

Tuesday, May 7, 2019

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE AD HOC COMMITTEE OF GREAT CITY SCHOOLS/MALES OF COLOR OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held May 7, 2019, at Bridgeport City Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 5:58 p.m. Present were Chair Joseph Sokolovic, Dr. Melissa Jenkins, Sauda Baraka, Sana Shah, Martin Rubin, JoAnn Kennedy and Natasha Noel.

Ms. Baraka moved to approve the committee's minutes of April 23, 2019. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on the community forum. Ms. Noel said the working group met on the issue. The speaker will be Cohan Harris on May 23rd. She said Mr. Harris will be effective in moving the work of the committee in the community forward. She said Mr. Harris asked for some specific data on Bridgeport.

Ms. Noel said the agenda of the forum has been formulated. She described said the forum was scheduled to last two hours and she described the proposed format. She said Mr. Harris has been tasked with discussing implicit bias and pushing teachers' thinking about what does and does not work with boys of color. There will be breakout sessions. Mr. Harris will deliver remarks at the end of the forum.

Ms. Noel distributed a draft flyer for the forum. Dr. Jenkins said she would investigate getting the flyer sent out via Dr.

Johnson's office. Ms. Shah said she would be distributing flyers at an event on May 18th.

There was a discussion of the public data that could be provided to Mr. Harris.

Ms. Noel described the questions that would be asked in the breakout sessions by the facilitators.

Ms. Noel said Mr. Walden would open the event and introduce the superintendent, followed by remarks by the superintendent, who will also recognize the committee; and Eric Alicea will provide a history of what the committee has done. Ms. Baraka will talk about what the committee is doing right now and introduce the schools that will present.

After all the schools have presented, Mr. Walden will discuss future steps and introduce the speaker. After the speaker, Ms. Shah will speak and provide instructions for the breakout groups. Following the breakout sessions, Ms. Noel will lead the recap section and introduce Mr. Harris for the call to action. Ms. Baraka will then close out the event.

The assignment of facilitators was discussed. There will be four breakout sessions, so the availability of six room would be requested.

The next agenda item was an update on the white paper.

Dr. Jenkins described the discussion of the working group on the white paper, including pressing issues. She said recommendations could be synthesized. She said she could use help with data if it is going to be included in the paper. She proposed that she summarize what research in this area indicates.

Ms. Shah said she attended the meeting. She said in examining systemic racism in policy that already exists in the district she was able to connect with an equity consultant in Massachusetts. She said an equity audit was suggested to identify policies not considerate of the most vulnerable students and to remove neutral policies that don't acknowledge systems of racism and oppression. This would require the district and the committees to do through training on what anti-racist policies look like.

Ms. Shah said a male educator of color indicated to her that the union should take a role in helping develop relationships between students and teachers.

Ms. Shah said she believed the paper should be as bold as possible. Ms. Baraka said she agreed. Ms. Shah said she believed teachers should be required to do professional development on white supremacy and how that shows up in the classroom.

Ms. Shah said there was a discussion of having the district consider how everything it does how it impacts males of color.

Mr. Sokolovic said as a Caucasian male when he heard the phrase white supremacy his defenses went up. He said white privilege might be more acceptable verbiage in order not to start teachers off on the defensive.

Ms. Shah said persons are uncomfortable all the time, including navigating racism and violence, and teachers need to be uncomfortable. She said if teachers can't confront white supremacy they can't be a service to black and brown kids.

Ms. Baraka said some people are stuck and they aren't going to change their minds and their behavior when it comes to our children; they have to be weeded out so they are not damaging our children one second longer. She said our black boys are dying and going to jail in record numbers for no reason other than the color of their skin. She said she went to segregated schools and lives being uncomfortable every single day. She added when Martin Luther King met with President Johnson he told the president he would ignore the suggestion that it was not the right time. Ms. Baraka said that he made a difference.

Ms. Baraka said because there would be a new school administration if we don't push this thing now and make it happen now it may not happen.

Mr. Sokolovic said he didn't mind making people uncomfortable, but not to the point where they shut down and stop listening. He said they may be borderline people who may be swayed and changed. He said most people don't get into teaching with the intention of doing harm. He said a lot of this stuff is implicit or subconscious bias.

Ms. Shah said talking about white supremacy is not just for white teachers, but for teachers of color as well who are forced perpetuate Eurocentric narratives that are problematic.

Dr. Jenkins said the question is the messaging we want to use for sustainability in the midst of a change of leadership. Ms. Baraka said there is always a reason not to challenge something and there is never a best time. She said this might be a good time to go out and speak about what is best for our families.

Ms. Shah said she wanted to write the paper in a way that it could be used in any community that had a lot of males of color. She said culturally responsive teaching makes people comfortable, but it does not address deep structures. She just teachers should be required to go through professional development on white supremacy.

Dr. Jenkins said if the term white supremacy is used that becomes the mental model. he asked if it created cohesiveness, stimulated growth and responsiveness to the males of color. She said she was concerned about creating schisms.

Ms. Shah said she believed we have to be disruptive, even though it will be uncomfortable.

Dr. Jenkins said if she was taking a course in African-American studies white supremacy would be a 400 or 500-level course, it would not be given at an introductory level. She said she was fine with it being in the coursework for professional development.

Ms. Baraka said what bothers her most about trying to sugarcoat things is we give the perspective that we don't care as much about ourselves. She said the Black Panther Party and Fannie Lou Hamer were not clean about things, but they put things out when they were not acceptable.

Dr. Jenkins said her greatest concern was messaging because there is no movement without relationship, and relationships are forged around the language we choose to use.

Mr. Sokolovic said he believed the goal is to level the playing field for everyone the language and how we get there is open to debate. He said we can have a professional development on white supremacy, but we can't keep people's minds open and keep people listening.

JoAnn Kennedy said the committee was supposed to be bold and make changes because no else is going to do it. She said we can't always skate in the middle. She said she experienced blatant racism because they are in power.

Ms. Shah said the closest we get to neutrality is the closest we get to complicity and passively continuing systems of racism and oppression. She said this is the central issue around everything.

Ms. Baraka said the paper is being written to address an issue and the committee should write the most honest paper it can produce. Ms. Shah said we're dealing with one of the most segregated with a huge economic and resource disparity. She said it is the result of white supremacy.

Ms. Baraka said we don't need to coddle folks and worry about how they feel. Ms. Shah said white supremacy is rising, citing the recent shooting in New Zealand. She said she was more worried about the dangers from white supremacy than how someone who benefits from systems of power has hurt feelings. In response to a question, Ms. Shah said she was Pakistani.

Dr. Jenkins asked why white supremacy would be used instead of equity. Ms. Shah said we could use both, but ultimately we are doing an equity audit because of white supremacy.

Mr. Sokolovic noted the Board of Education had to buy into what we produce and bring forward. He said he would sell whatever is given to him. Ms. Baraka noted the committee would address the white paper before a final draft is released. She said it should be perfectly clear the document is coming from the committee, not just Dr. Jenkins, with the goal of changing policy and procedures. She said part of the plan was to develop a clearing house office where everything flows through the office to see how it will impact the boys and young men in the district.

Dr. Jenkins said she would try to work on the white paper every week.

The next agenda item was the \$32,000 membership fee for Great City Schools. Mr. Sokolovic said it was going to be a hard sell with the current budget. He said he would try to sell it.

Ms. Baraka said the budget would have been submitted by February and there should be a line item funding the membership. Ms. Baraka said there is information provided by Great City Schools regularly. She said they are available to assist on issues that come up on a national level that impact urban districts.

Dr. Jenkins said if the district was looking through the lens of what would benefit males of color, Great City Schools is a great resource. She said it is a resource all upper-level leaders should be using.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 7:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

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