

Tuesday, May 31, 2022

MINUTES OF THE FINANCE COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held May 31, 2022, at Central High School, 1 Lincoln Boulevard, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:04 p.m. Present were members Chair Joe Sokolovic, and Bobbi Brown*. Board member Albert Benejan* joined the meeting subsequently. (*remote participation)

Supt. Michael J. Testani was present.

Ms. Brown moved to approve the minutes of the meeting of March 16, 2022. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

Ms. Brown moved to approve the minutes of the meeting of March 26, 2022. Mr. Sokolovic noted the version provided to the committee included the first page from the March 31st minutes, which should be corrected. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

Ms. Brown moved to approve the minutes of the meeting of March 31, 2022. Mr. Sokolovic noted page 1 of the minutes needs to be relocated from the March 26th minutes. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on the ESSER balances and program effectiveness.

Supt. Testani said some facilities expenditures had not yet been encumbered yet due to contract and supply change issues. Things such as HVAC work are still in the planning process. He said the city attorney and Berchem & Moses are working on contracts to keep things moving. He said roughly \$20 million is dedicated to facilities.

Marlene Siegel, chief financial officer, said \$23.7 million has allocated to facilities to date, with \$4.7 million currently expended.

Ms. Siegel introduced Patricia St. Louis, who replaced Liz Maurer as manager of budget and financial reporting, who retired on April 29th.

Ms. Siegel said there are three ESSER grants. CARES or ESSER I has an expiration date of September 30, 2022. The original appropriation was approximately \$8.7 million, with the current balance slightly over \$100,000. There is a non-public school component to this grant.

Ms. Siegel said ESSER II has an expiration date of September 30, 2023. The original appropriation was \$44.6 million. Expenditures for 2021-22 are projected in the range of \$23 million to \$24 million.

Ms. Siegel said ESSER III is known as ARP/ESSER and will expire September 30, 2024. The amount was over \$100 million, with at least 20 percent dedicated to learning recovery. In the current year, 2021-22, it is expected to expend between \$22 million and \$24 million. Next year, it is anticipated to spend about \$40 million, and \$36 million in the next year.

Ms. Siegel said the district is on track to expend all funds by the end of the grant periods in accordance with the budget plan.

Ms. Siegel presented a PowerPoint which summarized the programs and services funded by ARP/ESSER.

Ms. Siegel said the ESSER grants are intended to accomplish the goals of education renewal and learning acceleration and enrichment for every student. Twenty percent of the budget must be set aside to address the academic impact of learning loss through the implementation of evidence-based interventions. Ms. Siegel said the district's allocation is much higher than twenty percent.

Mr. Benejan* joined the meeting.

Ms. Siegel discussed the priority areas; personnel services that are funded, including district personnel, school administrator positions; extended day and summer programs; stipend positions; annual teacher positions; administrative support; academic support; and school management support.

Ms. Siegel said learning acceleration and academic enrichment represents 48.75. percent of the ARP/ESSER expenditures, with the next highest category building safe and health schools (26.12 percent).

Mr. Sokolovic noted the personnel hired were funded through 2024. Supt. Testani said as the loss of funding approaches we will start to trim back and absorb personnel through attrition. He said we had to be strategic about the administrative personnel that were added. He said besides salary, one of the biggest reasons teachers leave for other

district is a lack of support. He said the teacher leader numbers would be increased next year.

Supt. Testani said the district can put names and faces to the extra dollars that have been received. He said even with extra counselors we're just starting to approach appropriate caseloads. He pointed to what students are receiving from additional enrichment opportunities.

In response to a question, the superintendent said when the funding goes away for extended day opportunities the students will lose academic, enrichment and athletic activities.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested the PowerPoint be put up on the district's website.

Supt. Testani said there has been a reduction of the number of students going out of district. He credited Effective School Solutions for providing wraparound services, along with the addition of more special education supervisors. He said Hill for Literacy and Footsteps 2 Brilliance will be expanded. There will be new assessments and data-gathering in mathematics.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said eleven social workers and ten school counselors were also added to provide mental health support. He said restorative practices were also effective. Mr. Benejan said he wanted to be sure we were doing the best for our students.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said twenty Lighthouse sites will be serving breakfast and lunch this summer. Even students who are not in Lighthouse will have access to food. John Garrity, director of nutrition, said there

are also community sites with food services during the summer. The period of food service will be July 5th through August 5th, with food available for anyone in the community 18 years of age or younger. Supt. Testani said the sites most used by the community will be considered for remaining open past August 5th. Ms. Brown urged there be publicity through the district about the availability of the meals.

Supt. Testani said continuing programming beyond the grant cycle is going to be critical. He noted some students who were in K-1 during the pandemic may be behind their older counterparts. He said he recently met with Rep. Himes and offered to go to Washington to testify about the importance of the grants.

The next agenda item was on the fiscal condition for 2021-22.

Ms. Siegel said the financial condition report was posted on May 2nd. The projected amount to be withdrawn from the Internal Service Fund (ISF) is currently between \$1 million to \$3 million, down from \$5 million to \$6 million. The projected balance in the ISF will be \$20.5 million, part of which will be used to close the gap in 2022-23.

Ms. Siegel said the primary factors that have contributed to reducing the 2021-22 gap are the reduction in out-of-district special education placements; teacher and para vacancies, which was high compared to previous years; a reduction in legal services costs; and the use of ESSER grants for special education and ELL services.

Mr. Benejan left the meeting.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the deposits into the ISF were due to the pandemic, including the use of the hybrid model. Going forward, sufficient operating revenue was not received to fund operating costs, so withdrawals from the ISF are projected. In the following year, 2022-23 the budget gap plan projects a withdrawal from the ISF. Once funds are withdrawn, they do not replenish.

Ms. Siegel said the fiscal cliff is a synonym for insufficient operating revenue, which is the result of underfunding for the past twenty years. She said the average revenue growth from the state and city is 1.12 percent per year in the last eight years.

Supt. Testani said what people really need to grasp is that once federal grant funding dries up, not only do additional services go away, but decisions are going to be needed on services that were provided pre-pandemic, which was already down to the bone with nothing left to cut. He said any cuts like this would be quite impactful.

The superintendent said we have to start inching away and pulling back on services in order to preserve staff as the federal funding goes away. He said teachers cannot be cut with class sizes that are large, and we are already bare bones with administration

Mr. Sokolovic said we have to communicate the urgency of the situation.

Ms. Brown said she was not sure the community understood what the district is facing. The superintendent said he told the City Council Budget & Appropriations Committee that Fairfield has 9,000 students and a budget of \$200 million,

while Bridgeport has 19,000-plus students and a \$270 million budget.

The next agenda item was on the 2022-23 budget and the fiscal cliff.

Mr. Sokolovic said we had to operate under a worst-case scenario because people are not going to understand things until it's too late. He said planning and strategizing should start now.

The superintendent said contract negotiations with the teachers would occur before the expiration of ARP/ESSER. Supt. Testani and Mr. Sokolovic said we had to retain our certified staff. Mr. Sokolovic said consolidation of buildings might be needed. He said some of our schools are under fifty percent capacity.

Supt. Testani said a count was needed to get an idea of what schools have open class capacity. Mr. Sokolovic said schools are the lifeblood of neighborhoods and it disgusted him to even bring this up. He said personnel were our biggest expense and savings might be possible in noncertified personnel such as clerical, security, facilities, and nurses. He said we don't even get to negotiate the contracts for these personnel, which leads to the district having to pay overtime for staff who take vacation while school is open.

Mr. Sokolovic said cost savings in these bargaining units could be looked at by negotiating better contracts or issuing RFPs for services elsewhere. He said as a union member that kills him. Ms. Brown said it puts us in an interesting position, but we have to put the concerns of our students

first. She said any cuts we have to make will affect our students.

Mr. Sokolovic said he had been through cuts before, which he found heartbreaking. He said he hoped and prayed we would not have to go through that again. He said the last time home-school coordinators, math and literacy coaches, and assistant superintendents were cut. Those positions are gone, and we could not cut there again.

Supt. Testani said the federal government had to look at how we fund public education. Ms. Brown said it took an emergency like Covid for us to find money that was there. She said she hoped the federal government would see how well districts like Bridgeport were doing with extra resources.

The superintendent said because of additional funding the chronic absentee rate is slightly better than pre-Covid and almost half that of similar districts in the state. He said although there are about 60 vacancies in the district, similar districts in the state have 200-plus.

Ms. Brown moved *“to refer to the various committees gap closing strategies for the fiscal cliff such as exploring the possibility of RFPs for our noncertified staff and possible building consolidations, so a referral out to Contracts and a referral out to Facilities on these budget gaps.”* The motion was seconded and unanimously approved.

Ms. Siegel said this is the right direction. She said the district is preparing for the fiscal cliff, as well as enhancing advocacy to redress inadequate state and city funding.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 7:24 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

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