

Monday, November 19, 2018

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE GOVERNANCE
COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF
EDUCATION, held November 19, 2018, at Bridgeport City
Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:32 p.m. Present were members Chair John Weldon, Sybil Allen and Hernan Illingworth. Board members Maria Pereira and Joe Sokolovic were present.

Superintendent Aresta L. Johnson, Ed.D, was present.

Mr. Illingworth moved to approve the committee's minutes of January 17, 2018. The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on Policy 6201, field trip approval process.

Dr. Johnson said language was added about five days' notice for the daily trips and ten days' notice for out of state. She said previously out-of-state trips had to be approved by the board, but the updated language only applies to international trips. She said she wanted to be sure our practices and policies align.

Dr. Johnson noted another change was a reference to K-12 was made pre-K to 12. "Trips to foreign lands" was changed to "international field trips."

Dr. Johnson said she also presented a proposed regulation for Policy 6201-A.

There was a discussion about trips to amusement or water parks.

Ms. Pereira said she did not understand the big deal with such trips at the end of the school year.

Dr. Johnson noted there were liability and safety issues, especially at water parks. She said if the board does want to allow trips to water parks the ratio of teacher to students should be reduced from 1 to 12. She suggested the ratio be doubled.

Ms. Allen said when she taught and took children on field trips she had to obtain insurance for the students.

Ms. Pereira suggested leaving the provision with language saying trips must be tied to an educational purpose without mentioning amusement parks.

Mr. Illingworth and Mr. Weldon said they felt nervous about allowing trips to amusement parks and water parks.

Dr. Johnson said she would look into the policies of other school districts and report back to the committee in December.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said she believed the ten-day approval at the assistant superintendent level for overnight out-of-state trip was sufficient. She said her position was not to exclude the board, but sometimes a quick turnaround on the trips is needed.

The next item was on development of a board member dress code policy. Ms. Pereira said she provided the committee with a draft policy. She noted the proposed policy only applied to Regular Meetings and official board public hearings, forums, celebratory and awards ceremonies, and graduation ceremonies. She said this had been an issue for some time, but especially after a graduation ceremony.

Mr. Sokolovic said when he was elected to the board he spent a significant amount of money updating his wardrobe, but not everybody could afford to do that. He noted he was a blue-collar worker.

Ms. Pereira said her provision about men's dress calls for a collared shirt, which could be a polo shirt; ties are not required. She said she objected to board members coming to meetings wearing shorts, athletic gear and jeans. She noted there is a dress code for students and staff members are in attendance at meetings in appropriate dress.

Mr. Illingworth said if Ms. Pereira could get the teachers' union to agree to a dress code, he would be in support of Ms. Pereira's proposal. Ms. Pereira said Atty. Gary Brochu told the board they had every right to set a dress code policy for the district, without writing it into the union contract. She said she has seen teachers in inappropriate garb like flip-flops and yoga pants.

Ms. Allen said she would agree to extend such a policy to teachers.

Mr. Weldon said he didn't believe such a provision could be enforced with board members because they are not employees. He said it came down to personal style and what image board members wanted to present.

Ms. Pereira said board members should put their best foot forward at official gatherings. She said what happened at the graduation ceremony was deplorable.

Mr. Illingworth said when you work fulltime and wear casual clothing at work it may not be convenient to change clothes for a 5:30 meeting. He said he believed this person was the result of one person.

Ms. Pereira said that was not the case.

Mr. Illingworth said the board member was encouraged to participate in the graduation despite his reluctance.

Dr. Johnson said she invited the board member to sit on stage and did not want to exclude someone from the ceremony supporting the kids. Ms. Pereira said even with a gown it would have been possible to see the board member's Timberland boots with no socks on.

Ms. Pereira said Rev. Moales used to come to Regular Meetings with tracksuits and baseball caps. Mr. Illingworth said the board members are community members who do different things for employment, unlike staff members who work in the district.

Mr. Illingworth said if he was retired he would shave and come in a tuxedo. Ms. Pereira noted board members come to meetings in shorts. She said a lot of people talk about this issue.

Mr. Illingworth said he believe this was coming from something personal to an individual board member. Ms..

Pereira said there were women on the board who dress inappropriately.

Mr. Illingworth, Mr. Weldon and Ms. Allen said they were not going to go down this road. Ms. Pereira said she would putting photos of people on Facebook.

Mr. Illingworth moved to postpone the matter indefinitely. The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

The next item was on policies and procedures for information requests made under the Connecticut Freedom of Information Act.

Mr. Weldon said the item is geared towards centralizing how such information requests are made. He said the city has a centralized portal that applicants go through. Ms. Pereira said the board was not a division of the city.

Ms. Pereira said under state statute every superintendent's office serves as the record-keeper for the board of education, just like the city clerk is the record keeper for the City Council. She said this is reflected in board policy as well.

Mr. Weldon said the board's staff winds up having to administer FOI requests when there is a centralized portal in the city, which would include vetting by the city attorney's office. Ms. Pereira said the board was not a division of the city. Mr. Weldon said the school district is part of the City of Bridgeport. Ms. Pereira said the board gets its powers from the legislature and the state. She said the city charter contained no references to the board.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said there are a lot of FOI requests from companies and teachers working on dissertations, and they are directed to the city portal. She said this alleviates some work by her office staff, although they still have to gather the data. She said the city attorney's office had access to the portal.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said as much as 25 percent time of Ms. Valle's time in the office was spent working on FOI requests.

Ms. Pereira said the board is a public agency and considered as such under the statute. Mr. Weldon said he believed the board did not have its own employer identification number or exist as a corporate entity. Ms. Pereira said that was not true because the superintendent does not report to the mayor.

Mr. Weldon said he believed there should be a policy to solidify the current practice of the superintendent's office routinely routing FOI requests to the city's portal.

Ms. Pereira read C.G.S. 1-201 on access to public records. Mr. Weldon said he disagreed with Ms. Pereira's position that the board was a public agency. Ms. Pereira said she was confident if Mr. Weldon called the state Department of Education they would say the board was a public agency. Mr. Weldon said the board was the educational part of the City of Bridgeport.

Ms. Pereira said she would contact the director of the Freedom of Information Commission and ask him if local school boards are public agencies.

Mr. Weldon said all FOI requests should be handled the same way. He said where he works there is a FOI officer. He said he was advocating that all requests go to the city's portal.

Mr. Weldon said if a board member makes an FOI request, they are made as citizens, not as a board member. Dr. Johnson noted the issue of consistency came up at a prior board meeting. She said it makes it easier for her office if everyone making FOI request does it the same way.

Mr. Sokolovic left the meeting

Mr. Weldon said because there is a no policy in this area Ms. Valle does not feel comfortable telling some persons who file FOI requests directly with the superintendent's office that they need to go through the portal.

Ms. Pereira said since the school district is a public agency, no one should be sent to the city's portal. She said she would contact the state Board of Education and ask if local school boards are public agencies. She said she was willing to bet that they would say that is the case.

Mr. Illingworth suggested the administration come up with a proposed policy for everyone making an FOI request to follow. Mr. Weldon said the board developing its own portal might be an option.

Ms. Pereira said the only things that could be redacted from material provided under FOI are personnel opinions, contract negotiations or legal opinions. She said if a legal opinion is copied to someone who is not a board member or a lawyer, such a legal opinion could not be redacted.

Ms. Pereira described a past incident where a legal opinion was released in error by someone in a prior superintendent's office.

Dr. Johnson said she would speak to Mr. Postolowski about the possibility of a Board of Education portal.

Mr. Illingworth moved the meeting be adjourned. The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:35 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Approved by the committee on February 3, 2020