

Monday, June 7, 2021

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held June 7, 2021, by video conference call, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:32 p.m. Present were members Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Bobbi Brown, Secretary Joseph Lombard, Albert Benejan, Sybil Allen, and Joseph Sokolovic.

Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

**PUBLIC COMMENT:**

JoAnn Kennedy said she wondered why the board meetings were not being held in public. She noted students have been back in school for a while. She said it was not fair that the public's right to speak to the board has been taken away and speakers can only address agenda items. She urged the board get input from parents and the community at meetings.

Mr. Weldon said the plan is to return to in-person meetings on July 1 when a new system is installed at the Aquaculture School that can broadcast on YouTube. The superintendent said if there was a delay from the July 1 date it would only be because of a delay in obtaining the necessary technology equipment.

**CHAIR REPORT:**

Mr. Weldon said the BEA, the teachers' union, extended an invitation to the board to attend their retirement event for 2020-21. He said he was fortunate to attend, along with

other board members, and it was a really nice event. He congratulated all those who retired.

Mr. Benejan congratulated the Math Meet winners at John Winthrop School. He said the staff did an excellent job. He reported Blackham School came in second place.

### **COMMITTEE REPORTS:**

Ms. Brown said the next meeting of the Ad Hoc Districtwide Branding Initiative Committee would be scheduled after further discussion.

Mr. Weldon said the Contracts Committee will meet on June 10th to discuss a project on energy savings.

Mr. Weldon said the Facilities Committee has not met in the interim.

Mr. Sokolovic said the next Finance Committee meeting will be put off until about June 23rd.

Mr. Weldon said the Governance Committee met earlier this evening and two items were pushed forward to the full board. One item on remote participation by board members will be considered this evening. Revision of the magnet policies was also discussed and will be on the board agenda in two weeks.

Mr. Benejan said Students & Families Committee met and received information from Mr. Planas. Also discussed were the disappointing expenditures by PACs and PTSOs. He said the money is supposed to be for the parents.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Teaching & Learning Committee met. He said he would forego the report because two items are coming up on the agenda.

Mr. Weldon said he wanted to remind committee chairs that are there time frames to get items to the superintendent's office for agendas. He said there have been a couple of instances where they have been submitted the day before a meeting. He said the time frame is technically four business days. He said the superintendent's staff is really busy and this policy is intended to be fair to them.

Mr. Benejan said he was responsible for that on one occasion. He said he would always defer a meeting if the notice was too short for the staff.

Mr. Benejan said he would like to refer a security update to the Facilities Committee.

### **APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:**

Mr. Benejan moved approval of the minutes of the Regular Meeting of May 24, 2021. The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and approved by a 5-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Brown, Sokolovic, Allen, and Benejan. Mr. Lombard abstained.

### **SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT:**

Supt. Testani said he echoed Mr. Benejan's congratulations to the Math Meet winners. The top schools were Winthrop, Blackham, and Hooker. He said he would be bringing lunch over to the teams at Winthrop and Blackham.

The superintendent said he echoed Mr. Weldon's comments on BEA retirements, who were an amazing group of folks. He said some of the retirees had over 40 years of service to the district. He said it was unfortunate that some teachers had to end their careers with the challenges of Covid.

Supt. Testani said June 16th is the high school graduation day at the Amphitheater. All the high schools have held their proms recently.

The superintendent thanked the We Love You International Foundation and People's Bank for their collaboration which resulted in the donation of 36 iPads to the district.

Supt. Testani said he visited Columbus School on Saturday to recognize teacher, Chrissie McCabe, a kindergarten teacher, for her SEL work. He said what he saw was earth-shattering. Her entire class and their families were there and engaged in a serenity circle, with yoga activities, and singing. He said to see the kindergarten students in tune with mindfulness and social-emotional wellbeing was mind-blowing. He said if he had a vote he would vote for Ms. McCabe as the teacher of the year in America.

The superintendent asked Ms. McCabe to speak to the board. Ms. McCabe said she grew up with ADHD and with two parents pushing her to pursue her dreams. She said she believed this made her super-creative, which helps in teaching kindergarten and yoga. She said her anxiety was high during the Covid period and she introduced the children to yoga. She said even middle school students want to participate in her yoga classes. She said she soaked up the training she was given in the district on restorative practices and RULER. She describe a former student who graduated

from law school, who made a donation to fund some of her activities.

Supt. Testani said the district was helping to collect items for public school families that were affected by a fire on Olive Street. He said he distributed information on items the families need.

In response to a question, the superintendent said Lighthouse would be in 19 to 22 schools this summer. He said the district is also presenting a summer program for early reading success for K to 3 students. At last report over 900 students were intending to attend.

In response to a question about Lighthouse payments to the district, Supt. Testani said there are no payments to the district. The security officers work their regular school day during Lighthouse and are paid by the district.

In response to a question, the superintendent said all devices distributed to students have to be returned prior to the last day of school. Any 12th graders who do not return their devices will not participate in graduation ceremonies.

### **NEW BUSINESS:**

The next agenda item was on Effective School Solutions(ESS). Supt. Testani said this item was presented to the Teaching & Learning Committee. He said prior to the pandemic a colleague told him of the impact of ESS on their students and their contribution to helping keep students in district. He said observed the program in action with Mr. Young and Mr. Arnold in another district.

The superintendent said it is proposed to create a program for six schools: Claytor, Curiale, Bassick, Dunbar, Marin, and Harding. He said the team from Effective School Solutions was present.

Duncan Young, CEO of Effective School Solutions, said there has been an increasing amount of students presenting in the district and throughout the country with severe emotional and behavioral challenges, which leads to a strain on existing clinical resources and a steady increase in out-of-district placements.

Mr. Young said a lot of research is coming out that as students return to a more normalized school environment educators and school systems are going to be faced with students who have been presented with increasing trauma. He said the focus is on returning students from out of district if they can be responsibly served within Bridgeport. There is also a need to increase professional development to educators on mental warning signs, to deal with trauma and deescalate challenging behaviors.

Mike Roseman, vice president of district partnerships at ESS, said there was a growing mental health epidemic among K-12 students before the pandemic. He said one in five students pre-Covid had a diagnosed mental illness. He said a clinical survey of professionals resulted in findings of increased academic stress, family and economic stressors, greater social isolation, and anxiety about Covid-19 itself.

Mr. Young said ESS was founded in 2009 and is uniquely qualified to return students from out of district because it began as an out-of-district placement in New Jersey. The main mission is to provide therapeutic care that a student would get in a private, therapeutic day school, but adapted to

be integrated into the public school setting and the school day.

Mr. Young said the goal includes maintaining students in the least restrictive environment and hopefully achieving a reduction of out-of-district placements. Improvement in grades, discipline and attendance was demonstrated in data from district partners last year. ESS serves almost 2,000 students every day in over 79 districts across 9 states.

Mr. Young said the model is a multi-tiered system of support framework for mental health support. Support is aimed at the Tier III and Tier I levels. Tier III is a higher level of care that does not exist in many school buildings or districts. This is highly structured and typically supports a student for an entire year.

Mr. Young said Tier I includes universal support. He said the best support that can be put in a place is a well-trained, knowledgeable staff that understands the warning signs of mental-health challenges. He said there would be indirect support at the Tier II level, which is where most districts have existing resources, including psychologists and social workers.

Mr. Roseman said the proposed three-year plan with the district includes a focus on six schools in the first year, with an emphasis on out-of-district placement prevention. Students will be identified who can conscientiously be returned to the district and be educated in the Bridgeport Public Schools. There will also be districtwide professional development and targeted coaching in the six schools.

Mr. Roseman said in year two there is an acceleration on students returning to district is the focus. The footprint of

clinical work in the district will be expanded, attempting to fund the program through the return of students from out of district.

Mr. Roseman said the goal in the third year is to fully fund the program through the return of students from out of district and potentially creating a budget surplus.

Mr. Roseman said the nice thing about a Tier III program is a sustainability mechanism is already built in. He noted out-of-district placements can often cost as much as \$100,000 per student per year.

Mr. Roseman said funding is also possible through stimulus, IDEA, Title I, and Medicaid reimbursement.

Lisa Ciappi, executive clinical director of ESS, said the therapeutic components include Tier III daily group therapy, weekly individual therapy, staff availability one evening a week to support families, and biweekly family therapy sessions. She said a regional director will be overseeing the program on a daily basis, along with a quality management department. She added that if there is a shutdown at any point ESS can pivot quickly to a virtual model. She recited positive data about ESS students in terms of grades, absences, and discipline.

Lane Whitaker, director of professional learning for ESS, said the Tier I learning plan will include quarterly mental health workshops for all staff in the six buildings. A select group of teachers will receive a monthly supplemental education and a monthly newsletter, along with an hour of coaching. Additionally, there is mental health virtual learning for parents.



In response to a question, Supt. Testani said up to 60 students will be served at Dunbar, Marin, and Harding; and up to 30 students at Curiale, Claytor and Bassick. The annual cost over the three-year contract is \$1.45 million.

The superintendent said he wanted to stress it was a true partnership and ESS will be presenting updates regularly to the board. He said this was echoed at the superintendent and board level in other Connecticut districts. He added that the professional development component is important because it has been identified as a big need in the district.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the seed money is coming from ESSER funds, with the idea that it will be self-sustaining over time.

In response to a question, Mr. Young said the four challenges he mentioned being seen were from a survey of 250 or so ESS clinical staff members over the last year.

In response to a question about diversity, Mr. Young said he would love to interface with the Educational Diversity Committee and how ESS's work can reinforce that.

Supt. Testani said ESS's collection of data is a huge part of what they do to support the work. He said he was most impressed with the data that is generated.

Mr. Young said he would share data with the superintendent and the board at predetermined intervals. He said the proposal includes a ten-person clinical team who will work in the district every day.

Mr. Sokolovic said it was important to measure the data, and he would like to see before and after data compiled. He said

if we can demonstrate the effectiveness of these programs in the six schools we can make a very good case for more money and investment in our children's future.

Mr. Young said the vast majority of staff are licensed clinical social workers, licensed professional counselors, and licensed marriage and family therapists. He said ESS is really focused on people with three or more years post-master's degree and who have worked with this student population in a Tier III setting.

In response to a question, Supt, Testani said there are other organizations that provide some sort of similar services. He said ESS was brought to his attention by a colleague in another district; the program was observed, and feedback was gathered, along with meetings with ESS. He said the reputation of ESS in Connecticut and in nine states is impressive.

Mr. Young said he was not aware of an organization in Connecticut that is delivering Tier III services. He said ESS was operating at the highest level of care within the school setting.

Mr. Weldon said since there is rigid federal oversight there may need to be something for the file for the rationale to select the organization. The superintendent said this type of work aligns perfectly with the guidelines of the federal government when it comes to SEL and other dollars to vulnerable populations.

Mr. Lombard moved "*to approve the agreement as presented by staff with Effective School Solutions.*" The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on Read to Grow.

Dr. Melissa Jenkins, executive director of early childhood and literacy, said Read to Grow seeks to partner with the district to provide home visiting and work with families with children from birth to 5 at four school sites. The schools for 2021-22 are Bryant and Marin, and in 2022-23 there will be expansion to Dunbar and Claytor..

Suzannah Holsenbeck of Read to Grow described her program to distribute books to every baby born in 15 hospitals to Connecticut. She said there are currently four coordinators working in New Haven schools with the Early Steps to School Success program. The program is used in eight other states. The focus is on children ages birth to 3 and then preschoolers, 3 to 5. Goals include supporting children to be kindergarten-ready and to strengthen the home-to-school connection.

Ms. Holsenbeck said there are home visits to families with children from prenatal to three. Visits occur at least twice a month and include distribution of books and other materials, and play groups for children. Families are also connected to community resources.

Ms. Holsenbeck said the preschool-age program works with teachers with literacy activities, read alouds, and book distribution.

Ms. Holsenbeck described questionnaires distributed to parents to monitor progress, as well as assessments that are used. She indicated a national study demonstrated the success of the program, as well as firsthand accounts from parents.

Ms. Holsenbeck said the program is privately funded from donors and foundations. Space for coordinators in the schools is requested and the expectation is that they will work with teachers. Coordinators do not teach classes, are not subs, and are never responsible for a child without a parent or a teacher present.

Mr. Lombard moved “*to enter into the partnership with Read to Grow.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on the Parent Square school messaging platform.

Supt. Testani said there were discussions about this at the Branding Committee. He said the communications covered are not just at the district and school level, but down to the teacher level with students and families. He said a lot of unauthorized communications tools were being used by teachers to communicate with families. He noted School Messenger, the current platform, alienated some parents with excessive messages.

The superintendent said other options were looked at, but Parent Square seemed to be the one that fit all our needs. He said it gives the ability of teachers to communicate with individual parents or the entire class or subsets. Another great feature is the ability to scan messages to determine the amount of active parent e-mails and phone numbers that are working properly. Parents can choose the type of messages they would like to receive, along the translations into many languages.

Supt. Testani said it will be extremely beneficial to younger families because this is the way people communicate in today's day and age.

Jeff Postolowski, director of ITS, said most districts in the state and in the country are making this type of shift, particularly the feature that makes sure the messages actually get to parents.

P.J. Karaffa of the data management department said it also includes secure document delivery with report cards and progress reports. He said School Messenger, which only could handle a few languages, only allowed a few licenses per school for administrators only. He described Parent Square as a model platform.

The superintendent said the first line of communication on attendance issues will be much more seamless with Parent Square. Currently, teachers have to make phone calls on their breaks.

Mr. Benejan said sometimes parents have to be more responsible to check what's going on with their children in school.

In response to a question, Mr. Postolowski said the ability of parent leaders to notify parents of meetings is built into Parent Square.

Supt. Testani said Parent Square works in conjunction with Power School. The plan is to roll it out in the fall at six of the largest schools, and after the transition is worked out, another six schools will be added, with full implementation right after January 1, 2022.

Mr. Postolowski said the cost is about \$86,000, about \$30,000 more than School Messenger, but documents provided to the board show how much more the district is getting for the money.

In response to a question, Mr. Postolowski described the other products that were looked at. He said Parent Square's advantage is that it integrates with our suite of services.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested the platform be used for parent leadership elections to increase involvement. Supt. Testani said the platform can produce reports to track information by teacher, by grade level and school to see who is communicating with families.

In response to a question, Mr. Postolowski said the purchase will be through a contract to purchase software, which is the best way to obtain favorable pricing. A five-year option was chosen. The superintendent said the district had been with School Messenger for ten years.

In response to a question, the superintendent said parents can initiate communication to teachers through the platform. Mr. Lombard suggested looking at parameters for expectations to responding to parent communications.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the program translates into 56 languages.

In response to a question, the superintendent said this is a unique service to fit the needs of the district, and is not just through a bidding process because a low bid may not fit all of our needs. Mr. Weldon said the mechanism where there is a list of providers is called a pool that have gone through the procurement process to be placed on the list.

Mr. Postolowski said because the district has a specific set of systems in place what is chosen has to fit within our infrastructure. Supt. Testani said when Power School was chosen it was selected based on what it could offer, not the cost. Mr. Sokolovic said he wanted to make sure that it's dissimilar to one thing that happened in the not-so-distant past.

Mr. Weldon said this is called pool contracting where the state has gone through the process on our behalf, which districts have the ability to pull from. Supt. Testani said acronym for the pool COTSS is the Commercial Off-the-Shelf Software.

In response to a question, Mr. Postolowski said the product has survey capability built into it. Supt. Testani said feedback will be solicited through the first six months at the first schools.

Mr. Benejan moved "*to enter into the agreement tithe Parent Square school messaging platform.*" The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on establishing policy for remote participation by members in in-person board and committee meetings.

Mr. Weldon said a short document was distributed to board members. He said there was discussion about the ability of board members to participate remotely in in-person meetings. He said discussion indicated a limit of six times per year. Committee or board chairs participating remotely would have to delegate the chairmanship to a person in the room.

Mr. Weldon noted in the past the board occasionally had difficulty obtaining an in-person quorum.

The superintendent suggested exempting summer meetings due to travel plans.

Mr. Weldon said a year in the policy should be defined as the school year, with summer meetings exempted from the limit of remote participation events.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested following calendar years because that is how the board members are elected. He noted special meetings often happen with 24 or 48 hours' notice, for which remote participation is more understandable than regular meetings.

Mr. Weldon suggested defining a year as December 1 to November 30 and clarifying the six-meeting limit is for regular meetings only, and special meetings are exempted. The limitation for committee meetings would be participating remotely three times.

Mr. Weldon said he would assume the superintendent's office would keep the log of attendance. Supt. Testani said that could be done. Mr. Weldon said board members who exceed the limits could be denied the Teams invite for the subsequent meetings in question.

Supt. Testani said this would be much more manageable due to the new A/V system at Aquaculture School.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested this be considered a first read. Mr. Weldon said he would update the changes for the second read at the next meeting.



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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:36 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

*Approved by the board on June 21, 2021*