

Wednesday, November 17, 2021

MINUTES OF THE FINANCE COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held November 17, 2021, at Central High School, 1 Lincoln Boulevard, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 5:57 p.m. Present were members Chair Bobbi Brown and Bobbi Brown. Board member Albert Benejan was in attendance.

Supt. Michael J. Testani was present. Marlene Siegel, chief financial officer, and other staff were also present.

Ms. Brown moved to approve the minutes of the meeting of October 27, 2021. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on funding advocacy strategies. The superintendent said he has begun advocating even despite the federal funds that are coming into the district. He noted the dollars will create a huge cliff if we're not fully funded. He said another huge concern, as he discussed with Senator Chris Murphy at a recent meeting, is the recruitment and retention of teachers and support staff. He said this is approaching a crisis.

The superintendent said the compensation for teachers and other personnel lags way behind neighboring districts. The local districts have even more vacancies to fill due to the pandemic, which has led to Bridgeport losing people almost every day, including in key special education positions. He added he has spoken to the state Department of Education, Congressman Jim Himes, and the local legislative delegation

about this situation. He said he believes this could only be fixed at the federal level, given the salary and benefits compensation gap of \$10,000 per person.

Supt. Testani said the climate and culture has been improved in the district greatly, despite the pandemic, but 40 percent of our staff are in the first six years of their career and are more likely to transfer to other districts for greater pay.

The superintendent said some staff make extra money in summer school and after-school programs, but increasingly staff feel drained and are less likely to seek such employment. He said teachers who have to get second jobs elsewhere may have their effectiveness in the classroom diminished.

Supt. Testani said Lighthouse is struggling with staffing for the same reasons and has contemplated closing sites. He said he worried that the situation will be even worse next year.

The superintendent said he believed the district was going to keep being ignored on funding until a ball drops. He said we keep cutting and using band-aids, and our kids are losing out. He said to have over 70 vacancies right now is absolutely ridiculous, while other districts have a wealth of people.

Mr. Sokolovic said he believed the superintendent was letting the local authorities off way too easy because of the greater local funding provided by the cities of Waterbury, New Haven, and Hartford.

The superintendent said we've gotten to this point by the local funding neglect, including flat funding and no funding. He said to get out of the crisis situation it will take a massive effort such as federal funding.

Mr. Sokolovic said if the school budget was increased at the same level the police budget was increased over the last few years, we would catch up pretty quickly. He said it seems that the City Council never seems to understand the school budget. He said with local advocacy would be the easiest road to get more funding would be through the city.

Supt. Testani said we're the only district in the state that doesn't have a head of instruction or directors of math or science that devote their time solely to that, or a director of social studies or ELA. He said the special education department is small considering the size of the city and the charter schools that put a strain on the budget.

Ms. Brown said at the end of the day our students are affected by what we don't have. She noted the burnout of the staff that tries to go above and beyond.

The superintendent said the budget needs to be expanded so our kids get what they need. He said equity starts in the classroom with a highly trained, highly qualified teacher. He said that's where our kids get shortchanged right off the bat. He said the district is like a training ground for good teachers who once they hit their stride go somewhere else and teach other kids.

Mr. Sokolovic said prior to Covid it was heart-rending to sit on the board and vote on cuts to the budget and eliminating jobs. He said the board may be facing a situation where it will have to close schools or raise class sizes.

The superintendent said this was a problem in all the Alliance districts. He said he has asked the Connecticut Education Association and CAPPs to get behind this, but they represent 169 towns. Mr. Sokolovic said he believed the city had power because Bridgeport can swing elections in the state.

Supt. Testani said he suggested to the BEA that the unions from the other Alliance districts break away from the CEA to send a message.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested that community forums be held to explain the budget and where the money comes from, and to show how local funding compares to other districts. He said he believed the ones in the past were quite effective, although maybe too assertive. He said local politicians respond to constituents calling them. He said he believed community forums were squashed by pressure from above.

The superintendent said he believed we have a good strategy at the state level with the legislative delegation and the powers that be.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested starting community forums in the districts with new City Council people and districts where we can get a high turnout.

Supt. Testani said the community forum presentations needed only to present basic facts and what we are facing now in personnel and the future budget cliff.

The superintendent said the district has grown at a high rate over the last few months, and if it continues some schools

will be overcrowded, while others will be underutilized in terms of space.

Mr. Sokolovic said he would like to have a motion to bring back the community forums, with a theme being the greater local contribution made by New Haven and Waterbury.

Ms. Brown moved “*to bring back community forums in each of the ten districts starting as soon as possible.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on the budget timeline.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said we have been advocating over the last several years for the city to establish a funding stream for the board with a definite fund source. She noted the operating budget now is about \$260 million and the district cannot survive on annual increases of between 1 and 1.7 percent. She said at least four or five percent per year is needed.

Ms. Siegel noted the current Alliance funding increase was less than expected and the district has lost 2,000 students over a five-year period. At the same time, the special education and ELL populations have significantly increased. Even though enrollment has declined it does not mean the district can close classrooms because it has to maintain class structure.

Supt. Testani suggested getting to all City Council districts by the end of February. Mr. Sokolovic noted February 17th is the date for the mayor presenting the budget to the City Council.

The superintendent said we need to highlight the vacancies and the positions that we don't have compared to other districts. He said Waterbury currently has more vacancies than Bridgeport, but they have a larger budget and are able to absorb the hits.

Ms. Brown suggested strategizing around messages and graphics from the district to highlight these issues.

Mr. Benejan said he believed parents would want to hear about safety issues.

Supt. Testani said consolidating or closing schools is possible in the future, along with cutting programs that parents and kids rely on, if we don't get what we need.

Mr. Sokolovic said the purpose of the community forums is to educate and empower parents as to what changes they can make in their community.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 6:52 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod