

Monday, March 1, 2021

MINUTES OF THE GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held March 1, 2021, by video conference call, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:36 p.m.

Committee members present were Chair John Weldon, Joe Sokolovic, and Joseph Lombard. Board members Sybil Allen and Albert Benejan joined the meeting subsequently as noted.

Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

Mr. Sokolovic moved approval of the committee's minutes of the meeting of February 1, 2021. The motion was seconded by Mr. Lombard and approved by a 2-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon and Sokolovic. Mr. Lombard abstained.

Mr. Lombard moved to hear item 3 prior to Item number 2 . The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was a review of district magnet school policies

Mr. Sokolovic said magnet policies were changed about two years ago and he said he submitted to the item to the agenda to see how the policies were impacting the schools.

Supt. Testani said the focus for tonight was elementary schools, not high schools. He said the entrance requirements for Central Magnet are dated and discussions

are ongoing.

The superintendent noted the magnet school principals were in attendance and Francine Carbone of High Horizons would make the initial presentation.

Ms. Carbone said the changes in 2018 loosened the entrance requirements and the continuous enrollment criteria for magnet schools. She said there used to be a rubric based on the whole child for entrance criteria. She said SRBI and special education numbers have increased since the change in policies. She said this has stretched things since the magnet schools received less funding and it has also increased stress for students, staff, and administration.

Mr. Sokolovic said the past policy revision was the result of compromise. He said in his mind the magnet schools were functioning as a quasi-gifted-and-talented program and he feared that would be lost in the loosening of the criteria. Ms. Carbone said that was the case, but the true definition of magnet was to draw in students with specific interests. She said it had become harder to lead the students to a level of enrichment and acceleration.

In response to a question, Ms. Carbone said she did not believe a lot of students were being screened out under the old policies.

In response to a question, Ms. Carbone said she believed a revision to the current policy was needed. She said a rubric based on the whole child, not just grades, should be used for the upper grades. Mr. Sokolovic said he agreed.

Dr. Victor Black, executive director of magnet schools, said there was a consensus among the principals that the change

in the entrance requirements has resulted for more struggles in progress of students. He said the differentiation requires more time, along with the higher SRBI numbers, to serve all kids.

Dr. Luis Planas, principal of Multicultural Magnet School, said he was in agreement, particularly on the amount of time spent bridging gaps. Terese Maguire, principal of Park City Magnet, said a lot of quality time is being spent on the developing the habits of mind for a magnet school student such as time management and attention to detail.

Mr. Weldon noted when he went to High Horizons Magnet some decades ago he was out of his element, but he was able to get through it and it was hard. He said it is unfortunate to put some children under pressure when maybe they should not have been there in the first place.

Lindsay Davis, principal of Classical Studies Magnet Academy, said entrance criteria would ensure that the students and the families are ready for the rigor and the pace that magnet schools provide.

Supt. Testani said he believed the change in policies does not do the students a lot of good if they have to struggle. He said some of the current generation of students may not always have the necessary resiliency. He said we really want to create an atmosphere of enrichment for students that want to excel.

Ms. Allen joined the meeting.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested the administration and staff get together and put forward a recommendation to the committee.

Mr. Sokolovic said in the discussions a few years ago there were allegations of exclusion. He said a revision should include kids being where it best fits their needs. He said if less interventions are needed at magnet schools, they can be redirected to schools where they are more needed, and it would be best for all the schools.

Supt. Testani said he believed the administration could bring forward something for the committee's meeting next month, so parents understand going into next school year what the expectations are. He said this would not impact families who have applied for the lottery closing March 12th. Dr. Black said recruitment season kicks off for schools in July and parents should be made aware of any changes.

Mr. Sokolovic said personally he would like to see more academic standards and rigor built into the policy. He said the retention policy for magnet schools was watered down as well quite a bit. He said the entrance criteria and requirements to stay in the program should be aligned with one another. He noted coordination was needed with Central Magnet as the feeder school from the elementary magnets.

Dr. Black said sometimes students who have great memory and can memorize content struggle with performance tasks, so the criteria should focus on a blend of grades and a performance-based assessment.

Mr. Benejan joined the meeting.

Supt. Testani said the sibling policy should be looked at as well. He said it is convenient for parents to have children in the same school, however, we have to look at individual children when evaluating criteria. He said an automatic

sibling entry was unfair to the process.

Ms. Carbone said the sibling policy right now is basically an automatic entrance for students in Grades K to 3. She said she believed there had been more sibling applications in later grades than under the previous policy.

Dr. Black said it would be best to address the sibling and the magnet policy simultaneously.

The next agenda item was on remote participation by board members in meetings. Mr. Weldon said he circulated a draft policy for the board members.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested it be made clearer that a chair who has an emergency should be allowed to participate remotely, but not to serve as chair of the meeting. He said he believed the chair should be able to appoint a substitute chair for a meeting or via another method such as seniority.

Mr. Benejan said he agreed with Mr. Sokolovic. He noted he might have to leave the state unexpectedly in the event of a family emergency.

Mr. Weldon said he would circulate the next draft to the committee and bring it forward at the next meeting.

The next agenda item was on the district's retention policy.

Supt. Testani said he intended this item to be considered at the next meeting. He said there needed to be a discussion about the issue. He said in upper middle school grades there are students not participating in the online learning. He said it doesn't do anyone any good by promoting children and setting them up for difficulties in the next grade,

particularly 8th graders going into high school. If a student has difficulties in 9th grade, the likelihood of gaining their diploma is significantly lower than the average student.

Mr. Sokolovic said he did not want a situation where the diploma was the result of just passing kids along when they're not ready.

The superintendent said staff want to help children, but it should not be to the point where the grades do not reflect the work that is being produced. Dr. Black said sometimes students memorizing things from a book is not the best way to learn, but if given some tasks and some applied learning they can really excel. He said the district has to look at instructional practices.

Supt. Testani described a situation with an ELL student was receiving A's in English with the use of a translator, but was at entry-level language skills on a state exam.

In response to a question, the superintendent described the remedial-type courses that could be used in English and math to catch students up who fell behind during the pandemic. There will be summer school offered, but this would be used during the school year in place of electives.

Dr. Black said there is a buffer available for the students who need 25 credits to graduate with 32 credits being offered over four years.

The superintendent said the high school transition process was being discussed prior to COVID and it would be looked at again. Dr. Black said when we move towards students being more independent learners it will minimize the transitions from elementary to high school, which would be

the next big step.

Supt. Testani said a decision will be made on the course of action. He said the goal is to have students having skills to move on to their next step when they graduate.

Mr. Sokolovic moved to adjourn the meeting. Mr. Lombard seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:33 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

*Approved by the committee on June 7, 2021*