

Monday, August 17, 2020

MINUTES OF THE GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held August 17, at Bridgeport Regional Vocational Aquaculture School and by video call, at Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 5:03 p.m.

Committee members present were Chair Hernan Illingworth and John Weldon. Board member Joseph Sokolovic was present. Board member Albert Benejan arrived subsequently as noted.

Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

Mr. Weldon moved approval of the minutes of the meeting of June 1, 2020. The motion was seconded by Mr. Illingworth and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on Policy 5140, which covers school uniforms. Mr. Illingworth said there had been some concerns about the policy, especially on the high school level. He said as a parent leader he spearheaded the effort with the board to create this policy. He said there were thousands of parent surveys that were done before the current policy was put in effect in 2012.

Mr. Illingworth said the policy has been successful at the K to 8 level, but it does need to be monitored and enforced.

Mr. Benejan arrived at the meeting.

Supt. Testani said the document distributed was put together

with the high school principals in conjunction with Dr. Victor Black, the executive director of secondary education. He said the principals were present because they support revisiting the uniform policy. He added that the uniform policy is successful at the K-8 level. He said he supported giving high school students choices and added suburban districts do not require everyone to dress the same. He said challenges to the policy by students force the administration to spend time away from teaching and learning and enforcing what kids are wearing. He said the requirement of students to wear masks would also complicate the issue.

The superintendent said it was not proposed to change the uniform requirement at BMA or the lab coats used at Fairchild Wheeler. He said he would support making wearing shoes, not sandals or flip-flops, mandatory.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said he was looking to pilot a new policy for a year and then the pluses and minuses could be considered for needed further tweaks. An official policy change could be considered later in the school year.

In response to a question, Beth Furnari, principal of the IT School at Fairchild Wheeler, said she used other high school policies as a basis for the draft.

Mr. Sokolovic said the change would save parents who are out of work the expense of having to purchase the uniforms. He said defining offensive logos could be difficult. He noted that young people develop phrases and language that are not easy to determine the meaning of.

Supt. Testani suggested prohibiting clothing displaying logos, labels and phrases suggesting sex, alcohol or drugs,

and profanity. He suggested allowing political statements due to free speech.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested referring to closed footwear and limiting the size of heels.

Mr. Benejan said he believed the uniform policy was working well, but principals had to work harder to enforce the policies. He said he preferred uniforms because it made things easier for himself as a single dad. He said the school colors on shirts made it easier for security to identify students who did not belong in another school. He said parents needed to be informed that the uniforms are mandatory.

Mr. Illingworth said he understood enforcement was difficult, but there is a lot to be said in favor of uniforms. He said Bridgeport was a unique district with a lot of challenges such as gang-related colors. He said he was hesitant to suspend the policy, but would let the full board decide. He said he knew from his daughter that Mr. Graf at Central enforced the uniform policy, even though it was not easy. He said in the past children were being bullied because of the sneakers or the clothing they were wearing. He said the board could streamline the policy to make it easier to enforce.

Mr. Weldon said he sees both sides, but simply suspending the uniform policy and trying a dress code in its place would be a test. He noted the challenges of enforcing the policy at the high school level and he was not sure the dress code would be easier to enforce than the uniform policy.

Supt. Testani said Mr. Graf, who was unable to attend, expressed his support for revising the uniform policy.

The superintendent said his office had received a lot of calls from parents indicating they can't afford financially to buy new uniforms. He noted children at these ages grow quickly. He said if students are sent home for not wearing uniforms, they lose a day of instruction. He said when parents are called about students not wearing uniforms, they often respond they told the child to wear the uniform and then went to work. He asked the committee to hear from the principals in attendance.

Ms. Furnari said although there would be a dress code, it would be more relaxed than the uniform policy. She said teaching students appropriate attire was valuable as well. She said her students would be surprised to learn that the policies were not enforced at Fairchild Wheeler in the past and discipline data would support this. She said she had received calls from parents about financial hardships concerning buying uniforms.

Mr. Sokolovic said he would not support additional discipline which would result from enforcing the uniform policy.

In response to a question, Ms. Furnari said wearing the lab coats is a rule at Fairchild Wheeler. She said students have opportunities to take them off during the day. She said she believed the lab coats offer a measure of distinction to the school.

Dane Brown, principal of Harding, said last year there was an emphasis on chronic absenteeism and it was learned the lack of uniforms was a barrier to coming to school at times. Dr. Joseph Raiola, principal of Bassick, said he was in favor of the draft. He said the current policy has always been tough to enforce and sometimes takes time away from instruction.

Mr. Benejan said the uniform policy is enforced at BMA and he wondered why the other schools can't do the same.

Dr. Black said he supported both sides of the conversation. He noted BMA prepares students as first responders, jobs which tend to require a uniform. He said the negativity that often results first thing in the morning from the uniform policy can interfere with the education of the student. He said he believed the lab coat was appropriate at Fairchild Wheeler.

Supt. Testani said when the uniform policy was created there was clothing worn associated with gang activity. He said he believed the current gang activity has become more discrete and is less likely to draw attention with clothing. He noted the DiNardo family donated uniforms for some of the elementary grades.

Mr. Sokolovic said he was not opposed to a separate policy for magnet schools.

Mr. Illingworth said he would like to see a professional-style dress code. He said he supported hitting the reset button and bringing everyone around the table, including students, to develop a policy.

Mr. Benejan said he agreed the students needs to be at the table.

Me. Weldon moved *“to recommend to the full board that the district suspend Policy 5140 as it relates to secondary school students, with the exception of BMA and the lab coat requirement of Fairchild Wheeler.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Illingworth and unanimously approved.

Mr. Weldon moved to adjourn the meeting. Mr. Illingworth seconded the motion. The motion was unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:50 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

*Approved by the committee on September 3, 2020*