

Monday, May 13, 2019

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held May 13, 2019, at Bridgeport Regional Aquaculture Science & Technology Education Center, 60 St. Stephens Road, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:30 p.m.

Present were Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Jessica Martinez, Secretary Joseph Sokolovic, Hernan Illingworth, Sybil Allen, Maria Pereira, Chris Taylor, LaMar Kennedy and Joseph Lombard.

**PUBLIC COMMENT:**

Mr. Sokolovic moved *“to suspend the rules to allow all members of the public who signed up to speak.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Pereira and unanimously approved.

Ana Paula DaSilva said she was appearing because the superintendent and an assistant superintendent were leaving. She said when she found out some of the names of candidates she wanted to appear to caution the board to investigate. She said she was willing to speak in front of the candidates about this as well.

Nanci Weiner, a teacher at Hall School for the last nine years, said she has been in the district for 25 years. She said Hall School has a fabulous staff and a wonderful community. She said closing the school would be a slap in the face to the community. She said a crossing guard or

police officer cannot stop an out-of-control motorist and asked the board members if they would want a child in their family to cross Boston Avenue every day.

Alicia Robinson, a Bridgeport resident and arts director of the district, said she was passionate about arts education and the thought of taking it away from Hall students evokes fear for the future of our children. She said Hall had demonstrated immense success since joining Turnaround Arts. She said multiple artists had visited the school and a partnership was established with Yale School of Architecture. She said Hall students had performed at the Kennedy Center in Washington. She described a former Hall student named Clinton, who participated in the arts at the school, whose life was taken tragically.

Antonette Ford said she was Clinton's teacher at Hall School. She said after Clinton's death the students came to the school where they felt safe, loved and wanted to talk to the staff at the school because we are their family. She said Hall was one of only 79 Turnaround Arts schools in the country. She said state test scores at the school have shown a steady increase in the last three years. She said the students have visited Google's creative lab and other important sites.

Joseph Sokolovic said he was a parent, taxpayer and a member of the Board of Education. He said the board was about to vote to make children walk to school, cut some jobs, and perhaps close some schools. He said the responsibility for having to make these cuts lies elsewhere: the majority of the City Council and the mayor, who would rather have a property tax cut of \$50 to \$150 and a \$4 million increase to the police department than spend money on education. He said he was sorry for what he was about to do due to the

circumstances created by our elected officials.

A'olani Flores said she wanted to share how much Hall School means to her. She said she has attended the school since kindergarten. She said the other students made her feel welcome and she felt and secure in the school. She described the activities related to being a Turnaround Arts school such as using music and art in other subjects. She described the plays she performed in, including *Aladdin* most recently. She said she hoped the board would take great consideration not to close a school that is like a family.

Mr. Weldon said Spanish translation services were available.

Creflo Botweh said Hall School had been a big part of his life for more than six years. He said he learned how to sing, dance and act at Hall. He said he performed at the Kennedy Center and filmed a music video in New York City. He said one reason he doesn't want the school to close is because his siblings go there too. He said the school was a nice neighborhood, with nice teachers and students, and a great principal.

Marge Hiller thanked the board members for attending the City Council budget hearings and making impassioned pleas, especially Ms. Pereira. She urged the Hall parents to sit in the mayor's office and the City Council to urge more money be given to education. She asked the board to consider putting the School Volunteer Association back in the budget.

Vanessa Montalvo, mother of a sixth grader at Edison School, said Edison would be impacted by the closure of Hall. She said she was disgusted at the Finance Committee when someone said their mind was made up before talking

to the kids, parents, staff or PAC members. She said even though the district needed more money there had to be something else on the table.

Ronald Botweh said his son spoke earlier. He said when he first saw Hall School he thought he didn't want his kids to go there, but when he met the teachers and the principal he realized the school had character. He said the teachers make him feel like he's a family member; everybody in the school knows his daughter's name and she knows the name of everybody in the school.

Jasiah Williams said this was his last year in Hall School. He has attended the school since kindergarten. He said because everybody knows each other it makes the school very safe. He said Hall School is more like a family than a school. He said when he lost his friend Clinton in 2018 everybody in the school knew how he felt.

Trinity Williams said she was now in 5th grade at Hall School, her sixth year in the school. She said she learned to talk to her teacher about her problems through the use of the mood meter. She said she did not want the school to shut down because she would not feel comfortable going to another school that she is not familiar with. She said she wanted the school to stay open so she could do her last school play. She said she would miss her teachers and her principal, Ms. Fernandes.

Dimaxine Jackson, a mother of three children at Hall School, said she also works as a substitute teacher in Bridgeport. She said her children love Hall School because it is like a family. She said the board's job is to make sure the children get the best education and training. She added combining the two schools will disrupt both. She said she had worries

about Hall School being an abandoned building.

Cynthia Fernandes, principal of Hall School, asked the board to read its Policy 3600-C, which calls for engaging all stakeholders early in the process and creating a building study. She said the Turnaround Arts program which Hall has had for four years would be lost if the school merges with Edison School. She said the program has brought professional development for teachers, strategies for children and the presentation of Broadway-type musicals. She said Hall has brought the district \$28,000 through the program in cash and grants, including \$15,000 worth of computers. She said the students have performed with Jason Moran, Bernie Williams and the house band for the Apollo Theater.

Arianna Cabrera, a Hall School student, said she has attended the school for four years. She said everyone feels safe, welcome, respected and happy in the school. She said all the teachers make sure to say good morning to all the students every day. She said Ms. Fernandes makes sure she knows all the students. She said she did not want to go to Edison School.

Maria Pereira said Mr. Weldon, Ms. Martinez, Mr. Illingworth, Mr. Taylor and Ms. Allen voted to cancel community conversations, which meant Hall and Edison Schools never got theirs. The premise for cancelling was we cannot be honest with parents and staff about how the mayor and the City Council has chosen not to fund the schools. She said this was not what was best for students, but what was best for corrupt members of the Democratic Town Committee, Mayor Ganim and the majority of the City Council. She said the strategy did not work because the board needed \$11 million to keep what we have, but we got a pittance of \$1.3

million. She pointed to the dangers to students crossing Boston Avenue.

The next speaker was Albert Benejan. Mr. Weldon said previously Mr. Benejan's right to speak was suspended, but after gaining a better understanding of his perspective he was lifting that suspension.

Ms. Pereira raised a point of order. She said Mr. Benejan attacked her at a committee meeting and got into her personal space. She said his speaking privileges were revoked until June 30th and then his status was changed with no notice to her, the victim. Mr. Weldon said he rescinded the ban after hearing Mr. Benejan's side of the story, which is equally compelling. Ms. Pereira said Mr. Weldon was a puppet of the Democratic machine.

Mr. Benejan, the PTSO president at Bassick High, said he was the chair of the 47th Parent Convention, which would be held May 29th at Housatonic Community College. He invited parents to see him to get the forms to attend the convention. He said everybody was welcome at the convention.

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

Ms. Allen moved to approve the minutes of the Regular Meeting of April 22, 2019. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic. Edits were noted.

The motion was approved by a 7-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Lombard, Allen, Pereira, Sokolovic, Illingworth and Kennedy. Mr. Taylor and Ms. Martinez abstained.

Mr. Sokolovic moved to approve the minutes of the Special

Meeting of April 22, 2019. The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen. An edit was noted.

The motion was approved by a 6-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Pereira, Sokolovic, Allen, Weldon, Lombard and Kennedy. Mr. Taylor, Mr. Illingworth and Ms. Martinez abstained.

Ms. Allen moved to approve the minutes of the Special Meeting of April 29, 2019. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic.

The motion was approved by a 7-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Martinez, Allen, Pereira, Sokolovic, Kennedy and Lombard. Mr. Taylor and Mr. Illingworth abstained.

### **CHAIRMAN'S REPORT:**

Mr. Weldon said there has been a personnel search committee established to retain the successor to Dr. Johnson. The first meeting was last week and the committee will meet again tomorrow. It is hoped to finalize an RFP to find a search firm for the new superintendent and to finalize a process for an interim superintendent.

### **COMMITTEE REPORTS/REFERRALS:**

Mr. Illingworth reported on the Facilities Committee meeting of last week. He said two committee items would come up later for discussion and possible action by the board.

Ms. Pereira said she understood the Parent Center had been vacated. She asked the committee look at the costs of vacating the building and the status of the equipment in the

building.

In response to a question, Mr. Illingworth said the committee felt building a curriculum around gardens should be handled by the Teaching & Learning Committee. He said the Facilities Committee was still awaiting further information on the gardens.

Ms. Pereira said through Dr. Johnson and the Teaching & Learning Committee she is meeting with the schools that have the most well functioning gardens.

Ms. Martinez reported on the Finance Committee. She moved to add to the agenda items 1 through 11 on the proposed actions.

The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic.

Ms. Martinez said the items would have to be discussed in great detail at special meetings.

Ms. Pereira said there were only five items voted out of committee, which is what should be presented here. She said we added an item on generating revenue from Lighthouse.

Mr. Illingworth said his concern is that these are decisions that can't be taken lightly. He said he was concerned about taking on all these discussions. He said he was not prepared to take action on any of the items because there is a lot to consider and further information is needed. He suggested they be handled at multiple special meetings if necessary because the decisions could not be rushed.

Ms. Martinez said she would amend the motion. She listed



the items discussed at the committee meeting as to the possible proposed actions: Consolidation of six teacher positions for \$420,000; redeploying curriculum renewal funds for \$400,000; potentially consolidating Hall School into Edison School for \$1.1 million; moving from a 1 mile walking distance to 1.5 miles for \$984,000; deficit prevention mode, including a hiring freeze, for \$1 million in savings; not engaging in a new contract with the special education director because an executive director of special director has been hired for a \$160,000 in savings; removing two assistant principals and one clerical from Fairchild Wheeler for \$352,000; reduction in two assistant principal positions for \$300,000; fees charged to Lighthouse increased from \$75,000 to \$500,000; potential furlough days for \$1.6 million; and delayed longevity payments.

Ms. Martinez amended her motion *“to push items 1 through 11 to the first special meeting of the proposed budget cuts.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Taylor.

Mr. Weldon said we should plan on meeting three or four times in rapid succession. Ms. Pereira said the public had the right to weigh in on these major cuts. She suggested public comments be allowed at the special meetings.

Mr. Sokolovic said although he was all for public speaking, some of the items are time-sensitive. Mr. Weldon said the board had to formulate a plan before the public weighs in. Ms. Martinez suggested a community forum be held after the board addressed the budget in special meetings. She said she learned a lot about Hall School she didn't know before this meeting. She said none of this is something any of us want to do.

Ms. Pereira said the board must hold a public meeting at the

school prior to any vote to close the school. She said the closing committee had to issue a report to parents prior to the report being submitted to the board for the hearing.

Mr. Weldon said nobody was ever going to vote to close a school tonight. The most the board would vote on would be to start the process for closing a school. He suggested special meetings be held followed by a community forum.

Mr. Taylor said he was not closing any schools. He said he had requested a forensic audit since he has been on the board. He said he did not know where the money goes and he cannot advocate for more money until he knows where the money is going. He urged the board not to cut the budget and to just run a deficit.

Ms. Pereira said there are two board members here who did not attend a single public hearing fighting for our kids or a meeting with the City Council, and Mr. Taylor is one of them. Mr. Taylor said chastising the City Council and calling them names and telling the mayor he is corrupt and asking them to write a check would not work.

Ms. Martinez moved to amend the motion to gain information about what would happen if we do not balance the budget.

Ms. Pereira said under state statute the school board members can be held personally liable for not balancing their budget. Mr. Taylor questioned permitting a board member giving legal advice.

The motion to handle the items at special meetings was unanimously approved.

Mr. Illingworth said he was not convinced of the need to go

down the route of closing a school. He said the special meetings needed to be held as a first step.

Ms. Pereira said she will never vote to close a school ever. She said Mr. Wallack admitted the reason he proposed closing Hall instead of Edison was strictly because of enrollment. She said the nutrition center said they would need more ovens and there would be electrical problems. She said Mr. Laffitte wasn't consulted about the matter at all.

Ms. Martinez said democracy was wonderful because you gain knowledge in different areas that you lack. She asked where we get the money from and what do we do. She said it was amazing to have the community come out when we have to take an action. She said the community action was really needed in front of the City Council and the state. She said she believed she was the only board member to speak before the Budgets & Appropriations Committee in Hartford to ask for more money and equity in education.

Ms. Pereira noted no one thought about the Turnaround Arts program. She said all the teachers at Edison School have to park on the street. Ms. Martinez said her son attended Edison School for three years. Ms. Pereira said Edison School does not have its own cafeteria, gym or auditorium.

In response to a question, Ms. Pereira said a school closing committee would include parents, staff, and members from the community. She said Mr. Laffitte said he would not put a bus stop on Boston Avenue due to danger.

Ms. Martinez moved "*to remove the possibility of closing Hall School.*" The motion was seconded by Mr. Taylor.

Mr. Weldon asked if it was a permanent removal. Ms.

Martinez indicated that was the case and Hall School would not be considered later in the budget process.

Mr. Sokolovic said he was not going to make a lot of friends. He said before we go down this road we have to consider there are worse options out there that we may have to replace this with, such as laying off teachers or librarians. He said we should not take anything off table until we see all our options. He said to be fiscally responsible an item should not be removed from the plan until there is something to replace it with.

Ms. Martinez said after listening to students and staff members on how much Hall School has brought into the district she believed we'll lose a lot more by consolidating the school. She noted the school would lose the arts grant that gave great experiences to the students at Hall. She said she would be forwarding a video of tonight's meeting to City Council members and some state legislators.

Ms. Pereira noted Hall and Edison did not have 7th and 8th grade students, so those students are bused to other schools. She requested the possibility of returning 7th and 8th graders to the schools be investigated.

The motion was approved by an 8-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Illingworth, Martinez, Pereira, Allen, Kennedy, Lombard and Taylor. Mr. Sokolovic was opposed.

Mr. Sokolovic said he voted no because he felt it was irresponsible to take any motion off the table without measuring it against the other options that may take its place and children may end up being hurt more by the consequences.

Ms. Pereira referred the matter of the financing of the middle school debate league to the Finance Committee.

Regarding referrals to the Governance Committee, Ms. Pereira said Mr. Weldon had only held one meeting this year and two meetings in eighteen months as chair of the committee. She asked Mr. Weldon to address the referrals that were made in August.

Mr. Sokolovic reported on the Teaching & Learning Committee meeting of April 24. He said the committee received an update on the science curriculum by Ms. Bhushan. He said preliminary reports indicate the kits that are designed to accompany the science texts are excellent. He said if the state and the city were to properly fund our schools this would be one of the first purchases he would suggest. He added that science still needed to be promoted more in the lower grades. He said there should have been better promotion of science at the recognition ceremony and of the recently held science fair.

Mr. Sokolovic said it was concluded that it was not feasible to add gardening to the science curriculum, however, there was a consensus that gardening clubs should be established at schools.

Mr. Sokolovic said reverse suspensions, where parents shadow a suspended student in school, were discussed. He said Dr. Otuwa reported negative reaction from faculty. There will be further discussions about finding a principal willing to do a pilot program at the next meeting on May 21st.

In response to a question, Mr. Illingworth said he would have to discuss with Mr. Sokolovic which committee would handle the suspension data in the district. Mr. Sokolovic suggested

monthly reports alternate between the two committees. Mr. Illingworth agreed.

Mr. Weldon said the Personnel Committee will meet on May 15th. He said he has been approached by Teach of America who indicated that Dr. Johnson is not inclined to renew their expiring contract. He said the committee will listen to Teach for America and Dr. Johnson at the committee meeting. He said MOUs regarding athletic directors and Dr. Jenkins will also be discussed.

In response to a question, Mr. Weldon said Mr. Chester was going to provide teacher turnover data. Ms Pereira asked Mr. Weldon to place the hiring policies that were in the committee over a year ago on the agenda. She asked that teacher turnover data for Teach for America in the last three years be provided due to the placement fee the district has to pay.

Mr. Sokolovic reported on the Students & Families Committee meeting of April 25th. Ms. Clarke, the grants director, made a presentation on parent engagement grants and rules regarding expenditures. He said there were questions raised about expenditures at schools where a high percentage of parent engagement dollars went to staff. He said the committee was satisfied that no funds were spent in violation of existing policy.

Mr. Sokolovic said there was a consensus among the committee that policy and procedures may need to be updated.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Parent Convention, to be held May 29th, was also discussed. He encouraged all parents to attend.

There was a brief discussion of when nutrition bids would be handled.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said notices about the Parent Convention had been distributed to all schools at this point.

Mr. Sokolovic reported on the Great City Schools/Males of Color Committee. He said the committee met on May 7th and discussed the community forum and white paper. He said the forum has been postponed one week to May 23rd and is now at Cesar Batalla School. He said the white paper is moving forward and completion is tentatively expected by the end of the school year. The next committee meeting is tomorrow.

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

Dr. Johnson said Ms. Siegel has continued to stress the fiscal implications for the district.

Dr. Johnson said the district was still awaiting a decision on the SRO arbitration.

Dr. Johnson said high school proms have started. She said the dates for graduations are listed in the District at a Glance.

Dr. Johnson said the board had to look at the MOU for Harding High's daycare. She noted the contract with ABCD expires on June 19th and a decision is needed on whether to renew. She said Mr. Sokolovic, chair of the Teaching & Learning Committee, is aware of the issue.

Ms. Pereira said this was a critical time of year for human resources and she noted she could not remember the last time Mr. Chester attended a board meeting. Dr. Johnson said board packets included hirings and resignations and retirements in the district. Ms. Pereira said if Dr. Johnson wished she could share with her privately why Mr. Chester is not attending board meetings.

Mr. Taylor said when he said those exact things a year ago people got all over him. He said they're accepted now that they come from across the aisle. Ms. Pereira said she did not attack anybody or their performance.

### **OLD BUSINESS:**

The next agenda item was an RFP for administrator of programs for expelled students.

Attorney Mark Anastasi from the city attorney's office was present.

Atty. Anastasi said a revised document was provided. He noted that a caveat had been added that the entire agreement is subject to any representations, certifications and commitments that the district may have made to the federal and state governments. He said the state statutes on hiring are referenced at the top of page 18. He said Berchem & Moses was comfortable with the caveats.

Atty. Anastasi said he added language that the provisions in the RFP arise from legitimate, good faith concerns raised by board members.

Ms. Martinez moved *"to approve the RFP for administrator of program for expelled students."* The motion was seconded



by Mr. Taylor and unanimously approved.

### **NEW BUSINESS:**

The next agenda item was discussion and possible action on an RFP for translation and interpretation studies. Ana Sousa-Martins, director of world languages and bilingual education, was present.

Ms. Sousa-Martins said the RFP was in response to a request by the Teaching & Learning Committee. She said the request for proposals was the result of the influx of requests by parents and families for interpretation and translation of documents, meetings and PPTs. She said there are federal guidelines regarding providing these services.

Ms. Pereira noted the timeline needed to be adjusted. She suggested the proposal due date be June 13th. Mr. Weldon suggested it mirror the time-frames in the program for expelled students. Ms. Sousa-Martins said that would be fine.

Ms. Martinez moved *“to issue the RFP as it is written with the modification that the schedule of events within it mirror the schedule of events in the RFP for the program for expelled students.”* Ms. Pereira moved *“to amend the motion to also include a specific contract start date of August 1, 2019.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was discussion and possible naming of the Harding High School music wing.

Shaun Smith, an assistant principal at Harding High, said

she co-chaired the committee for the naming of the music wing. She said the committee held about four meetings in February and March. The committee included staff, students and a community member. Of the four names suggested the top choice of the committee was the Sheena Graham Performing Arts Center.

Ms. Smith said the other three names suggested were Duke Ellington, Robert Nesta Marley and Harding Fame Academy.

Ms. Pereira moved "*to name the music wing of the new Harding High School the Sheena Graham Performing Arts Center.*" The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen.

The motion was approved by a 4-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Pereira, Illingworth, Allen and Lombard. Abstaining were members Kennedy, Sokolovic, Weldon, Taylor, and Martinez.

Mr. Weldon said he believed that for those who abstained it had nothing to do with Ms. Graham or the honor that she was bestowed with earlier, but there are those of us who question naming any facility or a portion thereof for a current staff member. He said that should probably be addressed in policy.

The next agenda item was discussion and possible action for requesting full funding support from the City of Bridgeport to make 1735 Central Avenue into swing space for Bassick High School with a commitment to a long-term end use of that facility.

Mr. Illingworth said this matter came up in the Facilities meeting and it was recommended by the city administration. They are asking the board to request that the City Council

amend their capital plan to include the \$2.5 million so they can go out and bond for that money to make urgent repairs to 1735 Central Avenue. He said there were concerns with the City Council about bonding the money if they did not know what would happen to the building after its use as a swing space.

Mr. Weldon said he believed the expenditure at 1735 Central Avenue would not cost the board a penny. He said they need to know what the board wants and, if so, that there will be use of the building in the future.

Ms. Martinez said she was concerned about putting the Bassick students so close to the new Harding High School due to serious challenges. She asked if there was another space for the Bassick students.

Mr. Taylor said it was told to him that it was always Mayor Ganim's intention to sell the old Harding to Bridgeport Hospital. He questioned the expenditure of the money. He said he needed to speak to his community members about the issue and would also like to hear from the Bassick parents. Ms. Martinez said as a Bassick parent she is not comfortable.

Mr. Illingworth said the board viewed 1735 Central Avenue as inappropriate for the Harding students and now we're saying it's okay for the Bassick students. At the same time, he said, since there is no other place to put the Bassick students that creates the threat that the Bassick project could be stopped completely. He said he would have a Facilities Committee meeting at Bassick and request the police department attend so the city and the board could start creating a comprehensive security plan for the students in 1735 Central Avenue.

Mr. Weldon noted the policy about school closures includes developing the types of plans Mr. Illingworth is talking about.

Ms. Martinez suggested the 1735 Central Avenue building be considered for housing out-of-district special education students.

Dr. Johnson said she agreed with Mr. Illingworth about the concerns and the need for a comprehensive plan, including hearing from the Bassick students. She noted the construction of the new Bassick would be held over the board's head, but she said that was secondary to her.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said she did not know when the deadline was, but a letter from the board was needed in order to proceed forward with the bonding.

Mr. Weldon said the city has already approved its capital budget and would need the letter from the board. Dr. Johnson said they need a commitment from the board to keep the building after the Bassick students relocate to the new building.

Mr. Weldon said the city administration ultimately said they did not need to know the exact use the board would make of the building after the Bassick students leave.

Mr. Sokolovic said the School Building Committee is meeting on Thursday to approve items to get Bassick started. He warned against delays that could lead to losing funding. He said he believed the security issues could be addressed via suggestions brought forward. He said we have been fighting for a long time for a new Bassick and urged the board do nothing to risk it.

Ms. Pereira said we fought hard to get the increased enrollment, which cost millions and millions of dollars, that the state approved. She said saying we don't have a place to put Bassick students would put that at risk. She added every Bassick student will be two miles away from 1735 Central Avenue, which means they will all get bus transportation. She noted we have students from all over the city at Fairchild Wheeler, Central Magnet and BMA.

Ms. Pereira said Mr. Hammond and Mr. Wallack looked at other sites that would not work for Bassick students.

Mr. Illingworth moved that *"we request the full \$2.5 million funding support from the City of Bridgeport to make 1735 Central Avenue into swing space for Bassick High School with a commitment to a long-term end use of the facility."* The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez.

The motion was approved by a 7-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Pereira, Sokolovic, Kennedy, Weldon, Allen, Illingworth and Martinez. Mr. Taylor was opposed. Mr. Lombard abstained.

Ms. Allen moved the meeting be adjourned. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:46 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

*Approved by the board on May 28, 2019.*