

Thursday, March 31, 2022

MINUTES OF THE FINANCE COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held March 31, 2022, at Blackham School, 425 Thorne Street, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:38 p.m. Present were members Chair Bobbi Brown and Bobbi Brown. Committee member Christine Baptiste-Perez joined the meeting subsequently as noted.

Supt. Michael J. Testani was present.

Mr. Sokolovic discussed myths and misinformation about the budget. He said a big myth is we do not tell the city where the money goes. He said every year the budget is audited by the same people that audit the city budget. He said the budget information is available on the district's website.

Mr. Sokolovic said another myth relates to federal ESSER grants. The money can only be used between now and 2024 and can only be used for certain things. It cannot be used for paying teachers that already exist or other day-to-day expenditures.

Mr. Sokolovic said another myth is the board has a surplus. In fact, it only has a small savings account for emergencies. He said the additional money the board gets doesn't even cover the increased costs of things like utilities and salaries.

Supt. Testani said the ARP/ESSER funding from the federal government is for additional services that we are supposed to provide because of the Covid pandemic; it does not cover operating costs.

The superintendent said the district has to have a balanced budget; there are no loans or credit cards. He described school-based budgeting.

Supt. Testani noted enrollment in the district has declined since 2016-17, but there is now an increase since last year, and 400 additional students since October 1st.

The superintendent discussed a document displayed on per-pupil expenditures. Bridgeport spends \$16,982 per pupil, while Hartford spends almost \$22,000. Bridgeport is 144th out of 166 Connecticut districts in per-pupil expenditures. If Bridgeport's funding was made equal to Hartford, the district's budget would expand by \$95 million a year.

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. He added that New Haven provides in-kind services to its school district that Bridgeport does not. He said the City of Waterbury provides over \$30 million more to education than what Bridgeport contributes.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez arrived at the meeting.

Mr. Sokolovic noted Waterbury has similar demographics to Bridgeport; and Waterbury has a smaller grand list. He added the Waterbury has consistently outspent Bridgeport for years and years. He said the city was just allocating the money to different priorities. He said properly funding education for one generation would increase the tax base and reduce the need for police.

Supt. Testani said it was important to note the funding disparity is for every year, not just currently. Of the \$260 million budget of the board, \$90 million is spent for students with disabilities, covering about 4,000 kids.

The superintendent described the teacher classroom allocation and the Title I expenditures for parent engagement.

Mr. Sokolovic said the board cannot tax or borrow or generate its own funds. He said we are forbidden by law to go into debt as a school system. He described the board's budget as zero-based.

Supt. Testani described fiscal challenges, including utilities, legal services, transportation, special education, English language learners (who come from all over the world), substitutes, and employee benefits. He described the costs of curriculum renewal.

The superintendent said last year there was only \$2 million additional in city funding, along with \$1.5 million from the state. He said there was a 23 percent increase in English language learners in the last year.

Supt. Testani said since 2015-16 the district has received a little over a 0.5 percent increase from the city and a little over a 0.5 percent from the state, for an average of 1.17 percent annually, while the district's costs go up significantly more than that every single year. This gives the district a deficit just based on contractual obligations.

The superintendent displayed a slide with the additional expenditures as a result of federal funding. He said they are typically things that in Hartford and Stamford are already in

place. He said without additional revenue, the additional counselors and social workers would have to be eliminated after the ESSER funding expires. He described the stipends provided to teacher leaders through federal funds. The new Fame Academy, a performing arts program for students across the district, has been started at Harding High,

Supt. Testani said \$8.5 million was requested from the city, with \$1.5 million expected from the state, but the governor's budget is proposed to drop the state amount to virtually nothing. He said if the governor is giving nothing during an election year, don't expect anything in the next four years. Even if the \$8.5 million is received, there is an \$8 million shortfall. He noted this amount was only a three percent increase to the total education budget.

The superintendent said the district was on the hook for a \$5.1 million increase next year for salary contracts. Another \$3.3 million is anticipated for health insurance. Special education costs are projected to rise by \$1 million, along with retirement costs.

Supt. Testani described filling teacher vacancies. He said experienced teachers who apply for jobs know there is a shortage, and they try to negotiate higher steps, which costs the district more.

The superintendent said if \$8.5 million is received from the city it would only cover the status quo, not the critical additional services provided by ESSER funding.

Supt. Testani said 130 positions in the district were lost in 2016-17; another 60 in 2017-18; 41 in 2018-19; and 12 in the following year. He said the district does not have a director of math, director of science, director of literacy,

director of social studies; instead, there are administrators doing double or triple duty.

The superintendent pointed to literacy and math coaches that have been cut in prior years. He said an alternative program called Career and Craftsman was doing well but had to be cut.

Supt. Testani said the administrative staff in Hartford and New Haven was probably double that of Bridgeport. He noted 69 percent of the budget is spent on instruction, which includes class sizes of 29 students. He described classes of that size as totally unacceptable. He said the \$5.6 million spent on school security is a function of public safety and should come out of the police department.

The superintendent described the pillars of excellence in the district and the need for funds to implement them, especially a competitive salary schedule for teachers.

Mr. Sokolovic said budget figures provided by the city are misleading because the percentage shown as being allocated to education includes money that is provided by the state for education, for which the city acts as a pass-through. The true city contribution to education is 16.4 percent of its budget.

The superintendent said teachers with a master's degree start at \$47,250 in the district, while neighboring districts pay eight to ten thousand dollars more. Ms. Baptiste-Perez said it's five to ten thousand more in New Haven, which means Bridgeport is at a disadvantage competing with other urban districts.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said according to a Connecticut Post

article New Haven and Waterbury have better test scores, which means the greater investment has led to a greater return. She noted New Haven was still 139 teachers short.

An audience member said City Council members have told her that the board does not provide receipts. The superintendent said the district provides quarterly reports to the City Council, which are posted on the district website, with the ability to look down line by line into the budget. He said the Council just does not take the time to go through it and it is easier to plead ignorance. He said he e-mails the fiscal reports every quarter personally to the City Council president and Scott Burns, the budget chair.

Aikeem Boyd of the City Council was present and said he does receive the reports from his colleagues.

An audience member said having the two extra counselors in her building has done wonders.

The superintendent said due to the teacher shortage the number of teachers leaving to go to other districts has increased, including in Milford and Norwalk. He said 40 percent of the district's teachers are in their first six years. He said teachers deserve an increase every year just so we can get them to a competitive rate.

Mr. Sokolovic said one of the biggest myths about the district's budget is people don't know where the money goes. He said there is extensive information available online about the budget. Ms. Brown said the Finance Committee's meetings are open to the public and posted online. The superintendent said there are extensive internal controls when it comes to spending.

Ms. Brown noted the fiscal cliff that would occur without additional funding. Ms. Baptiste-Perez said essentially the district was broke. She said people in the city are being cheap with the education of children. She said she believed people did not know how bad the funding situation was.

Mr. Sokolovic and Supt. Testani listed the administrative positions that Waterbury has that Bridgeport does not. The superintendent indicated several of positions are covered in Bridgeport by administrators who also have duties in other areas.

Supt. Testani said with a much smaller attendance staff the district has a 27 percent chronic absentee rate compared to New Haven's 52 percent.

The superintendent and Mr. Sokolovic said they would provide a copy of the budget information and other details to Councilman Boyd.

Supt. Testani said the district is currently checking free and reduced lunch counts to ensure the accuracy of the Title I funding.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 7:47 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod