

Tuesday, September 21, 2021

MINUTES OF THE TEACHING & LEARNING COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held September 21, 2021, at Central High School, 1 Lincoln Boulevard, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:32 p.m. Present were Chair Joseph Sokolovic, and member Joe Lombard. Board member Albert Benejan was present.

Mr. Lombard moved to approve the minutes of the meeting of May 25, 2021. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

Mr. Lombard moved to switch the order of items two and three. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on Footsteps to Brilliance, creating a model innovation in Bridgeport for early literacy.

Ilene Rosenthal, CEO of Footsteps to Brilliance; Kathy Maximov, chief academic officer; and Eugene Narciso, chief operating officer, were present.

Anna Masoutis of Footsteps to Brilliance presented to the board.

Supt. Testani said he heard Superintendent Michael Conner of Middletown describe the impact of the program in that community. He said Middletown created a campaign around the early literacy initiative. He said discussions have been underway with Footsteps to Brilliance. He said the program

does not require wi-fi connectivity at home, which is a huge barrier for some Bridgeport children.

The superintendent said there was a pilot this summer at Claytor School to monitor how kids use the program. He said the results showed that kids liked the program and thrived. He said literacy is the gateway to academic success for children.

Supt. Testani said the plan is start this in pre-K and slowly roll it up into K to 2 classrooms. He said he believed it would create immense community/parent partnerships with the public schools. He said he was excited to see what the impact of this would be several years down the road, including with regard to the achievement gap.

Mr. Narciso said Footsteps to Brilliance had unique tools that scale literacy citywide. He said the marketing team will create an initiative, including a logo. He said the idea is to leverage mobile devices that parents already own to give access to birth through 3rd grade materials in English and Spanish.

Mr. Narciso described marketing efforts used in other cities that would be implemented in Bridgeport localized to the city, including a national press conference. He said Dr. Conner reported that Middletown is finding the program helps with the reduction of classifying students as special education.

In response to a question, Mr. Narciso said the demographics in Middletown were 20 percent African-American, 20 percent Latinx, 45.5 percent white and 5 percent Asian, with free and reduced lunches at 50 percent.

In response to a question, Mr. Narciso said the largest district Footsteps to Brilliance works with is a county in California and stretches from the Las Vegas border to Los Angeles.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said ARP and ESSER funds would be used to fund the program. He described how pre-K students in community sites would get access through devices.

Mr. Narciso described how the parents' devices that are enrolled in the program will obtain apps when they are connected to wi-fi. He said no advertising would appear on the apps.

Ms. Maximov said Footsteps to Brilliance supports learning everywhere, including in the classroom, and wherever parents happen to be. She said the program includes a bilingual help desk. The apps include books, games, activities and writing experiences. She described the research behind the curriculum that is presented. The program is entirely bilingual in English and Spanish.

Ms. Maximov demonstrated a typical offering available through the program, including the ability of students to apply knowledge from books. She added there is access to thousands of books. Re-reading books adds to vocabulary, so there are features built in to encourage reading more than once. She demonstrated the bilingual features in the app on the screen.

Ms. Maximov demonstrated how students can write and create their book, with artwork provided.

In response to a question, Ms. Maximov said the children can work independently on the app or work together with parents. There is additional information available just for parents. She described the effectiveness of the program in teaching English to students in Third World countries.

Mr. Lombard asked how the five-year plan fit in with the three-year limit on contracts. Mr. Sokolovic noted the last two years are basically bonus years, so it would not lock the district into five years. Supt. Testani said the ARP/ESSER guidelines indicate we can spend money where services go beyond three years, up to six years.

Mr. Lombard moved *“to present to the full board the recommendation that we enter into an agreement with Footsteps to Brilliance creating a model innovation city in Bridgeport for early literacy for the period of five years.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was a special education update.

Dementred Young said the data presented outlined four years of data. There are nine out-of-district students currently; three of which are the result of court settlements.

Mr. Young said the summary of placements will be available on October 1st. Reevaluations that were missed have been reduced to 96; down from last year’s exorbitant number. He said there are 4,332 reevaluations that are current. There are 20 pending initial referrals to special education.

Supt. Testani said there is a crisis situation in filling support staff in critical positions such as school psychologists, speech and language pathologists, along with special

education teachers. He said this is not just a Bridgeport problem. He said charter schools are also straining services. He noted there are six charter schools in Bridgeport, two of which contain two buildings. The district has no control over the enrollment in charter schools. He said he believed some charter schools wait until after October 1st to release students because that date is when funding is determined.

The superintendent said over 75 percent of charter school students required transportation.

Mr. Sokolovic said the expansion of charter school dilutes the resources available. He said he believed there was an inherent problem with the funding of schools that causes charter schools to be sought after.

Supt Testani noted a former superintendent in Bridgeport and a Commissioner of Education supported the opening of charter schools in the city.

The superintendent said retaining critical staff would be made easier by increasing funding that could be directed to salaries. He said there should be a better pathway to certification for teaching in Connecticut.

In response to a question, Mr. Young said the direct supervisor of social workers in the buildings is the principal, however, he evaluates all social workers as director of social worker. He said the new 17 social workers all have mentors and have received professional development. Building administrators facilitate PPTs with everyone else playing their roles. He said there will also be professional development for building administrators on PPTs.

Mr. Young he said if the law is broken on PPTs there is professional development and counseling and feedback given.

Mr. Benejan said he could forward information to Mr. Young about what is going on in schools and the job not being done properly. He said he was glad Mr. Young acknowledged that more training is needed.

Mr. Young said described how the continuum of services is being streamlined with supervisors. He said eight children had been brought back to the district from out-of-district placements.

Supt. Testani said sometimes you have to invest in a department in order to reap the benefits at some point, which is the case in special education. He said he found it hard to believe the out-of-district programs are doing anything better than we can do in Bridgeport.

The next agenda item was a Covid update. Supt. Testani said the governor's order begins on Monday so vaccine cards are being collected. A signed attestation of authenticity is now required and signatures are being collected.

Mr. Lombard said he believed someone who would submit a fraudulent card would also submit a fraudulent attestation. Supt. Testani said he learned that there would be a download of vaccine information from VAMS into a state database that will send lists to districts, which could be a check on such activity.

The superintendent said the district was up to about 80 percent fully vaccinated staff, leaving about 200 people who would have to undergo testing. He said this was an

encouraging number. Discussions about discipline for those who violate the testing protocols with BEA have taken place.

Supt. Testani said positive cases are popping up, but not in every building. There are no severe cases among staff or students. He said this indicates the virus is spread in the community, not in schools. He said it would be a game-changer if children aged 5 to 11 are approved for the Pfizer vaccine. He said there were misconceptions in the community about the vaccine.

The superintendent said teaching and learning is much more normal with in-person attendance in school. He said three feet is the recommended distancing, but it is not employed in the cafeterias. Air purifying systems are used in cafeterias. He noted the positivity rate in Bridgeport has gone down since schools have opened.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani there were parents who requested homeschooling, but not as many as last year. Principals will meet with homeschooling parents to explain expectations and set up times to review portfolios of homeschool progress.

Mr. Benejan said Mr. Testani would be surprised by a lot that goes on schools. He described a situation where a director took care of a problem with a student. Supt. Testani said students have more access to healthy habits in schools and they have routines and structure to a greater extent than in the community and in the home.

Mr. Benejan said he would not pursue his questions because he was upset. The superintendent said he did not want to upset anyone and noting he never said there was no Covid

in the schools. He said Covid exists in stores and in people's homes and other places.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:03 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

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