

Saturday, March 26, 2022

MINUTES OF THE FINANCE COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held March 26, 2022, at Harding High School, 379 Bond Street, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 12:01 p.m. Committee members present were Chair Joe Sokolovic, Christine Baptiste-Perez, and Bobbi Brown. Board members John Weldon and Albert Benejan arrived subsequently as noted.

Supt. Michael J. Testani was present.

Mr. Sokolovic said traditionally budget presentations were made by the budget director. He said the goal today is to make the presentation a little more interactive.

Mr. Sokolovic presented on myths about the budget. He said we hear these myths every year from elected officials and the public. He said it was a myth that we don't tell anyone where the money goes. The budget is audited every single year and every year the City Council is told where the money goes. The budget is posted online, and the public can look down to line items.

Mr. Sokolovic said ESSER funding was another myth because the funding can't be used for operating expenses. Another myth is the city gives 40 percent of its budget to education. He said most of the money for education in the city budget is a flow-through from the state.

Mr. Sokolovic said it is not true that the board has a surplus.

He said the Internal Service Fund is basically a rainy-day fund. He said the board can't borrow money, so if it runs into trouble and doesn't have the money to pay for something, there have to be cuts.

Supt. Testani said federal funds are one-time dollars that have been provided in ARP, ESSER, and the Cares Act. He said the board submits a plan to the state for use of these dollars, which has to be approved. He said the money from the federal government is earmarked for improvements such as HVAC and facilities (20 percent) and PPE.

The superintendent said there is fiscal accountability, with quarterly reports provided to the City Council, which are also posted online.

Supt. Testani said enrollment in the district has increased since October 1st by almost a thousand students. He said many are coming from all over the world, including places facing turmoil and the students often require ESL or bilingual services, and have social-emotional needs.

Mr. Sokolovic said the board is not allowed to go into debt. The city can bond; the board cannot borrow money. He described the board's budget as zero-based. He said the board had been massively underfunded for years and has had to resort to cuts all the time. He said Covid added about \$4 million in services that will have to be added to the budget if we want them to continue.

Supt. Testani displayed a slide of per-pupil expenditures, which indicated Bridgeport is lowest in the group of Stamford, New Haven, Hartford, and Waterbury. Bridgeport is 144 out of 166 Connecticut districts in per-pupil expenditures. If funding was made equal to Hartford, the

district's budget would expand by \$95 million a year.

The superintendent said one benefit of the district's work is its chronic absentee rate, which is about half that of Hartford. He said the district's parent and student engagement activities have been recognized by the state Department of Education and its strategies have been shared with other towns.

Supt. Testani said in two years, the federal dollars will go away, and we will be back to where we were if there are not continuous budget increases from state and local sources.

The superintendent said Bridgeport Public Schools receives 73 percent of its budget from the state and a little over 27 percent from the city. He said Hartford receives \$25 million more from their city government; Waterbury receives \$39 million more from its city. He asked, if Waterbury can do it, why can't Bridgeport?

The superintendent said he knows it's not going to happen overnight with \$39 million in one year, but one or two million dollars each year are not going to close the gap.

Mr. Sokolovic said Waterbury contributes \$6,348 in local tax dollars per pupil, while Bridgeport only contributes \$3,727. He said this has long been a structural issue. He said we need to question budget directors and ask, why can't we do what Waterbury does.

Supt. Testani said this has been a historical phenomenon, and the current City Council has the opportunity to create a massive change.

The superintendent said New Haven picks up a lot of in-kind

services for their district that are not factored into the monetary contribution.

Supt. Testani said almost 27 percent of the budget - \$90 million – goes to service students with special needs. He said these are not costs that can be cut, but they continue to escalate. He noted the significant out-of-district costs in special education.

The superintendent described the school and teacher allocation models. He said often teachers spend their own money to provide extras in their classrooms. He said Bridgeport teachers are underpaid.

Supt. Testani described fiscal challenges, including transportation, substitute costs, benefits, and the costs of students who are English language learners.

In response to a question, the superintendent said there is a partnership with UConn, using federal dollars, to get teachers in non-shortage areas endorsed in the TESOL/bilingual areas. Teachers who enroll must commit to five years in the district

In response to a question from Tyler Mack of the City Council, Supt. Testani said decisions to use electric buses are made by transportation companies.

Mr. Weldon arrived at the meeting.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the effort to recruit diverse teachers comes out of the budget, including Today's Students, Tomorrow's Teachers and a teacher residency program with Sacred Heart University where the district covers tuition costs and provides small stipends.

The superintendent said all recruitment efforts are to try to diversify the staff. The issue faced is every other district in the state is looking to do the same thing. Bridgeport has highest percentage of certified educators of color in the state. He said a lot of the historically black colleges don't have teacher prep programs, but there is also difficulty in recruiting teachers who want to relocate to the Northeast. He said other districts pay on average about \$10,000 more a year than Bridgeport. He said we're going to continue to struggle as long as this is the case.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said it would be helpful if the city picked up such board costs as custodial and security. He said the board pays about \$5.5 million yearly for security, which is a public safety function. He noted the city negotiates the contracts for security guards. He said after Sandy Hook, security costs have escalated.

Mr. Sokolovic said he did not want to rest on our laurels because we must do better in recruiting teachers of color. He said perhaps the city can offer a tax incentive for new teachers.

In response to a question, the superintendent said the new programs created with federal dollars was an opportunity to show the impact that can we have with additional funding. He said people do not realize there is not another round of federal money coming.

Ms. Brown said the federal funding allowed the creation of programs and resources that had not existed for a long time. She noted the stipulations that federal funding has to be expended by certain dates.

Audience members asked why teachers were able to not to come to work or be able to quit in the middle of the day. The superintendent said the district could not keep people from quitting their jobs, but when openings occur the positions cannot be filled as quickly as they can in Fairfield, Trumbull or Milford because of salaries.

Mr. Sokolovic said the great majority of our teachers are very hard working. He said they worked throughout the pandemic in classrooms with as many as 26 students. He said it was irresponsible to say our teachers are just a body in the classroom.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said we're having a problem recruiting and retaining teachers of quality. She said it takes a lot to be in a classroom. She noted the limitations on federal funds, which cannot be used for operational costs.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said if on average the district's increase in costs every year are five percent and it gets funded not even at one percent, over time, every year you're falling farther and farther behind. He said this is one reason why we can't give teachers more money to spend in classrooms. He said the board needs \$8.5 million this year to keep the staff we have.

The superintendent said enhancement to programming includes ten extra school counselors, which is still below the recommended national ratio; ten extra social workers; and additional therapeutic specialists in nine schools. He said restorative practices have been added. A member of the audience said restorative practices do not work and are a waste of money.

Supt. Testani discussed next year's fixed costs, including

collective bargaining (\$5.1 million); health insurance (\$3.3 million), MERF (\$1 million); and special education (\$1 million).

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said when ESSER funds are used up in 2024, the funding for the additional staff will be gone. The superintendent said the schools using the successful Effective School Solutions will lose that program.

Ms. Brown said the bigger question is what makes up school budget. She said the other cities give more funding to their schools than Bridgeport does.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez discussed the impact of inflation on the budget.

Dr. Ralph Ford said the real issue is how we convince policymakers and the City Council to put dollars into our education system. The superintendent said a big issue is the funding provided by the city to the board is locked in and can never be cut, which is one reason they are reluctant to provide increases.

Tony Barr also objected to teachers quitting their jobs. Mr. Sokolovic again explained the regulations around spending ESSER funds.

In response to a question, Mr. Sokolovic said community forums were held about ESSER spending, and there was input from the community and the staff.

There was a discussion of where to hold other public forums. Mr. Sokolovic said there would be four more forums. Ms. Brown and Ms. Baptiste-Perez described how greater community involvement would help with the board's

budgetary needs. Ms. Brown urged the public contact their elected representatives.

A Wilbur Cross School parent and volunteer said it was depressing to see the teachers in the school, especially in the 7th and 8th grade.

Supt. Testani said we don't control the money that comes here. He said there was only one state senator and one City Council member present today. He said there needed to be pressure on the mayor, the city Council and the governor. He said he talks every day to state legislators begging them to support Bridgeport. He said without adequate city funding, we have to start cutting.

Mr. Weldon said there are twenty Council members who are going to make the budget allocation. He said the police department is going to advocate for overtime and use public safety as a fear tool and the board gets the short end of the stick. He said a lot of the council members ran on a platform a year ago that they would fund education. He urged the public to pressure the council members.

Mr. Benejan arrived at the meeting.

Supt. Testani said if the board received \$8.5 million additional from the city it would amount to 12 percent of the city's budget. He said Senator Bradley has been fighting at the state level for funding, but the attitude at the state level is if Bridgeport is not willing to invest in education, how can the state invest in it.

Mr. Weldon said with the ESSER money and adequate funding we have an opportunity to show what we can with proper funding.

Supt. Testani said the \$8.5 million request from the city was back pay for the past years of underfunding. Mr. Sokolovic said the request amounts to \$446 per student. The superintendent said 243 positions have been cut since 2016-17.

Mr. Barr said he would advocate to remove Mr. Testani from being superintendent due to his answer about moving to Bridgeport. Following additional comments, Mr. Sokolovic said we were getting off track.

Mr. Sokolovic said there was an invisible deficit that we cannot see because of ESSER funding. He said by 2024, conservatively, there will be a \$15 million to \$20 million deficit. He said those cuts would impact schools, teachers, and classroom.

Supt. Testani said the loss of university interns in the budget hurt teacher recruitment. The program was brought back with federal dollars, but when the funding goes away the program will go away.

Ms. Brown said neighboring districts are advertising in Bridgeport for the same teachers we need, but they can pay them more.

Dennis Bradley, state senator, said he spent three and a half years on the board. He suggested a change in perspective in framing the issue. He said the charter movement always highlights successes. He said because people like to get behind a winner the district could do a better job of promoting positive things.

Supt. Testani said with the federal dollars we are collecting

data about the successes. He said the Fame Academy for performing arts was just opened.

Mr. Bradley suggested the idea of a teachers' village to attract young teachers to the city. The young teachers could live together, support each other, and find a lifestyle that can attract even more young teachers.

The superintendent said we need to retain young teachers beyond the first few years because they are still learning to teach early in their career.

Mr. Sokolovic said every issue comes back to dollars and cents, particularly in retaining teachers. He said he knows an educator very well who drives thirty minutes to get an extra \$30,000 a year.

Supt. Testani said all districts lost teachers during the pandemic, so the suburban schools that pay more are also looking for teachers in greater numbers. For example, last year the district lost fourteen teachers to Milford.

Dr. Ford asked what could be fixed now. Supt. Testani said the \$8.5 million allows the district to stay flush. Ms. Baptiste-Perez said charter schools give a residency bonus. She noted the importance of retaining teachers in the district.

Supt. Testani said we have 16 special education classrooms with substitutes. He said this was an example of trying to stop the bleeding. He said this was a two-year warning about the budget situation that will require cuts.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said a lot of parents are not aware of the situation we are facing. The superintendent urged the district leaders present at the meeting help.

In response to a question, Mr. Sokolovic said the Open Choice program did not address the underfunding of Bridgeport. Ms. Brown said it was damaging for our kids to attend school in a district where they're not wanted.

Mr. Sokolovic noted the suburban towns were opposing low-income housing.

Dr. Ford suggested the board present at an NRZ meeting to help move the council people.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the surplus from last year evaporated this year because we only got \$2 million additional from the city.

Mr. Sokolovic said the city figures that indicate it spends 39.3 percent of its budget on education is false because it includes a pass-through of state funding. He said the true percentage is 16.48, while public safety accounts for 42 percent.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said the city investment is toward the police force, which is essentially the school-to-prison pipeline.

Dr. Ford urged the public be spoken to in plain language. Mr. Sokolovic noted he is no longer allowed to speak at City Council finance meetings. He emphasized the greater funding Waterbury provides to education.

Mr. Benejan said he has been involved in the district for almost twenty years, including at PAC and PTSO. He said there has always been an issue with the budget since his son went to Webster School. He said everything was there

in black and white in the budget, but the City Council does not provide the money. He said Mr. Testani answers all the questions that are asked. He said he has urged the City Council to work as a team with the board.

Mr. Sokolovic said he would include the board members' contact information in the next handout. He urged the public to reach out to board members.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said there are ten free buses per month for field trips provided to the district.

Mr. Bradley said there is a lot of misinformation about the budget. He asked to be provided with information because he said he is being told something different in the Senate in terms of funding.

Supt. Testani said the governor's proposed budget is for an increase of \$13,000 for the district, instead of \$1.5 million. Mr. Bradley said because this is an election year for governor, we should make some Bridgeport noise. He said the first floor of the Capitol and the Legislative Office Building are open, but the meetings are held via Zoom.

Mr. Bradley suggested urban, hip events that include entertainment and food to increase turnout in the budget efforts.

Mr. Mack suggested door knocking because people aren't going to spend two or three hours listening.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez moved the meeting be adjourned. The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown and unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:05 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Approved by the committee on May 31, 2022