

Wednesday, March 16, 2022

MINUTES OF THE FINANCE COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held March 16, 2022, at Central High School, 1 Lincoln Boulevard, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:50 p.m. Present were members Chair Joe Sokolovic, Christine Baptiste-Perez and Bobbi Brown. Board member Albert Benejan was present.

Supt. Michael J. Testani was present.

Ms. Brown moved to approve the minutes of the meeting of February 23, 2022. The motion was seconded by Ms. Baptiste-Perez and unanimously approved.

Mr. Sokolovic said there would be upcoming committee meetings that would serve as community forums. He said the idea is to create a more engaging format around the budget.

Mr. Sokolovic described the proposed format, including an introduction and myth-busting.

Supt. Testani said another myth to add was the information on the city's budget which includes the state contribution.

Mr. Sokolovic said the format included an overview presented by the superintendent.

Mr. Sokolovic said further myths to be discussed are ESSER funds and the Internal Service Fund. The superintendent said a point about the monetary need being necessary to

maintaining current staffing levels needs to be hammered home.

Mr. Sokolovic said another myth was administrative costs. He said the district has some of the lowest administrative costs.

Mr. Sokolovic said the presentation would cover the operating cliff and the fiscal cliff.

Mr. Sokolovic said when crime goes up, the police budget goes up, but the same effort is not made when the schools are suffering.

Supt. Testani said information could be presented to show that smaller school districts receive far more funding on a per-pupil basis. Mr. Sokolovic said the funding in Waterbury compared to Bridgeport would be emphasized.

Mr. Sokolovic said he would like to see the history of staff position cuts presented year by year. The superintendent said some critical positions were lost.

Supt. Testani said his office could assemble contact information for local, state, and federal representatives.

The superintendent said the funding gap between Bridgeport and Hartford needs to be highlighted.

Mr. Sokolovic discussed the slide demonstrating comparisons between Waterbury and Bridgeport concerning demographics and local funding. He said we should be emphatic that ESSER funding does not cover operating costs.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said parents should have access to information about school funding, so they realize their vote matters. She said the smaller the election, the more powerful their vote is.

It was suggested to show the growth that was achieved through ESSER funding and what could be accomplished with more funding. Ms. Baptiste-Perez said the past history of underfunding should be emphasized, along with the concept that what we're asking for is the bare minimum.

Mr. Sokolovic said the town committee and City Council members will be invited. He said he was planning on five meetings. He said the information presented should be e-mailed to them also so they can't say they weren't aware of it. Ms. Brown suggested notifying nonprofits that are currently in partnership with the district.

Mr. Sokolovic said advocacy groups have the responsibility to advocate for the right amount of dollars. One year we needed eight million and one group advocated for two million, which resulted in the mayor promising two million, in effect giving the mayor permission to underfund us.

Mr. Sokolovic said he wanted to present the budget increase request on a per-pupil basis. Ms. Brown said this is an example of presenting the information in plain English.

Mr. Sokolovic then discussed the Internal Service Fund, which basically functions as a rainy-day fund. He said if those funds were not available this year, the district would need \$6 million more.

Mr. Sokolovic said the budget includes \$5 million in staff raises. So even if the state provided \$1.5 million and the city

gave \$2 million, that would not cover the cost of collective bargaining agreements.

Mr. Sokolovic described how deficit prevention mode, with the use of substitute teachers, should be presented. He said replacing experienced teachers with lower-paid new teachers is used each year to balance the budget.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said if she was a parent whose child would have a sub for the rest of the school it would make her just throw the whole system away or move, which is what a lot of people do. Mr. Sokolovic said Bridgeport has a hard time recruiting teachers because of the low salaries, which is a result of the budget. He said all roads lead back to money.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested the question period start with board members, then City Council members, followed by the general public. Ms. Brown suggested the public go before City Council members. Ms. Baptiste-Perez suggested a first come/first served format.

There was a discussion of the meaning of position consolidation and the possibility of schools being closed or bus transportation being cut. Mr. Sokolovic said the hardest thing he had to do as a board member was to cut things from the budget.

Ms. Brown said the budget presentations are typically long and we need to find a way to pinpoint major points for busy parents attending the meeting.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said it was important to emphasize what the board was asking for is the minimal ask. She said if large tax abatements are given out those are dollars that could be applied to the schools.

Mr. Sokolovic said not even one percent of the budget goes to administrative costs.

Mr. Sokolovic said City Council members have mistakenly stated that the city gives 41 percent of its budget to the board. He said this figure includes pass-through money from the state.

Mr. Sokolovic said he would like to get at least two of the five meetings done before the mayor drops the budget on April 1st. He suggested holding a meeting on Saturday, March 26th.

Mr. Sokolovic said there should be Parent Square notifications for parents. Ms. Baptiste-Perez said people and groups should be asked to share the events on social media.

There was a discussion of providing food that could be donated.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez suggested starting in the 138th and 139th districts first.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:39 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod