

Tuesday, December 14, 2021

MINUTES OF THE GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held December 14, 2021, at Central High School, 1 Lincoln Boulevard, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:32 p.m. Present were members Chair John Weldon, Joseph Sokolovic, and Joseph Lombard. Board members Albert Benejan, Bobbi Brown, and Christine Baptiste-Perez were present.

Student representatives Michael Hemmings of Fairchild Wheeler IT and Latonia Ferguson of Central High were in attendance.

Supt. Michael J. Testani was present.

Mr. Sokolovic moved to approve the minutes of the meeting of October 5, 2021. The motion was seconded by Mr. Lombard and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on the Make the Road Connecticut youth group regarding student transportation. Mr. Weldon said he received notice that the group had only opened the e-mail inviting them to the meeting today and were not able to be here.

Supt. Testani said he has been meeting monthly along with Mr. Pires with the group. There were conversations about bus passes provided to high school students. Since the beginning of the school year an additional hundred passes have been provided to each of the three comprehensive high

schools. He said some students technically under the transportation limits have received passes.

The superintendent said the data indicates the additional bus passes are not being taken advantage of. Only Harding has taken advantage of the extra bus passes. He said Bassick was not even meeting the original allocation of bus passes that were provided.

Supt. Testani said they are a great group of young people who bring up good points and ask great questions. He said they are learning advocacy and leadership.

In response to a question, the superintendent said the bus passes are monthly. He said the passes purchased are good 24/7, so they can be used when after-school activities are completed or to go to work or friends' houses.

The next agenda item was on the board's policy on public comment.

Mr. Weldon said he had been limiting public comment to agenda items only to keep control while we were in the remote phase. He said the board's attorney indicated the board could limit the number of speakers and the time period devoted to public comment. He suggested the number be limited to 15 speakers, with two minutes per person, and that the expansion of the number of speakers be prohibited.

Mr. Sokolovic said expansion of the number of speakers should be possible for major issues. Mr. Weldon said such major issues could be handled at a separate public hearing. He said he wanted to be sure that the board did not feel obligated to accommodate a large number such as fifty people.

Mr. Sokolovic said the board could determine whether to expand public comment or not if a large crowd showed up. Mr. Weldon said counsel indicated some boards have public speaking sessions at both the beginning and end of the meetings. Mr. Sokolovic said many people in the city have challenges and it is not easy to show up for a meeting and potentially stay very late.

Mr. Lombard said he believed in the cases where there are lengthy public comment sessions those who wish to attend the meeting are forced stay late to observe the business being conducted. He said if public speaking was allowed at the end of the meeting there is no guarantee board members would stay to listen to those comments.

Ms. Brown said she liked the idea of holding public comment at the beginning and end of the meeting.

Mr. Sokolovic urged the language not be mandatory in the event seventeen people signed up for public comment because two people would have to wait until the end of the meeting.

Mr. Benejan asked if there could be discussions with parents such as with transportation before the meeting starts. Mr. Lombard said if that occurred, people would have to be cut off for the 6:30 meeting start.

Mr. Weldon said the City Council has public comment before its meeting, but since it is not part of the meeting the members are often not in attendance.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said if there are large number of people signed up for public comment there could be another public meeting to accommodate them.

The superintendent said the board could probably predict what topics would generate a lot of public comment. He said transportation or closing or consolidating schools would be examples. He said often the public speakers are some of the same folks who do not have children, grandchildren or relatives impacted by the board's decisions. He said in the past disgruntled former employees came to the meetings to speak, which just wasted time and prevented work from being done. He added there is also a problem with some people signing up others to speak.

Mr. Weldon urged the speakers' list include the topic the speaker wants to address. He suggested speakers sign up with Ms. Valle before the meetings and indicate their subject. If the topic is known it could be determined that some subjects are simply not appropriate for the board such as the employment status of staff because the administration determines the staffing levels.

Ms. Brown noted the restrictions the board members had when they signed up to speak before the state legislature.

Mr. Sokolovic said he was very hesitant to restrict public comment in any way, shape or form. He said the board members were elected because they were discerning at what is in its purview or not. He noted there was an occasion when staff members spoke advocating for a person to be appointed to a position, and we all listened to that. Mr. Weldon said we should learn from that experience going forward.

Mr. Sokolovic said he believed the public should have the right to advocate in personnel situations. He said he had been called bad names while sitting on the board, which he did not like, but he believed people had the right to address him as a public official however they want.

Mr. Weldon said he believed comment should be allowed on any subject within the board's jurisdiction, which excludes personnel matters. Mr. Sokolovic said such matters could come to the board after arbitration. The superintendent said hearing such matters could prejudice the board members from only hearing brief comments by the public.

Mr. Benejan said he agreed with Mr. Sokolovic.

Supt. Testani said he hoped the student reps would not have to sit through lengthy public comment sessions.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said public comment on potential bias or outside the purview of the board is not the most effective use of our time. She said unlimited public comment could be a bit chaotic.

Mr. Lombard said he believed if public comment was in two segments, the first 15 speakers should be able to speak on any topic, not just agenda items.

Supt. Testani asked if the first group of fifteen could be limited to parents. Mr. Weldon said that could be cumbersome and difficult to administer.

Mr. Sokolovic said sometimes when special topics have shifted to Special Meetings it cuts the public out because public comment is not allowed at Special Meetings. He suggested public comment at Special Meetings be restricted

to agenda items, excluding executive session items. Mr. Lombard said the same rules as for Regular Meetings could apply.

Mr. Weldon suggested he prepare a draft which he will circulate to the members, and there could be further tweaks and then finalization at the committee. Mr. Weldon said he would remove the limitation on public comment on agenda items at future meetings.

The next agenda item was on adding student representative reports to the order of business of Regular Meetings.

Mr. Weldon said when the bylaws were revised three years ago the item was removed. He said there have been suggestions to reinstate it. He said he wanted to be sure that it is understood what those reports should be. He said if two representatives per school speak it could get quite lengthy. He added the reports were often routine, not about the significant events at the school.

Mr. Weldon said there should only be one report from each school. He said if there is nothing to report at a given meeting that should be okay.

Supt. Testani said a template could be created for the reports on events to highlight.

There was a discussion of how long the student reports should be. Ms. Ferguson urged the reports be five to seven minutes. Mr. Weldon said he believed seven minutes is excessive, although he did not believe the time had to be codified.

The superintendent said he did not want the principals to dictate to the representatives what should be in the report. He said in the past principals were told by the superintendent's office to review what the students were going to say. He said the students should be able to raise issues without censorship.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said after the last meeting she ended up waiting for the bus with the student representative who had to wait by herself. Mr. Weldon noted the student reports used to be pretty early on in the agenda. Mr. Sokolovic said it preceded public comment. The superintendent said he believed it should precede public comment. Mr. Benejan and Ms. Brown agreed.

Mr. Weldon said he believed the real point of student representatives is to be engaged in the decision-making process. He said he believed student reps should be allowed to go home before the end of the meeting.

Mr. Sokolovic said if a board member asks a student rep questions it should not count against the student's time. He said the student reps can participate in the debate on agenda items.

Supt. Testani said if there are major issues the student reps could reach out to him on Teams, and he could potentially visit their schools and discuss the matter.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said he is typically available about 30 minutes before meetings and he could hold private discussions with the student reps about their concerns. He said he would also be willing to meet with the student reps once a month in his office for lunch. He noted

there are often students who participate in the roundtables he holds at schools.

Mr. Weldon suggested the template be developed and discussed at the next meeting. Mr. Sokolovic asked that the student representative reports be added to the agenda. Mr. Weldon said for the time being he would defer a portion of his report to the students.

Mr. Lombard moved *“to add a new formal agenda item, student representative reports, to appear just prior to public comment to the board for full consideration.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 7:38 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

*Approved by the committee on February 10, 2022*