

Monday, June 24, 2019

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held June 24, 2019, at Bridgeport Regional Aquaculture Science & Technology Education Center, 60 St. Stephens Road, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:31 p.m. Present were Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Jessica Martinez, Secretary Joseph Sokolovic, Sybil Allen, LaMar Kennedy, Maria Pereira, Chris Taylor and Joseph Lombard. Hernan Illingworth arrived subsequently as noted.

Supt. Dr. Aresta Johnson was present.

Mr. Weldon moved "*the superintendent's report be moved up on the agenda.*" The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

Dr. Johnson presented Anthony Miller of the BioTechnology School at Fairchild Wheeler with the \$1,000 Superintendent's Scholarship. She announced Anthony will be attending Temple University with a major in neuroscience.

Anthony's mother said it was a great feeling to have a child excel and work hard to accomplish their goal. She said Anthony often came home and told her about the wonderful debates at the board meetings.

Anthony thanked Dr. Johnson for the scholarship, which he said was a big deal to him. He thanked the board for having

him this year as a student representative.

Ms. Allen moved to “*extend public comment to two minutes per public speaker for a maximum of twenty-two speakers.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez and unanimously approved.

Mr. Weldon said Spanish translation services were available.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Dasha Spell said the decision to appoint an interim or permanent superintendent should not be taken lightly, particularly in light of the huge budget cuts. She said the community needed good leadership. She said she was running for election to the board.

Rondell Jones, a father of an 8th grade daughter, said we need to keep things in-house when we hire our superintendent and hire someone who has walked the hallways with our children and can continue to run what Dr. Johnson started.

Sal Hanaif, soccer coach at Bassick High, said, like teachers, he was a coach because it is all about the kids. He noted the success of his soccer program and the increased participation at the school. He said it bothers him when we talk about race, religion and culture instead of caring about the kids. He said the interim superintendent should be someone who has been invested in our school system for a long time.

Lawrence Richardson, a school security officer, said he received great advice from Michael Testani when he was a guidance counselor. He said the students he sees in the

district face many issues because of what happens in the streets. He said the interim superintendent should be someone who has been in the district and who is vested. He said from his experience in coaching in Fairfield that children don't identify with who looks like them but with those care about them. He asked the board to trust someone who's been in the district for over twenty years.

Mary Tracy, PTSO president at Harding High, thanked Dr. Johnson for what she did for her and the children. She spoke in favor of Mr. Testani as interim superintendent because of the stability he could provide and his ability to hit the ground running from the first day. She said the other candidates travel from district to district every few years.

Dr. Ralph Ford wished Dr. Johnson well, although he said he was mad at her for leaving. He urged the board to make a prudent decision, not a political decision. He said it was prudent to pick the person who had the qualifications and experience to be the superintendent and on whether they have a vision for an urban district with 80 percent minority students. He said a political decision means you don't have to care about qualifications and or whether the candidate has been a principal. He said a political decision came from those who underfunded the schools and keeps the kids in educational bondage.

Antonio Osbourne said Bridgeport needed the best and brightest, but some of the candidates for superintendent went against that. He said seven people of color in the district who had certifications were not even candidates. He said the call went out in the city for people to show up at a meeting to support their candidate, which he described as a power play. He said he was sick and tired of the politics.

JoAnn Kennedy said she wanted to defend the board against charges from people from other districts that they were inciting a riot. She said they should take the message back that they were not going to get the board out; people in Bridgeport would do that ourselves. She said the cream rose to the top in the interviews at Claytor School. She said the board members should put aside politics and pick the best candidate.

Sarah Sollingsberg said she moved here from Utah, where the school district was very short of funding, unlike Bridgeport. She noted she had to volunteer in classrooms in Utah due to the underfunding. She said somebody to lead was needed for the students in the district who are great and want to learn.

James Meszoros Sr., a Gregory Street resident and employee of the district for 25 years, said there have been six superintendents in his tenure with the board. He said when Elaine Buckley left Bassick High, Mr. Testani came in and changed a lot of things and did things for the kids and the community. He said he was a hundred percent behind Mr. Testani.

Briana Graham, daughter of Denise Clemons, read a letter from a former music teacher at Cross School when Ms. Clemons was principal, Frances Russell. Ms. Russell described a \$50,000 music grant that Ms. Clemons wrote that was awarded to only one school in the country, Cross. She said the music program at the school thrived and students performed on several occasions in Washington, D.C. She described Ms. Clemons's personal efforts at transporting drums to an event and praised her mantra: It's all about the kids. Ms. Graham urged the board think about the future and not the politics in this room.

Beth Lazar said the district was in need of a competent person to be the superintendent of schools. She said Dr. Brice was such a person, highlighting his work in the Obama administration and his degrees. She said Mr. Testani was a cousin of Mr. Fabrizi and willing to be the puppet of Ganim and Testa. She said it would be a blatant case of racism to pick Mr. Testani over Dr. Brice.

Albert Benejan, former PTSO president at Bassick High, said we need to work together. He thanked Dr. Johnson for her work in the district and her support for his work at Bassick High. He said he supported Mr. Testani because he had long experience in the district. He announced he would be running for election to the Board of Education.

David Heard said he would like to see someone be the superintendent who would like to be in the position for a long period of time and who was born and raised in this community and understands Bridgeport. He said the majority of students in the district who are minorities need someone who looks like them.

Dr. Jonathan Brice thanked the board for the opportunity to go through the interview process for the position of interim superintendent. He highlighted the importance of liberty and justice referenced in the Pledge of Allegiance. He said he grew up in a town like Bridgeport, Baltimore, Maryland. He asked the board to put politics aside and make the right decision for the young people of Bridgeport. He said he can live with no, but he can't live with a process that is not transparent and does not happen in public.

Tammy Bogdanyi said she regretted Dr. Johnson leaving the district and wished her well. She said she came here as a

strong white woman who was married to a strong black man with four black children. She said she was a single mother for about fifteen years. She said when her kids look at her they do not see color. She said an interim superintendent needs to come into Bridgeport and treat all children equally. She said she hoped Dr. Brice would come back as the permanent superintendent. She said from his work with parents Mr. Testani was a person of high integrity and she urged he be appointed interim superintendent.

Dane Brown, principal of Harding High, thanked the board for going through the vetting process of candidates. He said Mr. Testani had the ability to take the baton and make critical decisions on Day One because of his communication skills and work with building principals. He urged Mr. Testani be appointed interim superintendent.

Gail Janesch thanked the board and Dr. Johnson for launching community conversations and for supporting the forum for superintendent Saturday night at Claytor School. She praised the questions that were submitted for the candidates by the public. She said as a happy Bridgeport resident she wished Dr. Johnson well in her new job and said she would like to register voters at the University of Bridgeport. She said she would be running forums for candidates for the Board of Education as well.

Bob Halstead said he was a son of a former Central High teacher, a nephew of a former Central principal, and former City Councilman. He said he had reservations about the food being served in the schools, which has led to the creation of gardens. He said we might need someone from the outside to transcend the political system. He urged the board members work with whoever is chosen.

Maria Pereira said all the recent superintendents and interim superintendents in the district were qualified to serve by an 093 certification or serving at the level of assistant superintendent or higher. She said Mr. Testani was the candidate for Mayor Ganim, Mario Testa, Dan Shamus and former Mayor Fabrizi, people who have done a disgrace to our children.

Ms. Pereira said she fought for Ms. Clemons to get an interview because she was qualified, but her job was not to vote for her friends. She said Mr. Testani had major conflicts because his wife is a school teacher and he was vice president of a union.

Ms. Pereira said Dr. Johnson was shocked that Mr. Testani submitted what he called a letter of recommendation that Dr. Johnson wrote to the UConn superintendent certification program on behalf of Mr. Testani. She said Dr. Johnson indicated she was remaining neutral and was unaware the letter was supplied to the board

Craig Gordon said he had a program to solve the school-to-prison issue. He said nutrition was the key. He said his program had worked for people in recovery, probation officers and other school systems. He said he was available to provide further details.

Lyle Hassan Jones said he has worked in the past with Mr. Testani and Ms. Clemons. He said Ms. Clemons was born, raised, and went to school in Bridgeport. He said she had done what we tell children: go to school, get educated, do something with your life and give to your community.

Mr. Jones said we do not need politics playing with children's lives. He said we need the right players to make the

decisions in what has been a struggling school system. He urged the board members stand on principle and weigh the candidates because they have to live with their conscience. He urged Ms. Clemons be appointed.

Ms. Martinez moved “*to move Item 10-A up to immediately following public comment.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Kennedy and unanimously approved.

Ms. Martinez moved “*for a five-minute recess.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The meeting was recessed and 7:32 p.m. and reconvened at 7:39 p.m.

Ms. Martinez moved to go into executive session to discuss the final decision for interim superintendent. The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen.

Ms. Pereira said under state statute an individual whose employment was being discussed could insist such a meeting be held in open session.

Mr. Weldon said the board’s attorney was told by the Connecticut Freedom of Information Commission that it was acceptable to go into executive session to discuss candidates.

Mr. Taylor objected to the board receiving legal advice from a non-attorney, Ms. Pereira.

Mr. Sokolovic said the attorney did not indicate the board must hold the discussion in executive session. He said too many decisions in Bridgeport are being made behind closed doors. He said we should speak about it and account for it in

front of the public.

The motion failed. Voting in opposition were members Lombard, Illingworth, Martinez, Pereira, Sokolovic, Weldon, and Taylor. Mr. Kennedy and Ms. Allen did not vote.

Ms. Pereira said Ms. Martinez and Mr. Taylor missed three of the five candidate interviews and did not attend the Saturday forum. She asked if it was their intention to vote on the matter.

Ms. Martinez said she received the resumes of the candidates and watched the forum online.

Ms. Pereira said the board had to go through the candidate rating forms, which was the standard process and was used when previous candidates were hired.

Mr. Lombard said he wished there was a Dream Team for the three top candidates. He said his limited interactions with Mr. Testani had been excellent during this tenure on the board. He said Ms. Clemons had experience, expertise and a lot of support. He said Dr. Brice had an amazing resume and was an excellent orator, noting his doctorate from Harvard. He said he was really torn.

Mr. Illingworth said he had Dr. Brice right up top on his rating sheet. He said he viewed interim superintendent as a specific role. He said he worried about someone not familiar with the district coming in without support and a skeleton crew in the district. He said he was really torn. He urged Dr. Brice if he comes up short to consider coming back as the permanent superintendent.

Mr. Taylor said he did not attend the interviews, and his only

intended interviews were people from Bridgeport, Mr. Testani and Ms. Clemons. He said he received call from Dr. Ford, a district leader, and he met with Dr. Brice, Ernie Newton, Dr. Ford and others, which was the only political meeting he had. He said he had another political meeting with Ms. Clemons. He said he never met with Mr. Testa or Mayor Ganim, but did meet with Mike Garrett, his party chair. He said Mr. Testani did not reach out to him.

Mr. Taylor said he spoke to Mr. Weldon, Ms. Martinez and Mr. Illingworth about Mr. Testani. He said he committed his support when he did not have the votes for Ms. Clemons. He said he believed Ms. Clemons should be the next four-year superintendent. He said he would like to see Mr. Testani get the position and have Ms. Clemons come on as a deputy superintendent so she could hit the ground running next year.

Ms. Allen said she was torn because there are two wonderful candidates in Dr. Brice and Ms. Clemons that she would like to see become superintendent. She said she would do what her heart, her soul and her constituents asked her to do.

Mr. Sokolovic said when he received the candidates' resumes he did not know what anybody's face looked like. He said Dr. Brice's background stood out for vast experience in a large, inner city district that had issues with violence and disproportionate suspensions of males of color. He said Dr. Brice served under President Obama in the My Brother's Keeper initiative. He said he may not be from Bridgeport, but was familiar with the city's problems and issues and could hit the ground running. He said in addition to familiarity breeding contempt, it also creates a \$15 million budget deficit.

Ms. Martinez said she was born and raised in Bridgeport,

and she knew nothing about color when she was at Curiale School, as well as nothing about slavery or inequities. She said it angered her that leaders of color are perpetuating inequities and politics. She also objected to the police department being funded more than education in Bridgeport.

Ms. Martinez said it was not about color, but about the children. She said she was tired of racism and division in the city. She said Dr. Ford and Mr. Newton had made phone calls behind the scenes, but she had never seen them at board meeting. She said they supported Ms. Clemons, but when she didn't have the votes they dropped her and went for Dr. Brice.

Ms. Martinez said she did not get calls from Mayor Ganim or Mr. Testa. She said the mayor knew how opposed she was to his lack of funding for education.

Ms. Martinez said she believed Ms. Clemons and Dr. Brice were great, but politics muddied their chances. She urged they come back for the permanent superintendent position. She added she was upset that a white man that chose to give over 25 years of time to the board is not black enough or Latino enough. She said Mr. Testani was highly qualified and she would vote for him.

Ms. Pereira said Ms. Rabinowitz was brought here as the interim superintendent for six months and she ended up staying for two and a half years. She said there was a board member here that voted to terminate that superintendent search. She said studies showed that minority students need to see people of color in front of them. She added the district had done a great job in recruiting minority educators and adding the Latino studies and African-American studies as a graduation requirement.

Ms. Pereira said she created a spreadsheet that showed the credentials of the candidates. She said the only person who has never taught in a pre-K to 12 classroom was Mr. Testani.

Ms. Pereira said Dr. Brice had worked in the Department of Education in the Obama Administration, worked on My Brother's Keeper, and been involved with large urban school districts, including Baltimore, which has 162,000 students and a \$2.5 billion budget. She said she was strongly in favor of Ms. Clemons getting an interview, but it was not her job to vote for her friends or associates.

Ms. Martinez asked who called Ms. Pereira to change her vote. Ms. Pereira said nobody can pick up the phone and tell her to what to do, and everybody in Bridgeport politics knows that. She added she does not get along with Dr. Ford or Mr. Newton.

Ms. Pereira said Dr. Brice's interview gave her goose bumps and she was blown away by him.

Mr. Kennedy described an occasion as a football coach when he voted for a lesser player from Bridgeport over a superior player. This prevented the superior player from being a unanimous all-state selection. He said he regretted that decision which occurred because he was biased. He added he does not play politics and he urged the board members to make the decision they feel is right, not because somebody told them to vote for a candidate.

Ms. Pereira said when a new athletic director was chosen by Supt. Vallas the administration passed over an African-American woman who had been a coach in the district in

favor of a guidance counselor with no certification in physical education. A lawsuit was filed and the district had to pay \$100,000 that could have went to children.

Ms. Pereira said there were three highly qualified African-American candidates and we may be in a position where we have justify why someone significantly less qualified was chosen.

Mr. Kennedy said the definition of cronyism was when someone hires a friend to do a job whether or not he or she is the best candidate.

Mr. Taylor said Mr. Kennedy had made eloquent comments. He thanked Mr. Kennedy for guiding him in his decision.

Mr. Weldon noted Dr. Brice had met with a board member despite the advertisement for the position prohibiting contact with board members outside the established application process.

Dr. Brice said he was not familiar with the political players in Bridgeport, and he agreed to meet with Dr. Ford today as a citizen of Bridgeport. He said he did not know a board member was going to be there. He said he made it very clear that his integrity was beyond reproach and he does not sell his vote or decisions. He added his answers in the process have been focused on what's best for students.

Ms. Martinez said Dr. Brice was very candid in his response and she was grateful. She said he did not know that Dr. Ford is the district leader of the East End who makes decisions.

Ms. Pereira said she chatted with candidates out in the lobby after the forums. She noted Dr. Brice met with one school

board member who had never had any interaction with him. She added Democratic Town Committee members are not elected officials under the city charter or state statute. She said on Saturday she followed up with Dr. Brice in the parking lot on his certification and his experience with financial crises.

Mr. Weldon said the issue was that it was a closed-door meeting outside the process, but he was not casting any aspersions.

Ms. Martinez said unfortunately she was at the hospital on Saturday with her terminally ill father, but did watch the forum online. She said Dr. Brice excited her. She added she went over his resume thoroughly. She said unfortunately the city was divided and wounded by lies and miscommunication, as well as corruption in politics.

Ms. Martinez said we need to take action and lead with her words in mind. She said we were going to decide tonight what's best for our children. She said Mr. Testani cares about our kids and our staff.

Ms. Martinez said hopefully Dr. Brice would come to stay for a long time. She said currently we need stability. She added as a person of color she was disgusted at it being viewed okay to discriminate and disrespect white people at our meetings.

Ms. Martinez said her son's best teachers at Marin School were white. She said she put her son in Notre Dame, but he is now in Bassick, one of the worst high schools in Bridgeport.

Ms. Pereira asked if the board would be going over the

candidate rating forms. Mr. Weldon said he had not received any from members. Ms. Pereira said that was his role as chair.

Mr. Sokolovic moved that “*we offer the interim superintendent position for superintendent to Dr. Brice.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Lombard.

Ms. Martinez made “*a motion for Michael Testani.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen.

Mr. Lombard made “*a motion to put Ms. Clemons on the floor.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Pereira.

The results of vote were five votes for Mr. Testani (Members Illingworth, Weldon, Allen, Martinez and Taylor); and three votes for Dr. Brice (Members Pereira, Sokolovic and Lombard).

Mr. Kennedy abstained. He this was because one candidate had five votes and his vote would not matter.

Ms. Pereira moved to recess the meeting. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The meeting was recessed at 8:26 p.m. and reconvened at 8:39 p.m.

Mr. Weldon said motions previously passed by the board on healthy food options were not specific enough.

John Gerrity of the Nutrition Department said after receiving comments he would ask the board that the three motions be approved with the proper language.

Mr. Weldon moved “to add to the agenda a motion to consider and approve of the health food option pursuant to C.G.S. Section 10-215f by voting ‘yes’ for the healthy foods option; a health food exemptions pursuant to C.G.S. 10-215f; and a motion to consider and approve beverage exemptions pursuant to C.G.S. Section 10-221q.”

The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved

Ms. Allen moved that “the Bridgeport Board of Education certifies that the food items offered for sale to students in the schools under its jurisdiction, and not exempted from the Connecticut Nutrition Standards published by the Connecticut State Department of Education, will comply with the Connecticut Nutrition Standards during the period of July 1, 2019, through June 30, 2020. This certification shall include all food offered for sale to students separately from reimbursable meals at all times and from all sources, including but not limited to, school stores, vending machines, school cafeterias, and any fundraising activities on school premises sponsored by the school or by non-school organizations and groups.”

The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez and unanimously approved.

Ms. Allen moved “the Bridgeport Board of Education will allow the sale to students of food items that do not meet the Connecticut Nutrition Standards provided that the following conditions are met: The sale is in connection with an event occurring after the end of the regular school day or the weekend; The sale is at the location of the event; and the food items are not sold from a vending machine or school store. An “event” is an occurrence that involves more than

just a regularly scheduled practice, meeting, or extracurricular activity. For example, soccer games, school plays, and interscholastic debates are events but soccer practices, play rehearsals, and debate team meetings are not. The regular school day is the period from midnight before to 30 minutes after the end of the official school day. Location means where the event is being held.”

The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez.

There was a discussion of which activities and events would qualify. Mr. Gerrity said the language is from the statute that applies to this exemption.

Ms. Pereira said it was important that the PACs and principals be informed of the policies.

Dr. Johnson said she was in favor of the motion. Mr. Taylor advocated approving the whole thing.

Mr. Weldon said this is what Mr. Gerrity is being told that he needs.

Dr. Johnson noted the definition of event in the motion, which covers something more than just regularly scheduled practices, meetings or extracurricular activity.

The motion was approved by an 8-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Sokolovic, Taylor, Allen, Lombard, Illingworth, Martinez, Weldon, and Kennedy. Ms. Pereira abstained.

Ms. Allen moved that *“the Bridgeport Board of Education will allow the sale to students of beverages that do not meet the Connecticut Nutrition Standards provided that the following*

conditions are met: The sale is in connection with an event occurring after the end of the regular school day or on the weekend; the sale is at the location of the event; and the beverage items are not sold from a vending machine or school store. An event is an occurrence that involves more than just a regularly scheduled practice, meeting or extracurricular activity. For example, soccer games, school plays, and interscholastic debates are events but soccer practices, play rehearsals and debate team meetings are not. The regular school day is the period from midnight before to 30 minutes after the end of the official school day. Location means where the event is being held.”

The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic.

The motion was approved by an 8-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Sokolovic, Taylor, Allen, Lombard, Illingworth, Martinez, Weldon, and Kennedy. Ms. Pereira abstained.

Mr. Taylor moved to adjourn the meeting. The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen.

Mr. Taylor, Ms. Allen, and Mr. Illingworth voted in favor. Mr. Sokolovic was in opposition. Mr. Lombard did not vote. No other votes were verbalized.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:47 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Approved by the board on August 26, 2019