

Wednesday, April 21, 2021

MINUTES OF THE FINANCE COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, April 21, 2021, by video conference call, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:02 p.m. Present were members Chair Joseph Sokolovic, Sybil Allen, and Bobbi Brown. Board member Albert Benejan was present. Board member John Weldon joined the meeting subsequently as indicated.

Supt. Michael J. Testani joined the meeting subsequently as noted.

Ms. Brown moved to approve the committee's minutes of March 10, 2021. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on Covid grants and allowable expenditures.

Marlene Siegel, chief financial officer, displayed the state guidelines for ESSER 2 on the screen. She said all allocations must have a connection to Covid, either preventative or to remediate the learning loss. The funding is not intended for basic, ongoing operating expenses of a school district.

Ms. Siegel said the state announced state-level priorities for education in April. The four priorities are (1) academic supports, learning loss, learning acceleration, and recovery; (2) family and community connections; (3) school safety and social-emotional wellbeing of the whole student and of

school staff; (4) remote learning, staff development, and the digital divide.

Mr. Weldon joined the meeting.

Ms. Siegel said the ESSER 2 guidelines added further clarification to acceptable school facility repairs and improvements.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the funds do not cover escalating fixed costs such as salary increases, healthcare and MERF contributions, and increased special education expenditures. She said there is an increase of nine special education teachers in next year's budget, which is correlated to learning loss during the pandemic.

The next agenda item was on expenditures to date on the ESSER 1 grant.

Ms. Siegel said the document displayed was an updated version of earlier information presented to the board. It covers the CARES Act and CRF grant(which expired at the end of December 2020). The two allocations totaled about \$12.8 million.

Ms. Siegel said the report indicates expenditures and commitments of about \$11.7 million, leaving an approximate balance of \$1.8 million. The CARES Act or ESSER 1 expires September 30, 2022.

Ms. Siegel said new items in the report include interactive boards for the Fairchild Wheeler campus totaling \$306,000 for 84 boards. Portions of the new math curriculum for Grades 9 and 10 were charged to the grant. There is a placeholder for about 2,000 new math graphing calculators.

Ms. Siegel said there is also a projected expense for digital services for social studies.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said there are about twelve elementary schools without assistant principals, which are under 500 students or close to 500 students. She said it is planned to restore an assistant principal to Fairchild Wheeler which was left vacant due to Covid.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the smaller schools do not need an assistant superintendent. She noted some schools have as few as 200 students. She said the schools with over 400 students without an assistant principal are Discovery, High, Madison, Multicultural, Park City, based on projected registers for next year. She noted the superintendent's plan has temporary evaluation support over the next three years at schools without assistant principals.

Ms. Siegel said a shortfall in the nutrition budget of \$691,000 has been charged to the CARES Act grant.

Ms. Siegel said the \$1.8 million remaining will be used in the next fiscal year for services in the strategic educational plan that are ESSER-eligible. She described areas where those funds will be spent.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel confirmed that funds that rollover do so along with the rules and regulations attached to the grant funding.

The next agenda item was on the preliminary plans for ESSER 3.

Ms. Siegel said she shared a draft with the board based on an initial application. She noted ESSER 2 funding is \$44.6 million, and runs from July 1, 2020 to September 30, 2023.

She said CARES or ESSER 1 funding will be used first.

Ms. Siegel said the document is divided into personnel and non-personnel items. The personnel section includes new positions, including a grants manager position. She noted the costs reflect that this is a two-year grant. Other positions added are an assistant principal at Fairchild Wheeler and Waltersville; a district director of teaching, learning and professional development, which is currently posted; a district coordinator of athletics and intramurals; and a special education specialist.

Ms. Siegel described increases in the summer program and extended day for special education, and a new transition-to-high school program.

Ms. Siegel said there would be stipends for teacher leaders and university interns, as well as elementary academic support instructors in 22 schools. District family connection teams would be established, including social workers and guidance counselors; as well as additional social workers and counselors for direct school support, for a total of five additional social workers and five additional counselors. ESSER 3 will add five more social workers and five more counselors.

Ms. Siegel said there is a reserve fund for professional development, with the specific activities not yet defined.

Ms. Siegel said funding will also be used for support for the copier network; funding for summer transportation costs; as

well as possible contracted social work support and special education support. She said the building sub program will be continued at a reduced level from the current situation.

Ms. Siegel said the current plan does not call for kindergarten sub paraprofessionals because additional teacher positions are being added to the non-magnet schools.

Ms. Siegel said there is \$7.2 million for technology renewal on hold to cover remote learning, staff learning and the digital divide.

Ms. Siegel said all the categories have reserve funds built in.

Ms. Siegel said there are allocations to the supplement the Teacher's Choice program and paper delivery to schools.

Ms. Siegel said there is additional funding for safe school operations, including school facilities.

Ms. Siegel said the facilities department has done an analysis in the areas of potential HVAC replacements, door repairs and replacements, custodial equipment, environmental services, and window replacements. She said Mr. Garcia is identifying a skilled engineering firm to conduct an assessment of the HVAC situation. Projected facilities needs are in the range of \$20 million to \$25 million.

Ms. Siegel said this is the initial plan, with modifications likely in the next few months and in the course of the next year. She said no ESSER 2 funds have been expended, with the application to be submitted tomorrow.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the replacement of smart boards is a major effort and she did not know if every school currently had smart boards. She said the technology renewal funds are intended to include smart boards.

Mr. Sokolovic said he was concerned that a school like Batalla will have classrooms without smart boards while Fairchild Wheeler will have one in every classroom. Ms. Siegel noted the installation pace is dictated by the ability of the vendors to meet the demand. She said she was not an expert in this area, but she understood that schools have smart boards, but many are old, which may or may not be functioning.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the plan is to add an additional assistant principal to Fairchild Wheeler. She said there are twelve elementary schools without an assistant principal, including the magnet schools except for Classical Studies and Claytor. She said she believed the temporary assistant principal plan devised by the superintendent is the best strategy.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the schools with an enrollment of over 400 students without an assistant principal are Discovery, High Horizons, Madison, Multicultural, and Park City.

Mr. Sokolovic said he believed all schools with over an enrollment over 400 that do not have assistant principals should have one.

Ms. Brown moved to amend this presentation to add assistant principals to every school that has an enrollment of

over 400 students for the duration of the grants. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic.

Mr. Weldon said it was going down a slippery slope for the board to get into this level of detail through motions. He said the board used to do this and it put us in a dangerous situation. Mr. Sokolovic noted the board overturned a cut of the assistant principal to Fairchild Wheeler in the past. He said the board's review and approval of the budget are one of the three major responsibilities of the board. He said the board had not been involved in the budget as much he would like it to be because oversight is needed.

Mr. Weldon said the board reviews the budget, but does not develop it, and it tells staff generally where it wants resources placed as a matter of policy. He noted the board's budget had hundreds of lines.

Mr. Sokolovic said in order to approve the budget things needed to be changed. He said this was not micromanaging, but addressing senior-level executives with input. He said motions have the force of the board behind it.

Ms. Siegel said she recommended the motion be held until we have notification of ESSER 3 budget guidelines and the development of an ESSER 3 budget plan. She said the superintendent's plan calls for temporary assistant principal support to be shared among schools for teacher evaluation. She said since the board is responsible for a balanced budget she would give her own input and judgment. She said the ESSER 2 plan did not have room for additional assistant principal positions.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the deadline for submission of ESSER 2 is April 26th. She said if assistant principals were included in ESSER 2 there would have to be

reductions in other areas such as smart boards or the summer program.

Ms. Siegel said the superintendent would not change the plan for ESSER 2.

Mr. Sokolovic noted the timeline was tight and said he would withdraw his motion. The withdrawal was seconded by Ms. Brown and unanimously approved.

Mr. Sokolovic moved that all schools with over 400 students will have a fulltime assistant principal included in ESSER funding until such funding runs out.

Supt. Testani joined the meeting.

Mr. Sokolovic noted he withdrew his motion to modify the ESSER 2 submission and said schools with over 400 students had been without assistant principals for many years now. He said he favored the board mandating assistant principals in the ESSER 3 funding, with the board taking more responsibility for the budget.

Supt. Testani said he did not disagree with the idea that the schools needed additional support. He said the biggest difficulty is teacher evaluations. He said the magnet schools do not have the disciplinary problems that other schools do. He said the Fairchild Wheeler assistant principal is being restored because it is a large high school with a large number of staff to be evaluated. The school also faces some of the discipline issues that other high schools have. He said input into the budget is welcome from the board. He said if assistant principals were funded the people in these positions would take significant pay cuts if they have to return to the classroom when funding expires.

Mr. Sokolovic said five assistant principal positions could easily open up and allow those employees to retain their assistant principal status. He said the additional assistant principals were needed because of the additional stresses of Covid, the backlog of special education and other administrative duties such as family engagement.

In response to a question, the superintendent estimated the cost might be \$1.5 million over two years. He said he was not opposed to further discussion. He suggested one assistant principal might be more appropriate for the JFK Campus.

Mr. Sokolovic said he wanted proposals brought to the committee so we don't have to get into this late in the game again. The superintendent said he agreed.

Mr. Sokolovic said he believed every move made in the budget needs to be done through an equity lens. Supt. Testani said he agreed.

In response to a question, the superintendent said the goal is to replace every smart board in the district with new Promethean boards, which involves purchase and installation by multiple vendors.

Mr. Sokolovic withdrew the last motion. He noted the City Council goes line by line through its budget and the board should follow their example to some extent, without micromanaging.

Supt. Testani said his goal is to provide the students that have been given the least the most from funding. He said it was unfair in the past to put the board in the position to

decide what should be eliminated from the budget. He said he believed that was the responsibility of the superintendent.

Mr. Sokolovic said the prior superintendent brought cuts to the board that it refused to implement in favor of other cuts. Mr. Sokolovic and Supt. Testani said the issues should be worked through together to make sure kids get what they need.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said there have been a lot of discussions in the administration on ESSER 3 funding about developing arts opportunities, including pre-high school programs. He said a program could be developed such that other districts would want to send students to it. He said capital plans would also be addressed in ESSER 3.

Ms. Siegel noted the 44 teacher positions had to be continued during the second and third years with ESSER funding, along with further social workers and counselors.

The superintendent said the funding of university interns will be an excellent method of recruiting new teachers. He said he believed the funding in the area of social-emotional learning would be critical.

Supt. Testani said he hoped the board would see that the plan is very thoughtful and very methodical and focused on specific areas. He said there would be measurable goals, with data collected to make sure what we're doing is effective.

In response to a question, the superintendent said he would not want to fund the School Volunteer Association as is. He said a redesigned and restructured program was needed,

including expanding upon the responsibilities of whoever is in charge.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the full dollar amount from the federal government sounds like a lot of money, but per year it amounts to about \$2,000 per kid, per year. He said there is very little room for error. Flat-funding from the state and city creates a cliff in three to four years. He said if the city would not contribute two to four million a year now, it would not come up with \$25 million four years from now.

Mr. Sokolovic said the worst-case scenario might mean in 2025 going to advocate for a budget with the need of \$40 million and if not obtained, a cut of \$40 million in programs that exist today. He said he was seeing a train coming and our kids laying on the tracks, but the public does not realize it is coming yet.

Supt. Testani said the federal or state officials saying this will be covered down the road may not be in charge when the time comes. He said this was a scary thought because the kids and the staff will still need funding. Mr. Sokolovic noted politicians have been known to break their promises, especially funding schools.

The superintendent said he could put together an information sheet on what the district is facing.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the district continues to receive the Perkins Grant according to the guidelines of the grant. Mr. Benejan said he supported the program.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel described the grants Bassick High receives. Mr. Benejan said one of the grants provides aid to parents. He said he would provide further information via e-mail.

The next agenda item was on changes to the 2020-21 budget and the 2021-22 request.

Ms. Siegel said the fourth formal forecast of the fiscal year will be posted in the first week of May. A balanced condition continues to be projected and it is anticipated that there will not be a need to withdraw from the Internal Service Fund the \$2 million surplus.

Ms. Siegel said the projected shortfall in nutrition has been revised to \$2.8 million to \$3.6 million. The lower projection is the result of returning to full in-person instruction and the use of the CARES grant.

Ms. Siegel said the out-of-district cost cap was announced at 16.52 percent, which was extraordinarily good news. There are also a reduced number of out-of-district students.

Ms. Siegel provided a curriculum renewal update. About \$2.6 million has been spent to date, including math for Grades 9 to 10, math for Grades 2 to 5, literacy for Grades 7 and 8, and the ELL digital program. The funds are derived from multiple grants.

Ms. Siegel noted a newspaper article about a state proposal to reverse the governor's freeze on ECS and added funding to districts with higher numbers of low-income and ELL students.

Mr. Sokolovic noted the mayor's proposal is a zero dollar increase for education.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:12 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod