this with Chief Garcia on this. He said the SROs did an amazing job during the pandemic, but there is now a lack of communication from that division.

The superintendent said there are staffing concerns in the area of paraprofessionals. There are currently 55 teacher vacancies, including special education positions. He said he has consulted with the state, but no solution has been offered. He said if a solution is not found next week we may have to take matters into our own hands to make sure a certified educator is in front of children.

Supt. Testani said there is even more concern in the area of speech and language pathology and school psychologists. He said we are working hard with agencies in these areas, along with efforts to obtain school nurses.

The superintendent said retention is a major issue, with a significant number of educators lost to other districts because of economics. He said both the urban and rural districts are being pillaged by the suburban districts who can offer more in salaries. He said he has spoken to the offices

of Senator Murphy, Rep. Himes, and members of the state delegation, along with the CEA, on this issue. He said he would continue to work on this until a solution is found.

Supt. Testani said there is an average difference of \$10,000 in pay for educators in the district and as long as this exists we will continue to lose educators, particularly since 40 percent of the certified staff are in their first six years.

In response to a question, the superintendent said the easiest solution is direct payment to teachers, similar to forgiveness on student loans. He said he has spoken to Dr. Steve Perry of Capital Prep on ways to transition people who could be educators into the profession. He noted the barriers to certification in public schools and the ability of non-certified educators to teach in Catholic and private schools.

Supt. Testani said the district opened a welcome center. Over 400 families have come through in less than two months.

The superintendent said there are some transportation issues, but nothing out of the ordinary to the normal start of school. He gave credit to the folks at We Transport.

Supt. Testani said Student Success Day will be October 6th. He said Read Aloud Day is alive and well and will take place on October 20th. He said September's theme for social-emotional learning is respect and goal setting; October will cover antibullying. The board will receive a monthly newsletter from the SEL office.

The superintendent thanked a friend from Urbani Landscaping and M & M Fencing, who worked with Craig Nadrizny of the city, to donate time and equipment to build a

new baseball diamond at Tisdale School for Little Leaguers. The field was needed as a result of an act of violence at Newfield Park.

Supt. Testani said a teacher attendance incentive was just negotiated with the BEA. Up to \$250 may be earned over the course of the year.

The superintendent said air purification units are installed in almost every cafeteria and on Friday the first shipment of classroom systems will begin arriving. Water filling stations have been installed in high schools and work is beginning on elementary schools.

Supt. Testani said there had been some vandalism due to the TikTok challenges, but not as much as in neighboring districts.

The superintendent reported 85 percent of bus drivers are fully vaccinated, with 10 percent more having received one shot. The rest of the district staff includes 354 people in testing protocol.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said ESSER funds are paying for the attendance incentive, with the approximate cost currently unknown, but minimal. He said it would be worth every penny.

In response to a question, the superintendent said there were 15 SROs at one time, 9 last year, and currently 3 assigned. Mr. Benejan urged the police officers be returned because bad things can happen very quickly. The superintendent noted he cannot assign police officers because it is the chief's job. He said he will keep requesting coverage.

Mr. Benejan said he was concerned because parents driving near schools are not paying attention to stop signs.

Mr. Benejan said he was former PTSO president at Bassick High for four years. He said only three board members helped him a lot – Mr. Sokolovic, Ms. Martinez and Mr. Illingworth. He said he worried about communication and the support of parent leaders at schools. He urged the superintendent let people know this.

The superintendent said we have two dedicated staff members now to support parents. He said recently when a complaint was made by a PAC president he personally went out to the school to resolve the problem. He said it would be a process. He noted it takes time for relationships and partnerships to develop.

Ms. Martinez urged there be training for parent leaders. She said PLTI is incredible training.

Mr. Benejan thanked the executive directors for always helping him with the parents.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said we've been working through some issues where there are safety concerns in sending children back to school, but they have not been widespread. He said what is being reported in the news and social media does not help us. He said students seem happy to be back in school buildings.

Ms. Brown said the superintendent's Facebook Live events were very helpful. The superintendent said in October there will be weekly interactions again.

Mr. Benejan said the open house at Winthrop School today was amazing.

In response to a question from a student representative, the superintendent explained the role of SROs and their role in patrolling outside schools. He said since 2012 the district has been recognized for reducing the amount of arrests due to the training received by SROs.

Another student discussed the extreme heat in some school buildings. Ms. Martinez said she would like to see students assigned to board committees to address these issues. She said she has discussed the heat issues with Mr. Garcia.

Supt. Testani noted the school year has to be a certain length, so you're either going to get warm days at the beginning or end of the school year. He said another option is to eliminate vacations during the school year, which can be tricky. Ms. Martinez suggested seeking grants to get every school air-conditioned.

Another student urged the snack bars be returned to the high schools. The superintendent said he was not aware they were not open and would try to open them by Monday.

NEW BUSINESS:

The next agenda item was on an agreement with Footsteps to Brilliance. Anna Masoutis was present from Footsteps to Brilliance. Supt. Testani said the matter was discussed in the Teaching & Learning Committee. He said he learned of the program through discussion with Dr. Conner, superintendent of Middletown schools, and learned of its impact on early literacy. All children in Bridgeport will have

access to the program. The app can be downloaded to any device and utilization does not require connectivity.

Dr. Fabian left the meeting.

In response to a question, Ms. Masoutis said the vision is to create a model innovation community, where pre-K children or younger can access content. She described how the app could help with positive interactions with police officers.

In response to a question from the audience, Supt. Testani said the district had a device for every student and parents can also download the app. He said the program will start with pre-K, including students at community sites. Ms. Masoutis said Footsteps to Brilliance has been doing this nationally and there are many options.

A member of the audience suggested the idea be presented to the Library Board. The superintendent said once the purchase is finalized it will be pushed out citywide, with the marketing plan still under discussion.

Ms. Brown moved *“that we step into an agreement with Footsteps to Brilliance for an online literacy program.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on a solicitation for athletic training services. James Denton, director of adult education, was present. He said it was a standard RFP through the city to obtain a contract for athletic trainers for high school sports teams. Supt. Testani said it was critical because the district is under a temporary agreement until January with the current provider and the provider is struggling to cover all the

needed services. It is hoped to find a provider that can cover all three schools for all events.

Ms. Allen moved “*to issue a solicitation for athletic training services as presented in this RFP.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on a contract with Access Educational Services to provide an afterschool program at Classical Studies Magnet Academy. Lindsey Davis, principal, said the funds come from the Extended School Hours Grant. She said the school has been working with Access for several years.

Ms. Martinez moved “*to enter into this agreement.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on agreement with the Carver Foundation to provide an afterschool program at Classical Studies Magnet Academy. Ms. Davis noted it was an in-person program this year, not virtual. She said the Carver Foundation’s work is for 3rd to 6th grade students. She said they supplement the grant funding with fundraising. There are enrichment activities and academic support.

Mr. Benejan moved “*to enter into this agreement with the Carver Foundation.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on the FY2021-22 operating budget. Marlene Siegel, chief financial officer, said the target to balance the budget number was \$17 million. The four components are state and city revenue; grant revenue; the Internal Service Fund; and deficit prevention mode.

Ms. Siegel said additional state revenue is about \$1.5 million; city revenue is \$2 million. Grant revenue, where the district is able to charge various services that would be in the strategic plan, is about \$2 million.

Ms. Siegel said the Internal Service Fund (ISF) covers about \$9.5 million. She said deficit prevention mode has been discussed on many occasions and about \$2 million in savings is projected.

Ms. Siegel said the four components combined result in a 2021-22 budget.

Ms. Siegel described the funds available through the ISF, including a \$2 million surplus before 2018-19; a deposit at the end of 2019-20 of \$6.5 million; a deposit at the end of 2020-21, the pandemic year, of approximately \$11.7 million. She noted the use of \$9.5 million at this point is just a projection, but based on current trends she was optimistic it would be lower.

Ms. Siegel said ESSER funds would be used to meet needs arising out of the pandemic and strength our infrastructure so the district will emerge after three years with a much stronger foundation.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said ESSER funds are always used in accordance with the guidelines of the funding. There are situations where items covered by ESSER funding would have to be funded out of the operating budget if ESSER did not exist. She said the technology aspects of ESSER address the digital divide.

Ms. Martinez moved “*to approve the 2021-22 operating budget as presented the CFO.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

The next item on the agenda was on pooling ARP and ESSER funds with the City of Bridgeport through joint Youth and Education committee. Supt. Testani said he was approached by city officials prior to the district’s application for ARP/ESSER being submitted to the state. The city suggesting matching dollars to broaden support to kids through community agencies. He said the community agencies often have lower operating costs in running a program than the district would have.

The superintendent said because of the large response to the RFP the city has upped their contribution to \$3.5 million per year over the three years. The board would not have to match this but maintain a \$2 million commitment per year. He said this was presented by the Finance Committee and was a great opportunity to collaborate with the city and involve community-based agencies in supporting kids.

Mr. Benejan moved “*to approve pooling district ARP and ESSER funds with the City of Bridgeport through the joint Youth and Education committee.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez and unanimously approved.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:53 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod