

Tuesday, January 9, 2018

MINUTES OF THE FINANCE COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held January 9, 2018, at Bridgeport City Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 5:50 p.m. Committee members present were Chair Jessica Martinez and Dennis Bradley. Board members Hernan Illingworth, Joseph Sokolovic, Maria Pereira and Ben Walker were in attendance. Committee member Chris Taylor arrived subsequently as noted.

Supt. Dr. Aresta Johnson was present.

Chief Financial Officer Marlene Siegel said there were ramifications to the loss of \$1 million in Priority Grant funds in the middle of the year.

Ms. Siegel said Strategy 6 includes a credit from the Country Disposal's contract extension; funds from Extended School Hours Grant will be deployed to the cost of the Classical Studies extended time for Grades K-2; and there will be capture of cost savings and future accruals.

Ms. Siegel described the redeployment of funds from the Extended School Hours Grant. She said the allocations are being made to the ESH schools and there will be a webinar with principals this week in order to discuss next steps.

Ms. Siegel said the Alliance/Priority application to the state has a due date of January 19th. She said board approval was needed at the next board meeting.

Supt. Johnson said there were similar reductions in the Priority funds for other districts.

Ms. Pereira noted that Strafford employees agreed to take two

furlough days. In response to a question, Supt. Johnson said there had been no headway on furlough days and she said that extreme measures were used in Stratford. She said we're going to have to pursue that avenue, but we've been met with resistance from both bargaining units.

Mr. Walker noted that according to the document provided by the superintendent last night the district has already lost 200 staff members. He said it was time for them to realize that we are already at the bone because every cut has a direct effect on children and classrooms.

In response to a question, Supt. Johnson said the district had 182 school days for children, but we are at 180 right now due to the last two snow days.

Ms. Siegel said she was asking for approval of the Priority/Alliance request by the committee for transmission to the full board.

Dr. Johnson said we know it's a short window, but the district was given a short window by the state.

There was a discussion of the timing of the submission to the state. Nadira Clarke, director of grants, said approval by the board on January 22nd would be adequate. Board members suggested a special meeting be held. Ms. Clarke, Ms. Siegel and Supt. Johnson said there was no chance the submission would miss the deadline.

January 16th was suggested as the date to hold the special meeting. Ms. Martinez said she would contact Mr. Weldon.

Mr. Bradley said he would not vote tonight to approve something he had just seen. He said the item could be brought directly to the special meeting.

The next item was the 2018-19 budget request. Ms. Siegel noted the district receives 26 percent of its budget from the city and 74 percent from state.

Ms. Siegel said the budget request PowerPoint would be presented

on January 22nd to the board. She said on February 2nd the additional funding that is being requested will be entered into MUNIS. She said if the requested funds are not received, a budget gap plan will be required.

Ms. Siegel said on page 24 of the PowerPoint there is a pie chart that shows the budget request for 2018-19. In the state's biennium budget there is an additional \$1.1 million for the district in 2018-19, which is hardly enough. She said \$15.7 million is needed above the \$1.1 million. This figure includes the restoration of the kindergarten paras.

Ms. Siegel said the document shows Claytor Magnet growing to Grade 6 and obtaining another teacher, but register projections indicate there may be an overall net reduction in the district, although there could be an increase. She added the lease on the Parent Center will expire on December 31st, it will not be renewed, and there will be savings of \$66,000 per year.

Ms. Siegel said the new Harding High will open next year and the board might decide to maintain the old building as swing space for the Bassick renovation. The facilities department calculated it would cost \$150,000 per year to maintain the building.

Ms. Siegel said the amount for the kindergarten paras is \$2.7 million.

Ms. Siegel said page 26 notes increased costs for collective bargaining contracts and health insurance growth. She said we do not have the actuarial projections for health insurance costs yet. She said she made an educated supposition that the growth rate will be six percent.

Ms. Siegel noted the loss of \$250,000 and the reduction of the Title IIA grant, which is anticipated to be eliminated totally. She said the remaining services in Title II are critical, such as math coaches, a human resource position, peer observers, and a portion of Teach for America.

Ms. Siegel said the special education figure represents the maintenance of mandated services and escalated costs for out-of-district expenses, including special education transportation.

Ms. Siegel said the transportation contractual increase is two percent for next year, and there may be some additional needs, for a total of a \$600,000 increase.

Ms. Siegel said the \$85,000 grant for teen mentors has been eliminated, and it is now an unfunded mandate.

Ms. Siegel said in 2017-18 we're taking the remainder of the accrued funds from six years of surplus in the Internal Service Fund (ISF) of about \$2.4 million. She said it is hoped there will still be a surplus in the ISF and in order to balance this year a million dollars of projected surplus will be used. She noted a credit of \$150,000 from the pharmaceutical plans will be used. The food and nutrition budget is going to contribute more to the ISF in order to cover their claims, for a projected \$300,000. In total, in 2017-18, in order to balance the budget, approximately \$4 million is being used from the ISF. In 2018-19, \$1 million will be used from the projected surplus.

Ms. Siegel said grant accruals were used through accrual generators, but for next year we will not have capacity to generate accruals at same rate due to the elimination of Title IIA, the \$1 million reduction in Title I and cuts to the Priority Grant.

Ms. Siegel said if we hope to fill positions in non-shortage areas when vacancies occur funding is needed and there must be stringent and rigorous implementation of deficit reduction mode measures. This includes a hiring freeze.

Ms. Siegel said the ask for additional funding in 2018-19 will be \$20.25 million.

Mr. Bradley said he wasn't sure it would be the responsibility of the board to maintain the former Harding High. Ms. Siegel said she understood it would be considered a Board of Education building. Mr. Bradley said it would be three years before Bassick gets underway and he asked why the city wouldn't pay the expense. Ms. Pereira said under state statute the board is responsible for the building unless it turns the keys over to the city, except in the event of a major event like a roof repair.

Ms. Pereira said there was no other place to use as a swing space for Bassick. Ms. Martinez said she did not think that was wise because of East Side/West Side issues. Ms. Siegel noted the board had not voted on the issue yet.

Mr. Walker said his concern was that if we give the keys to Harding to the city, they would sell the building right out from under us. Ms. Pereira noted the situation at the Central High renovation was an absolute disaster.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the health insurance projection of six percent included increased payments by bargaining units and new hires.

Mr. Bradley noted that the board had spent money to rehab the Parent Center and there is a lot of equipment there. He wondered if we're allowed to take things out of the building. He said he would refer the matter to the Facilities Committee.

Mr. Bradley noted restoring the kindergarten paras was a big number. He asked in the year since they have been eliminated what the teachers have been saying on the ground and what are the results on test scores compared to years when the paras were in the classrooms. He said, depending on the results, it may be an almost \$3 million expense that we don't need.

Supt. Johnson said parents have expressed concerned about the lack of kindergarten paras at PTSO meetings. She said before we can get to the educational piece, there is a concern about safety and the learning environment. For example, it would be impossible to evacuate a kindergarten classroom into today's snow condition with 18 students with only one teacher. She added teachers are leaving the district because they don't feel supported. She said she could research the iReady assessment scores in kindergarten.

Mr. Walker said Dr. Santacapita had presented data in the Teaching & Learning Committee. He said an intangible with the paras is the educational foundation that the students get, which may not be reflected in kindergarten scores, but might be in subsequent years.

Ms. Siegel said the documents provided included the Food and Nutrition Services budget for 2018-19. She asked the board review the document and noted it is one hundred percent funded by state and federal grants.

Ms. Siegel said the next PowerPoint showed the impact of the cuts. The budget is defined, along with the gaps over the last two years, and to provide historical background. The budget gap is \$13 million and does not include the kindergarten paras because if additional funding is not received, the first objective will be to maintain existing services, not to add or restore services.

Ms. Siegel said last year we lost \$1.1 million in ECS funding and the budget gap grew from \$15 million to \$16 million.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said right now the deficit is \$275,000 and there is a plan to close it. She cautioned that the district is in a very precarious fiscal position because we are drawing on the Internal Service Fund and grants to literally survive.

Ms. Siegel said unfortunately we have to redeploy funds that were on hold for curriculum renewal to support the operating budget. She said she was optimistic that additional accruals will result, but there cannot be a guarantee.

Ms. Siegel said another page illustrates the dismal state we're in, including a potential \$40 million gap over three years if we do not receive an infusion of new funds in 2018-19.

Ms. Pereira said out of 169 municipalities there is none that contributes less to its public schools than Bridgeport.

Ms. Siegel said the district lost \$311,000 from the state magnet grant last year; it is unknown if there will be a further reduction this year. There is a \$36,000 reduction to the Aquaculture school.

Ms. Siegel said the district is 16 percent special education and 17 percent English language learners, although there is some overlap in the two categories. She said as of June 30th almost 27 percent of

the total budget was dedicated to special education.

Ms. Siegel said if we were equitably funded with Hartford we would have \$100 million more.

Ms. Siegel said another page of the document described the budget gap resolution. She said we would need to consider furlough days, a delayed longevity payment, the possible loss of the twenty remaining literacy and math coaches, and possible elimination of some assistant principals.

Ms. Siegel said there is a study underway as to the costs of changing transportation limits for students in Grades 5 to 8. She the district's limit of one mile is less than that of other communities. The outcome of the cost analysis is not known yet.

Ms. Siegel said the item is not in the document because we are not recommending it, but it would have to be considered as a drastic step because of the budget gap for the third consecutive year.

Ms. Siegel said one of the options includes the elimination of the school volunteer coordinator and clerical.

Dr. Johnson said if the board members had other suggestions for cuts items listed in the document could be removed. She noted from 2014-15 to 2018-19 there has been only a .5 percent increase in the city's contribution.

Ms. Siegel said based on projections the consolidation of classes may be possible. She said data management indicated there is an outflow of students to charter schools.

Ms. Siegel said assuming the Priority Grant remains flat, there will have to be structural changes in the budget next year to continue various services. Two assistant principals that were moved into the operating budget would not be able to be sustained. She said there has been discussion of eliminating the per diem academic intervention program to generate the dollars to maintain the assistant principals.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said the numeracy coaches are in the BEA bargaining unit.

Mr. Bradley said he was curious if students who have had coaches show improvement. He said he hears conversation at the state level, wrongly a lot of times, that Bridgeport does not self-regulate itself very well. He said one possibility is changing the conversation to say what is working in the district and what is not. He said the use of literacy coaches could be investigated. He said it wasn't too long ago that he was in elementary school in an urban district that did not have paras and assistant principals for small schools. He said it was difficult to measure what an assistant principal does in a small school.

Ms. Pereira questioned having a school with 500 students with only one principal.

Mr. Walker said he agreed cuts should stay away from the classroom. He noted our schools have needs that a lot of suburban schools don't have. He said there is a contract with BCAS that calls for assistant principals above a certain enrollment. He added it was a valid conversation to have now.

Mr. Walker said a building use review might be helpful to see if there are some schools that are under utilized. He said unfortunately extracurricular programs might have to be looked at as well.

Mr. Bradley said there is the possibility of pivoting to saying we're making cuts such as the coaches because we have measurable outcomes that are not favorable for our students.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said the role of the coaches is to work with the teacher in the classroom, model lessons and work on curriculum. Mr. Illingworth said the model has changed from when coaches used to instruct students.

Dr. Johnson said there is an item on the Facilities Committee agenda on building capacity.

Ms. Pereira said schools should not be closed because studies have shown closing schools is detrimental to property values, students and

communities.

The next item was on snow removal. Tony Pires said an RFP has been out; three vendors responded. Letters have been issued to the vendors and they're ready to go whenever we need them. The vendors are chosen from an on-call list, it is not a contractual situation. He said Bob Hammond and Alan Wallack call in the vendors.

In response to a question, Mr. Pires said he did not believe a contract is beneficial to the district.

Mr. Pires said our facilities department is responsible for snow removal up to six inches from the schools. Board employees and equipment are used. Above and beyond six inches, the contractors are on call to help remove the snow. Most of the time the contractors are used to haul snow away with large trucks.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said there is \$45,000 in the budget for snow removal contractors. Elizabeth Maurer, manager of budget and financial reporting, said we have spent \$50,000 to date on snow removal in-house through this week.

Mr. Bradley said he worried that the lower priced contractors might not be available when we call them.

Mr. Pires said if we have a harsh winter we probably won't save money on snow removal.

The next item was a proposal for a contract extension with Country Disposal Services for refuse and recycling.

Ms. Siegel said the proposal would yield a credit of \$21,828 in the current year, which is currently included in the deficit resolution plan. In the next two years the new rate would be \$321,000 annually.

Ms. Siegel said the city originally billed the board \$349,393 for refuse and recycling services. The original agreement with County Disposal was around \$290,000 and then additional sites and pickups had to be added, which increased the cost of \$340,000. She said with the

credit the current year cost would be \$317,844.

Ms. Siegel said this is a cost-savings proposal and we are recommending approval.

Ms. Pereira noted the price includes not picking up at the Parent Center next year. Mr. Pires said the new Harding would be an additional location. Ms. Siegel said presumably there would be still be a need for pickups at the old Harding.

In response to a question, Mr. Pires said the vendor was being responsible and picking up what they're supposed to. He said in the first couple months there were some adjustments that needed to be made. Ms. Siegel said the company presented a large spreadsheet showing the additional pickups they provided at no additional cost.

In response to a question, Mr. Pires said the schools were provided smaller dumpsters, but we are not charged for additional pickups. He said the size of containers has been adjusted based on experience. He added the contract would be inclusive of gas prices and tipping fees.

Mr. Bradley moved *"to approve the contract proposed by Country Disposal Services, LLC, for two years."* The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez and unanimously approved.

Mr. Walker suggested Ms Martinez present this to the full board in her committee report.

Mr. Bradley moved to approve the committee's minutes of November 2nd, 2017. The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez. Ms. Martinez and Mr. Bradley abstained and the motion was approved.

The next item was on the RFQ for legal services. Dr. Johnson said the Finance Committee asked that this go out to bid in November. She said the city sent back comments from the city attorney's office indicating that they were not going to post the RFQ without substantial changes. The city provided a version regarding language to be inserted in the RFQ.

Ms. Pereira said she read the entire purchasing ordinance and there is nothing in it about inserting charter language into a bid. She said the board's 3000 Series does not contain any provisions regarding this. She said this is their attempt to send a message to bidders that they're going to control the bid. She said the city attorney doesn't make any decisions about how we spend a dollar. She noted the line item for legal services to the board is about \$1 million per year.

Ms. Pereira said anybody can set up an account on BidSync and the board can have the bids go to Mr. Pires. She said we're not a city department; we get our power from the State of Connecticut.

Ms. Pereira said this was a big battle when Mr. Gardner and Ms. Baraka were on the board and Mark Anastasi finally gave in and he did not sign the contract.

Mr. Pires said his fear is if we go through the whole process and then have it stopped at city purchasing.

Mr. Pires said the city attorney was part of the bidding process in the prior RFQ, but ultimately the board decided on who it wanted for legal counsel.

Mr. Taylor arrived at the meeting.

Mr. Bradley said it seemed the language has been historically a part of the RFQ, not new language. Mr. Pires said it was on an RFQ before. Mr. Bradley said he didn't see how it would lead to a loss of sovereignty as the board picked its legal counsel before. Ms. Pereira said Mr. Gardner told her the language was not in the prior RFQ. Mr. Pires said the second version of the bid did not have the language from the charter.

Ms. Martinez said she understood our budget is completely separate from the city, but we are a department of the city. Ms. Pereira said we get our power from the state.

Dr. Johnson said she attends city departmental meetings because she represents the board.

Mr. Pires said when we submit a purchase order it is approved by a city department, the purchasing department, so we funnel all our requirements through the city.

Ms. Pereira said it is a shared service and the board pays for a person in the purchasing department to process Board of Education items. She said the board gets its power from the state and it is not a city department. She said the only thing the city does is appropriate funds.

Ms. Martinez said she believed we are one city and she believed the relationship is a give and take.

Mr. Pires said we could post the item on BidSync and have the bids come to the board, but we need to go before the purchasing board as part of the ordinance. He said a vendor could challenge an award if we didn't follow the process.

Ms. Pereira said she did not believe the lengthy purchasing ordinance required the matter to go before the purchasing review board. She said as a prior member of the Finance Committee we never voted to remove any language from the template used three years ago.

Mr. Taylor said we should be totally sovereign from the city in regards to our own procurement.

Ms. Pereira said Mr. Tardy told her when he saw the board wanted the RFQ in the *Hartford Courant* and *Connecticut Law Tribune* that he went to the city attorney's office to find out if they had an account, and one of the city attorneys became aware of the matter.

Supt. Johnson suggesting getting a legal opinion from Shipman & Goodwin, and if they provide the okay to send the RFQ to BidSync.

Mr. Bradley said he wanted the legal advice because we don't want to shoot ourselves in the foot as we seek sovereignty. Dr. Johnson suggested the board consult Shipman & Goodwin on the legalities.

Ms. Martinez said she was concerned about the separation because in order to get things done we need to unite more. She said we need

to extend an olive branch. Ms. Pereira said saying we're not posting it unless you do this is not building relationships.

Ms. Pereira said she wanted Shipman & Goodwin to address whether we are required to put the language in.

Mr. Bradley moved that *"we refer this to our attorney, Shipman & Goodwin, to see if the language proposed by the city attorney's office is required for our RFQ."* The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez and unanimously approved.

Mr. Illingworth said he believed we could pass a motion pending the response from our attorneys.

Mr. Bradley moved that *"we approve the current language pending the approval by our attorney, Shipman & Goodwin, approving the language that's been proposed. Once we have an approval by our attorneys that the language is correct, that we can move forward with the posting."*

The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez and unanimously approved.

Supt. Johnson said she requested the item on crowd funding. She said while the district has its own foundation, one of our high schools is developing their own foundation, and there are Donors Choose for teachers and Go Fund Me sites. She said we had run into issues with Donors Choose because the donated materials belong to the school, not the teacher.

Dr. Johnson said the Shelton Board of Education put a policy into place regarding online crowd funding. She suggested the board create a process and policy.

Dr. Johnson said she had been discussing the issue with Ms. Clarke for a while and she was waiting for the board to change hands before bringing it forward.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said there is no monitoring in place for Donors Choose contributions.

Supt. Johnson asked that it be a standing item on the committee's agenda.

Mr. Bradley said he had become frustrated how difficult it is to donate monies with the amount of bureaucracy and red tape. He said this happened when he attempted to fix a wall at Bassick High. Ms. Clarke said she would provide her card and the person just has to call her and she can assist.

Mr. Bradley said he understands there needs to be monitoring, but he doesn't want to stifle things by saying it has to go through a mega-organization which puts red tape in the way.

Ms. Clarke said she agreed, but we have to be strategic about the donations we are trying to obtain. She said if there are multiple Go Fund Me accounts we are potentially tapping into the same resources.

Ms. Martinez said there needs to be a level of accountability and transparency.

The next item was on Columbus School Commissioner Network services. Dr. Johnson noted the board policy requires any contracts over \$25,000 to have board approval. Columbus is in the Commissioner's Network and receives \$680,000. There is a contract with Literacy How for about \$35,313, Fairfield University for \$31,000, and another with HILL for Literacy.

Ms. Pereira said items over \$25,000 are also supposed to go through the law firm.

Dr. Johnson said she was requesting approval because we want to go through the process properly.

Ms. Pereira noted the rules could be suspended if the board wishes.

Mr. Bradley said he was reading the contracts here for the first time. He asked what were the measurable outcomes of having the literacy coaches in the school.

Ms. Clarke says the state visits the schools in the Commissioner's Network as part of a measuring progress. Dr. Johnson said the state will report out on the progress of the work underway.

Mr. Taylor said if Dr. Johnson tells him this is a worthwhile program he doesn't need to research it himself. Dr. Johnson said the administration weighs in collectively on the decision and she is comfortable with this. Ms. Clarke said if the state did not want to continue to give us this money, they would have asked for these vendors to be removed.

Ms. Martinez noted there was a process and plan in order to put the school in the Commissioner's Network.

Mr. Bradley said a lot of the Commissioner's Network schools continue to be failing schools. He said he understood it was "free money," but it seemed like a crying shame that we're not talking about how the schools are performing.

Ms. Martinez said in the Commissioner's Network schools are measured. Dr. Johnson said, for example, she hasn't seen the growth that she would be happy with at Marin, Curiale and Columbus.

Ms. Martinez said she had been part of the process and advocated for Marin entering the Commission Network. She said there is a flawed process because the committees formed can include parents who do not have children in the school.

Ms. Pereira said she did not support the Commissioner's Network and had never voted for a single school to enter it.

Mr. Bradley said when he was child his father would measure his kids' reading progress by listening to him read. He added that Ben Carson, the African-American surgeon, said his mother used to do the same thing. He said standardized tests were not necessarily needed to monitor progress.

Ms. Pereira said a lot of our parents have challenges in reading due to native languages or coming from other countries.

In response to question, Dr. Johnson said some things could be done differently with the Commissioner Network, but she feels like she is held hostage because of the \$600,000. She said she was comfortable with the programs for which approval is being sought tonight.

Mr. Bradley moved to suspend Policy 3320.2R. The motion was seconded by Mr. Taylor and unanimously approved.

Mr., Bradley moved "*to approve contracts for Literacy How, Fairfield University and Hill for Literacy.*" The motion was seconded by Mr. Taylor and unanimously approved.

Mr. Bradley moved the meeting be adjourned. The motion was seconded by Mr. Taylor and unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod