

Thursday, February 10, 2022

MINUTES OF THE GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held February 10, 2022, at Central High School, 1 Lincoln Boulevard, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:34 p.m. Present were members Chair John Weldon, Albert Benejan, and Joe Lombard. Board members Joseph Sokolovic and Christine Baptiste-Perez* were present.
(*remote participation)

Supt. Michael J. Testani was present.

Mr. Lombard moved to approve the minutes of the meeting of December 14, 2021. The motion was seconded by Mr. Weldon and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was a discussion with Make the Connecticut youth group regarding student transportation.

Mwichi, the youth coordinator, and Crystal of Make the Road Connecticut were present.

Mwichi said unfortunately other members could not be here tonight. She said she wanted to discuss the transportation mileage for district students so more students could receive bus passes.

Supt. Testani said more bus passes have been given out to high school students due to Covid. He said bus transportation for extracurricular activities has been provided as well.

Supt. Testani said the transportation limit was two miles for high school students.

Mwichi said the group had been meeting with the superintendent for a couple of months. She said all students are not aware they can receive bus passes. She said Bridgeport receives less money per student than neighboring cities.

Crystal said the group would be willing to go to the City Council and advocate for more funding.

Mr. Weldon said it sounded like Mr. Pires and the superintendent had been trying to accommodate the students with more bus passes. He said the board would be requesting an increase from the city for education. He said any changes to the transportation limits would have to be studied for its impact on bus costs.

Mwichi said it was just not safe for kids to be on public buses now due to Covid.

Mr. Weldon said the students who receive bus passes are those that do not fit easily into school bus routes. He said the city bus company is not allowed to provide special buses just for schools due to federal regulations.

Mr. Sokolovic wondered if the GBTA could start a new route and integrate it into public routes to better accommodate students.

Crystal said students did not know that they cannot use the bus passes on weekends.

Supt. Testani said well over 400 bus passes had been handed out. He said as we've gotten to the colder weather there has been more use than in the fall. He said Harding had the largest number of passes and all of that school's allocation have been used.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the new Bassick High will increase the number of school buses needed for the school.

In response to a question, Mwichi said the group has focused on high school transportation, not elementary students. Supt. Testani said the district website has not been updated yet, but there will be more advertising about transportation. He said the schools advertised the availability of bus passes at the beginning of the year and they have lists of the students who have issued passes. He added elementary students who live beyond 1.5 miles get school buses.

In response to a question, the superintendent said due to expanded federal dollars bus passes have been provided for students who live between 1.5 miles and 2 miles from their schools, along with those in after-school activities and sports. He noted that funding will dry up in 2024.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said adding more transportation at Fairchild Wheeler a few years ago cost \$1.5 million. He said if bus transportation was expanded the question would be if We Transport has available buses and bus drivers. He noted there was a shortage of bus drivers across the state. He said to bring a new bus driver on board takes about six months.

The superintendent said the bus routes are created by a sophisticated computer program, but a lot of times the buses have very few students, particularly at Central High, because students are dropped off by parents.

Supt. Testani said he could provide the committee with estimated costs for changing transportation limits.

Mr. Sokolovic said there could be advocacy at the federal level to allow bus companies to make routes aimed at students.

Mr. Lombard asked if there could be increased school buses provided just during the cold weather months. The superintendent said the inquiry could be made, but the shortage of bus drivers might impact that.

Mr. Benejan said for him money is not the issue. He said his first issue is the health and safety of the students. He noted the difficulty students had in walking to school and unsafe conditions he has observed.

Mwichi said there was data available about the routes students used to walk to school and the safety issues.

JoAnn Kennedy was recognized. She said the board had been underfunded for decades.

In response to a question, Mr. Weldon said there would be an RFP for student transportation services presented to the Contracts Committee next week.

The next agenda item was on public comment to the board.

Mr. Weldon said item was discussed in December and he prepared a proposed draft for a new policy.

Mr. Weldon said the discussion previously was that if the number of speakers exceeded fifteen people, any additional public speakers would present after the conclusion of the agenda.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez asked about the provisions on personnel matters, employment grievances and other topics as to the day-to-day oversight of the superintendent. She said part of the duties of the board are oversight as to their one employee, the superintendent. She said comment on day-to-day events gives the board insight as to what is going on in the schools.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said from discussions with CABE she found that other districts do not prohibit this type of speech. She said she did not agree with proposed restriction.

Mr. Weldon said this was aimed at people taking “potshots” at employees such teachers or principals and was an attempt to keep public comment focused on what it is supposed to be. The superintendent noted the board has policies that indicate it is supposed to protect district employees as well.

Mr. Lombard suggested the chair be given the discretion to curtail certain comments in certain circumstances. Mr. Weldon said the language on top of the public comment sign-in sheet could be incorporated into the policies.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said she believed public comment gives additional insight to the board members about what is going on in the schools and the impacts on children.

Mr. Weldon said there have been instances where someone's job was eliminated as part of the budgeting process and their supporters come to public comment and try to get the board to influence the superintendent to reverse a budgeting decision.

Mr. Sokolovic said he believed the proposal was overly broad. He said he agreed with Ms. Baptiste-Perez. He said a reading of the policy would prohibit a parent from coming to the podium and complaining about the cleanliness of a school because it falls under the superintendent's day-to-day operations. He said he board needs to hear pressure about budget cuts to see the consequences to actions or inactions.

Mr. Weldon said there was a distinction between disparaging remarks and slanderous allegations. He said he could provide alternative language.

Supt. Testani said he believed advocacy to retain positions should be allowed because it would likely not change anything. He said he thought the intention in the December discussion was to avoid speaking about things that could potentially be a grievance before the board where board members might have to recuse themselves.

Mr. Sokolovic said that language about disciplinary actions or grievances could be added to the proposed policies.

Mr. Benejan said sometimes parents go directly to the board with complaints because they feel they are not being listened to.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said she understood the issue about grievances, but that might not apply to employees not in a

union. Mr. Weldon said some catch-all language could be crafted that covers the right of all employees.

The next agenda item was on a revised policy regarding high school magnet entrance and performance expectations.

Supt. Testani said the proposal relates only to Central Magnet because it is the only intradistrict magnet and is not covered by any of the federal magnet policies. He said the policy had not been looked at for years and some provisions were outdated. He said the staff at the school formed a committee that reviewed the policies.

The superintendent noted the CMTs are no longer given, so the policy reflects the state SBAC. He said changes were highlighted in yellow in the document. He said a recommendation from an elementary principal could now help a child who had previously struggled but had turned things around. He noted other changes. Students in the top ten percentile would receive automatic acceptance similar to students coming from the feeder elementary schools.

Supt. Testani said the change in the high school schedules to a block schedule resulted in another change of language. It is proposed that students who fail two academic courses by the end of the school year will be deselected to maintain a level of rigor. A change was made that allows a student who makes one mistake in judgment is not automatically removed.

The superintendent said a pathway has been added for high achieving students who previously did not have a pathway to Central Magnet.

Mr. Sokolovic said the magnet school program students at Claytor School should also receive automatic entrance. The superintendent said the TAG students at Claytor get automatic entrance.

The superintendent said there was no urgency to pass the revised policy now. He said he would bring the back an altered draft next month.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said there is a separate magnet diploma for Central Magnet students. He said the policies indicate Central Magnet students must enroll in four magnet course and they must complete one AP or ECE course. Mr. Sokolovic noted that sometimes magnet students take non-magnet courses at Central because they are viewed as easier.

The superintendent said he would speak to Dr. Graf and Ms. Smith about whether additional language was needed to cover this. He said the magnet school is located on the second floor at Central. He said perhaps core graduation requirements need to be taken into the magnet program. He said he believed the teachers and counselors were sticklers about this, but perhaps more language was needed.

In response to a question, the superintendent said the magnet courses are weighted differently towards the GPA. He said Dr. Graf is aware of spreading out the AP courses across each period, so students have access to as many AP courses as they wish. He said nonmagnet students are allowed to take magnet courses when they are seeking access to magnet program while enrolled at Central.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 7:45 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Approved by the committee on March 7, 2022