

Wednesday, May 8, 2019

MINUTES OF THE FINANCE COMMITTEE OF THE  
BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held May 8, 2019,  
at Bridgeport City Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace, Bridgeport,  
Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 5:40 p.m. Committee members present were Chair Jessica Martinez and Maria Pereira. Board member Joseph Sokolovic was present.

Supt. Dr. Aresta L. Johnson was present.

Ms. Pereira moved to approve the committee's minutes of April 10, 2019, with an edit. The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez. A correction was noted. The motion was unanimously approved.

Marlene Siegel, chief financial officer, reported on the 2018-19 budget. She said the April 30th fiscal forecast was completed and posted. Based on current projections, analysis of trends and utilization of all available fund sources, we do expect at this time that the district will achieve a balanced budget by year end. She said the budget remains in a precarious state due to the under-resourced condition, reserve funds at a minimal level and competing needs. There are multiple stress factors such as special education or emergency facility needs that could have a negative impact during the remainder of the fiscal year.

Ms. Siegel said the information provided on special education includes data as of May 1. The number of out-of-district students is 420, with a projected expense, is \$28.1

million, which is a 13.4 percent growth from last year to this year.

Ms. Siegel said the May 1, 2019, special education count is 3,666 or 17.89 percent, compared to 3,575 or 17 percent at the same point last year.

Ms. Siegel said the final state cap on out-of-district reimbursements was announced on April 12th at 26.38 percent. She cautioned the board that the unabated growth in out-of-district expenses is a serious matter warranting an intensive focus.

Ms. Siegel said the latest forecast indicates growth of \$800,000 over the original projection in special education transportation.

Ms. Siegel said in response there has been a concurrent focus on strengthening instruction in general education, particularly literacy and math, through an effective use of existing resources. Sufficient accrued funds have been aggregated to finance a literacy curriculum renewal initiative in a six-year package, the total cost of which is about \$1.1 million. There are seven different funding sources being used for this purchase.

Ms. Siegel said this positive outcome occurred for three major reasons: (1) rigorous enforcement of deficit prevention mode; (2) optimized utilization of grant funds; and (3) surplus funds that emerged due to lower than projected expenses such as legal services.

Ms. Siegel said it is hoped the math K-2 curriculum program, a four-year package, will be split-funded between this year and next year.

Ms. Siegel said through accrued funds from Title IV-A the Naviance digital service for all high schools has been renewed.

Ms. Siegel said despite serious fiscal challenges we have been able to derive funds that can support these initiatives through effective fiscal management.

Ms. Pereira said the special education program continued to grow. She said she didn't want to hear anymore that we can't address it at the younger ages. She said when Ms. DeNitto was the special education director there was a huge increase in special education students, which described as crazy. She requested a data on the last three years regarding how many special education referrals each school made and how many children were labeled special education.

Dr. Johnson said that information is looked at through the districtwide special education data team, which includes special education audits. Ms. Pereira said the board had never seen a report by school on special education. Dr. Johnson said the district looked at the data for the current year, not the past two years.

Ms. Pereira said she wanted to see which schools are constantly seeing elevated numbers of special education referrals. Ms. Martinez said she believed there was serious misclassification in special education and some students are staying in special education for far too long.

Mr. Sokolovic said he would like to caution that we do not pressure people to avoid identifying special education students.

Dr. Johnsons said the amount of special education referrals in February was too high at Roosevelt School. She said PPTs have strict legal requirements that the district must implement. She said additional training is given in schools with a high number of referrals.

Ms. Martinez said maybe wraparound services can be found for students, with the organizations obtaining the grants to come into the schools. Dr. Johnson said the wraparound services had been cut. Ms. Pereira said our social workers, counselors and psychiatrists had been cut. Dr. Johnson said there are partnerships with external agencies like Optimus.

Ms. Pereira requested Mr. Sokolovic obtain the special education report by school through the Teaching & Learning Committee. Dr. Johnson said she was not sure she could commit to bringing forward the prior two years by the meeting this month. The data for the current year is available.

Ms. Pereira said when Supt. Vallas first came he cut \$3 million out of the special education budget. Ms. Martinez said Mr. Vallas did that due to misclassification. Ms. Pereira said when Supt. Rabinowitz took over she ran into all these state complaints about special education.

Dr. Johnson said we have to do a better job of having an off ramp from special education. She said building leaders will not want to lose supports that are in place. She said many children are being over-identified.

Ms. Martinez said the special education information was needed for the budget discussion and making cuts to address the budget gap.

Ms. Pereira said the information needed by school was total student population, the number of referrals, and a percentage.

Dr. Johnson noted the district had 17 percent chronic absenteeism, while Bassick High was at 45 percent.

Ms. Siegel suggested the data be gathered on the reason for the referral to determine whether there are any steps we can take.

Dasha Spell was recognized. She suggested that a lot of behaviors that are seen in classrooms are the result of environmental factors. She said wraparound services could be formulated around trauma to address this.

Nadira Clarke, director of grants, said the district had tried for Project Aware grants twice and previously had the Safe Schools, Healthy Students grant. She the competition for grants is intense.

The next agenda item was on the 2019-20 budget gap plan.

Ms. Siegel said the documents apply anticipated revenue to the original \$16 million gap. Projected state revenue is \$2.5 million, but may be \$2.8 million. She said the City Council approved \$1.3 for the district, but the mayor has a two-week period in which to either approve or veto.

The gap balance after the incorporating of the anticipated revenue is about \$10.2 million.

Ms. Siegel said the first proposed action is the standard evaluation of registers for next year. She said position

reductions have been made corresponding to reduced registers. The overall reduction is six positions.

Ms. Siegel said the next item was curriculum renewal initiatives, which are critical to district's strategic plan. She said \$400,000 in funds in the current budget will be redeployed. She said we were able to restore \$300,000 in the current year.

Ms. Siegel said the proposal to consolidate Hall School into Edison School would result in net savings of about \$1.1 million, in addition to two positions removed based on lower registers.

Ms. Siegel said the three items reach an \$8 million gap.

The next option is to change the limit for transportation for Grades 5 to 8 from 1 mile to 1.25 mile for a projected savings of \$700,000.

Ms. Siegel said deficit prevention mode would result in another \$1 million in savings. She noted the savings are accomplished by freezing positions, delaying filling other positions, and covering services with substitute staff.

Ms. Siegel said the district office was listed generally, without a specific recommendation. Also listed was the Fairchild Wheeler campus option, which would have serious implications if it was implemented. She said the magnet schools have to remain as vital centers of education in order to attract suburban students as well as to provide an excellent education for Bridgeport students.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said there is no longer a magnet grant being received by Fairchild Wheeler.

Ms.. Pereira said Fairchild Wheeler was split into three separate schools under Supt. Vallas to gain a big federal grant. Ms. Siegel said the federal grant provided supplemental services, not fulltime staff.

Ms. Pereira noted Central Magnet did not even have a principal.

Ms. Martinez said there was only one position she was considering not renewing the contract of in the district office.

Ms. Pereira said she attended a meeting with Fairchild Wheeler parents. She said they wanted to retain three principals, did not want a merger because of UConn scholarships and the effect on class rankings. She said all these features would remain in effect. She said they felt giving up two assistant principals was a fair compromise.

Ms. Siegel said if we lose suburban enrollment we're not going to be able to manage these schools. Ms. Pereira said the biggest problem with suburban enrollment was the refusal of local communities to allow us to recruit students.

Ms. Martinez said principals, including assistants at Central High, help operate Central Magnet.

Mr. Sokolovic said if two assistant principals are taken away from district schools instead of the interdistrict program we are affecting one hundred percent Bridgeport residents.

Ms. Pereira said Fairchild Wheeler significantly underserves English language learners, special education students and students who are considered in poverty.

Ms. Siegel said there are four and half special education resource teachers at Fairchild Wheeler. She said her purpose was to make sure the board had all relevant information.

Ms. Siegel said item eight covers school administrators. She said there had been discussion of shared services; two positions are suggested at about \$300,000.

Ms. Siegel said the next item is furlough days, which has appeared on every budget gap plan but agreement with all unions has never been secured. The \$1.7 million amount pertains to two furlough days for all personnel in the district.

Ms. Siegel said item ten suggests forgoing longevity payments, contingent on receiving it upon separation from service or receiving it in the subsequent year.

Ms. Siegel said we need to aim to be within \$1 million or \$1.5 million for the gap. She said at the end of the fiscal year and in the summer she engages in intensive fiscal analysis which involves reassessing all of the fiscal factors that contribute to the budget condition and reassessing the projections, and there is always the possibility we may be able to lower a projection. She added that the projections can also increase.

Ms. Siegel said she and the superintendent would ask the committee to vote on the proposals that it can support. She noted the consolidation of Hall and Edison would require immediate action. She requested consideration of items 2, 3 and 4. She said decisions had to be in place by June 1st, per standard practice.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the walking



distance for Grades 5 to 8 in the state policy is 1.5 miles. She said the amount of savings for increasing the transportation limit to 1.5 miles would save about a million. Ms. Martinez and Ms. Pereira said they were in favor of this.

Ms. Pereira moved “*to change the walking distance from Grades 5 to 8 from 1 mile to 1.5 miles, effective for the 2019-20 school year.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez and unanimously approved.

Ms. Martinez said the consolidation of schools was not about closing a school but an opportunity to save \$1 million because of decreased enrollment in both schools. She said if the parents in that district are upset they need to speak to the City Council.

Ms. Pereira said the long policy on school closures should be looked at first due the impact on students, families and staff. She said studies have shown school closures decimate neighborhood property values. She said a mass closure of schools in Chicago impacted impoverished urban schools.

Ms. Martinez said the schools were down the street from one another. She said her mind was made up after the last committee meeting. She added that people are not moving to Bridgeport because of taxes and the board has to manage the things we have the best way. She said she would not touch the arts or athletics. She noted the teachers and principals at the schools to be consolidated had contracts and would not lose their jobs.

Ms. Pereira said Edison is the only neighborhood school in the JFK precinct, while Hall is in the 139th. Ms. Martinez said her son used to attend Edison School. Ms. Pereira said the school has one tiny room that serves as cafeteria,

auditorium and the gym. She said adding 200 students would create complications about physical education and lunch waves.

Dr. Johnson said Edison school has the capacity to manage the additional students.

Ms. Pereira said the extensive policies about closing schools had to be followed. Input was needed from the school community.

Dr. Johnson said parents are worried and anxious about the situation and she needs direction from the board. She said she cannot talk with parents until the board decides what it wants to do.

Ms. Martinez said she was born and raised in Bridgeport and is a Bridgeport parent first. She said we have hard decisions to make that the community unfortunately has to swallow along with us. She said the problem is the City Council.

Ms. Pereira said Ms. Martinez and her cohorts cancelled the community conversations not because it was best for children, but because it was best for their political friends. Ms. Martinez said it was because of Ms. Pereira causing division. She said Ms. Pereira's message on the mayor is factual. Ms. Pereira said for thirty years the schools haven't been funded.

Ms. Pereira said the conversations were cancelled because of Ms. Martinez's political friends such as Aidee Nieves. Ms. Martinez said she hasn't spoken about the community conversations with Ms. Nieves. Mr. Sokolovic asked how are we helping children now.

Ms. Martinez said she would bring this issue to the full board.

Dr. Johnson suggested moving on to the other items.

Mr. Sokolovic said we were put in this position by a lack of funding from the state and the City Council. He said the cuts are disgusting so that he feels like vomiting sitting here. He said we had to put aside the contention on the board and do what we've got to do, as distasteful as it must be.

Mr. Sokolovic asked if Fairchild Wheeler produces net income or is it a net expenditure going out. He asked why only two assistant principals were on the list. He said he believed last year the number was higher. Ms. Martinez said she believed six was suggested last year.

Mr. Sokolovic said he could not count on the longevity payment deferrals or the furlough days. He said he did not believe there was anything left to cut in the district office.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the consolidation of Hall and Edison would remove a custodian, a security guard, a clerical, a principal and twelve teachers in total.

Mr. Sokolovic said closing schools is disgusting and everything Ms. Pereira and Ms. Martinez said was correct. He noted Michelle Lyons of the City Council suggested closing more schools. He asked if there were other low enrollment schools that could be consolidated, especially if the transportation limit was raised to 1.5 miles.

Ms. Siegel said buildings cannot be closed simply because there are available seats. She noted closing schools would add to busing expenses.

Ms. Siegel said in other districts unions have agreed to furlough days. She said she believed the administrators' union had expressed an interest in agreeing to furloughs.

Ms. Siegel said Fairchild Wheeler is not a question or a net gain or a net loss; it is a balance. She said high schools cost over \$4 million to operate.

Mr. Sokolovic requested data on school enrollment and school capacity by building to see where there is excess capacity. He said it would be fiscally responsible for concentrate students and staff in one place. Ms. Pereira suggested looking at Park City Magnet.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said when Supt. Rabinowitz discussed closing Hall and Edison the savings were estimated at \$300,000. She said the \$1.1 million projected savings via consolidation was because of the lack of busing expenses.

Ms. Pereira noted that closing a school requires that a study be done. She said she would like to visit Edison School.

Dr. Johnson said Mr. Wallack looked at Edison School and he shared that it was feasible to move the Hall students into Edison.

Ms. Pereira said she believed it was Dr. Johnson who first recommended the closing of Hall School. Ms Martinez said it doesn't even matter who recommended it. Dr. Johnson said when she met with Ms. Siegel she indicated she did not want the consolidation on the sheet at the last committee meeting. Ms. Martinez said she suggested the consolidation be added to the plan at the last meeting.

Ms. Martinez said this is not something anyone wants to do and it is unfortunate that it has to happen. She said the city needs to cough up more money every year. She said she was fighting for all kids. Ms. Pereira said Ms. Martinez was a paid lobbyist for charter schools. Ms. Martinez said that does not matter.

Ms. Martinez said she went to the City Council with a kind heart and now we have to take it to the polls and make sure we elect people that will be there for the children first. he said she was grateful for \$1.3 million, but it's nothing that's really going to help. She said hopefully what the board faces this year will be a smack to their face. She said she agreed with Ms. Pereira that our city is not doing right by our children.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the magnet school tuition cases are still pending. She said Stratford, Trumbull, Monroe and Shelton all owe magnet tuition of about \$1.6 million. The district is withholding payment of tuition to Trumbull for agri-science, so the net effect is about \$800,000 in the current year and \$800,000 for the prior year. She said she could not discuss pending litigation at this time.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said the redeployment of funds for curriculum renewal means a delay, but not that the renewal will not happen. Ms. Siegel said the funds are not needed until the spring, just as this year. She said the curriculum process will begin in the fall with the resources becoming available in the late spring.

Ms. Pereira moved *"to approve the curriculum renewal proposed deficit reduction plan of \$400,000."* The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez and unanimously approved.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the date of implementation of deficit prevention mode would be subjects to discussion. She said there are very few certified teachers available in January and February. She suggested using March 1st as the date.

Ms. Pereira said schools cannot be closed without a study and talking to the community and parents in hearings.

Ms. Pereira moved *“to approve deficit prevention mode, which includes a hiring freeze of school positions for teachers effective March 1, 2020, except in shortage areas, delayed hiring in other positions, including OTPS savings and pending certification reserve.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez and unanimously approved.

Ms. Martinez said she didn't see where another cut can be made in the district office. She said Mr. DiDonato's position was up June 30th. She added a new special education executive director has been hired. She suggested considering not renewing Mr. DiDonato's contract. Dr. Johnson said his contract just terminates on June 30th. She added the new director starts June 24th.

Ms. Siegel said that had not been calculated into the budget gap plan and she would add it.

Ms. Pereira noted that Stratford teachers agreed to furlough days and then the district ended up with a surplus and the teachers were livid.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the district would never land in a surplus due to its many needs, including a technology renewal plan. She said she would not agree with

a guarantee to pay the money if a surplus is achieved because the furlough days are days that personnel have not worked. Mr. Sokolovic said they would be giving up a contractual right to work those amount of days.

Ms. Siegel said in the past AFSCME gave four furloughs days.

Ms. Pereira said Lighthouse uses 26 buildings all year long and 18 during the summer that are air-conditioned. She said if they paid the fees like every other organization does they would be paying \$3.5 million a year. They collect \$900,000 in parent fees that is nowhere in the city's budget. She said the board approved them paying \$500,000 in fees which was rescinded after political machinations and reduced it to \$75,000.

Ms. Pereira moved to increase fees for utilities, rental, supplies be increased to the Lighthouse program to the tune of \$500,000.

Ms. Martinez said the city should be paying that amount. Ms. Siegel said she thought this was a fruitless activity because the city would not pay it.

Ms. Pereira said it was political because Tammy Papa, the Lighthouse director, was Joe Ganim's and Mario Testa's girl.

Dr. Johnson recommended a special meeting of the board to go through the decisions. Ms. Pereira and Mr. Sokolovic said they agreed.

Ms. Pereira restated the motion: *"A motion to increase the Lighthouse fees, which include utilities, supplies and so forth, from \$75,000 per year to \$500,000 per year."*

Ms. Martinez seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved

Ms. Sokolovic suggested adding two additional administrators to the cut. He said a school of 500 students could be run by one principal. He said this was the case at Park City Magnet. Ms. Pereira said she agreed with adding two school administrators to the plan.

Ms. Martinez moved "*to bring item 8 to the full board.*" The motion was seconded by Ms. Pereira and unanimously approved.

Ms. Siegel suggested holding the discussion of Fairchild Wheeler for a special meeting. She said they have to be able to maintain an enhanced program, including reduced class size. She said it was important to recognize the elements of an interdistrict magnet school.

Ms. Pereira suggested having students within walking distance of Fairchild Wheeler walk. Dr. Johnson said there was no sidewalk. Ms. Pereira said many schools did not have sidewalks. She asked why Fairchild Wheeler was being treated in a special way.

Ms. Siegel said the item on legal services was self-explanatory. Ms Martinez agreed.

The next item was on the SRO arbitration resolution update. Ms. Siegel said the matter is still under review by the office of labor relations. It is expected to have a final determination soon. She said we are awaiting a written determination, which will be shared with the board.



In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said we have a \$1 million contract with The University School for special education. She said there is exploration to bring the program in-house, which could save about \$140,000. She said a full presentation would be done on May 21st at the Teaching & Learning Committee.

Ms. Siegel said the exact amount of savings will depend on the actual salaries and benefits of the fulltime positions in the plan. She said she used a midrange average salary in calculating the amount.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said she would prefer the students be in our own schools amongst our own students in the least restrictive environment.

Ms. Pereira moved that the meeting be adjourned. The motion was seconded by Ms.. Martinez and unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:31 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod