

Wednesday, June 17, 2020

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE PERSONNEL
COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF
EDUCATION, held June 17, 2020, by video and audio
conference, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 5:31 p.m. Present were members Chair John Weldon, Hernan Illingworth and Joseph Sokolovic. Board member Albert Benejan was present.

Interim superintendent Michael J. Testani, and Denise Altro-Dixon, executive director of human resources, were present.

Mr. Illingworth moved to approve the committee's minutes of June 12, 2020. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was discussion and possible action on candidates to be interviewed by the committee for school year 2020-21. Mr. Weldon said there are various candidates that have been presented to the committee level. He said with less than two weeks remaining prior to July 1st there had been delays in interviewing candidates at the school level. In the interests of the HR department being able to move business along, he was suggesting that the candidates the committee would interview be forwarded to the superintendent this evening so he can interview them and make the decisions he needs to make for the coming school year.

Mr. Weldon moved that “*we refer whatever candidates that would otherwise be interviewed by the Personnel Committee to the superintendent for his review and interviews for him to make his final decision for hiring.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Illingworth.

Mr. Sokolovic said he understood there are issues with social distancing, but the interviews have taken place at the committee in the current format when we can get the meetings together. He said he was always available for interviews and he didn’t see why the candidates would have such a hard time making themselves available to us. He said he was concerned because the board and the city had a reputation for doing things behind closed doors and nepotism. He added that although Mr. Testani is doing a fabulous job, the process used to hire him was done under a cloud.

Mr. Testani said there was an interview committee that narrowed down assistant principal candidates from a large pool. The committee included representation throughout the district. He said he believed the best candidates were chosen by the committee on merit regardless of ties to anyone. He said he did not object to the Personnel Committee spending several evenings interviewing them. He added the committee probably did not have to interview Dr. Wayne Alexander due to prior interviews. He said he wanted the assistant principals in place by July 1st.

Mr. Sokolovic said the practice of interviewing candidates was a board policy that would have to be overturned by the full board.

Ms. Altro-Dixon said scoring sheets are used by the panels to rate candidates. She said the sheets are retained in her

office and are available to document the rankings of candidates.

Mr. Illingworth said he agreed with some of Mr. Sokolovic's comments. He said the reason the board wanted to interview principals and assistant principals was because of past practices of hiring that were based on who you know. He said Dr. Johnson and Mr. Chester came to him as Personnel Committee chair suggesting the current board policy be changed, but they never followed through with a recommendation. He said he still did not trust the process that every qualified person will be given an interview and a fair shot.

Mr. Illingworth said he would support the motion on the condition there is a policy presented to the board to outline any needed changes. Mr. Weldon said he questioned how appropriate it was for board members to interview any candidates other than the superintendent. He said he appreciated the concern of the board members about the lack of integrity in the past, but he did not believe that is the case now. He said the way to combat that should have been to get down to the root cause instead of adding another layer at the board level. He said he would welcome revisiting the policies in this area.

Mr. Testani said with all positions once the HR department and he reviews all the resumes submitted and investigates certifications. He said there were about 130 applicants for assistant principal positions. Many did not have proper certifications at first glance. From there the best candidate pool was created through phone calls to references and the candidates were interviewed by committees drawn from the district and executive directors. He said questions were

directed more at the day-to-day performance of the position than the boilerplate questions used last year.

Mr. Testani said ultimately the board's Personnel Committee is a recommending body. He said he appreciated the comments being made. He said from going through the applicants one by one there were people he knows personally for many years that did not even get an initial interview. He said it was about getting the best candidates for our schools.

Mr. Sokolovic said policy and procedures should be established no matter who was superintendent. He said he did not see the point of the Personnel Committee if it did not interview candidates. He said he was prepared to sit through all the interviews and change the policy later. He said if one other committee member made the same commitment the interviews could be concluded.

Mr. Weldon said he was not suggesting undoing any existing policies, but simply using the committee's authority to pass the referred candidates to the superintendent in this case. The policies allow the committee to make referrals to the superintendent. He said he had no objection to updating the policies.

Mr. Illingworth said regardless of who we interview, the superintendent interviews all the candidates presented to the committee. Mr. Weldon said changing the policy is a discussion for another day; he urged the HR department take a look the policies. Ms. Altro-Dixon said she would do so. She said the Personnel Committee was provided with all the candidates' resumes

Mr. Testani noted today was the last day of school and many of the candidates are teachers. He said the committee had all the resumes and he urged the members to raise any reservations seen in them. He said candidates ranked below the top seven were not good fits right now for positions. He said the candidates were all internal and were a diverse group.

Mr. Sokolovic said his comments were not a reflection on the candidates or any of the current staff, but in support of open governance. He said proceeding in this manner would be a blow to good governance in Bridgeport.

Mr. Weldon said it was not about his convenience but the entire circumstances created by social distancing, which has dragged the process out. He noted scheduling last week was complicated by some candidates not being available.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said Ms. Altro-Dixon had been great in organizing all the online interviews. He said she is not a voting member of the committee to move anyone forward.

Mr. Illingworth moved the question. The motion was seconded by Mr. Weldon.

The motion was approved by a 2-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon and Illingworth. Mr. Sokolovic was opposed.

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Mr. Sokolovic said the trouble seems to be people who want a \$20,000 to \$30,000 raise were not willing to meet the committee's schedule.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 6:07 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Approved by the committee on February 11, 2021