

Monday, January 10, 2022

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held January 10, 2022, via Teams, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:31 p.m.

Present were Vice Chair Bobbi Brown, Secretary Joseph Lombard, Joseph Sokolovic, Christine Baptiste-Perez, Michael Maccarone, and Erika Castillo. Chair John Weldon, Sybil Allen and Albert Benejan arrived subsequently as noted.

Supt. Michael J. Testani was present.

STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE REPORTS:

Layla Wilson of the BioTech School at Fairchild Wheeler reported on her school. She highlighted recent food and toy drives held at all the Fairchild schools.

Avery Flechtner of the IT School at Fairchild Wheeler highlighted the IT staff for fixing the Motion Capture lab and two teachers who received Donors' Choose grants. There was a successful transition back to school today. The BCYL program, which will involve students teaching elementary school students how to code after school, is underway.

Aleena Khan from the Aerospace School at Fairchild Wheeler reported on her school. Among the items she highlighted were a recent skills day and the approaching end of the quarter, which include students' final projects. The

Science Fair will be held virtually next Thursday, which can be accessed through the school's website.

Ms. Allen and Mr. Benejan joined the meeting.

Michael Hemmings of the IT School at Fairchild Wheeler said Ms. Flechtner covered pretty much everything at the school.

Shermaine Elliot of Harding High reported on her school. She highlighted Christmas cards designed by students for healthcare workers. She said many seniors have been preparing college applications and many students have already heard from colleges.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Ana Batista, president of the BEA, said the BEA strongly supports the American Rescue Act premium pay, particularly the inclusion of BPS classroom staff in the benefits. She said the staff risked their own health and that of their families every day. She said the staff was present in buildings even before everyone was vaccinated. She said together we are Bridgeport Strong.

APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:

Mr. Sokolovic moved to approve the minutes of the Regular Meeting of December 20, 2021. The motion was seconded by Mr. Lombard and unanimously approved.

Mr. Benejan moved to approve the minutes of the Special Meeting of December 4, 2021. The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and approved by a 7-0 vote. Voting in favor were

members Castillo, Brown, Baptiste-Perez, Sokolovic, Maccarone, Allen, and Benejan. Mr. Lombard abstained.

COMMITTEE REPORTS/REFERRALS:

Ms. Brown reported on the Districtwide Branding Initiative Committee. The next meeting will be on January 19th, but it is not known if the meeting will be in person or online.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Educational Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Commission will meet the third Monday of each month. This month's meeting will be on January 18th.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Finance Committee will meet on January 26th. He said hopefully the meeting will be in person.

Mr. Benejan said the Students & Families Committee will meet on January 20th.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Teaching & Learning Committee will meet on January 18th.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez referred an item to the Teaching & Learning Committee on the outcome of the discussions with Harding, Bassick & Central principals regarding the Educators Rising program.

Mr. Benejan said he wanted to refer an update on security to the Facilities Committee.

SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT:

Supt. Testani said the district has transitioned back to in-person learning from the break. He said last week there were two weather-related closures, along with a planned day off, so today was the second day back in school. He said overall there was not much of an increase in student absences. Prior to Covid the first day after a break would average about 3,800 students absent; Tuesday of last week had 5,000 absences.

The superintendent said there is no option to go to remote learning and no districts in the state are offering that option. He said he was confident that schools are safe. He said the spike over the holiday break was caused by community spread, not schools. He said mitigation strategies are consistently stressed with staff and students.

Mr. Sokolovic said he was starting to have real concerns about the schools. He noted the board went to a remote meeting tonight for the Omicron surge. He said the standards set by the prior reopening occurred during a lower positivity rate. He asked what the consequences would be to defy the governor's order and to go to a hybrid model of in-person and remote. He said he has been an advocate of parent choice. He said he believed the governor was playing election games.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said he did not know what the consequences would be. He said he believed the staff in the district would have a hard time going backwards to a hybrid model, which would put a damper on morale. He said the attendance numbers indicate parents are relying on us to educate their children. He said significant progress has been made with the students

returning to in-person instruction. He added that primary level students especially need in-person instruction. He noted most of the positive students are reporting mild symptoms.

Supt. Testani said there is an upcoming superintendents-only call so other options could be considered, but right now he said we should stay the course unless something significant occurs. He said from listening to the professionals the current virus was something we're going to need to live with for a while. He said if students are at a disadvantage, the district's kids are hurt the most.

Mr. Sokolovic said he recently tested positive for Covid. He said it looks bad to say it is safe for kids to go to school while the board meets remotely. The superintendent said he hopes the board returns to in-person meetings because they are more productive.

Supt. Testani noted there are packed arenas and stadiums across the country, with no restrictions on restaurants and businesses. He said the winter basketball season at the high schools had not led to any quarantines. He said he believed the district was in a better place than it was twelve months ago.

Mr. Weldon joined the meeting.

Ms. Brown said there were a lot of concerned parents and she noted that previously parents were given choices. The superintendent said because the governor's executive order has expired there is no choice available for families for remote learning. He said the hybrid model puts a significant strain on the staff.

Supt. Testani urged people to speak to doctors and pediatricians. He noted the city has one of the lowest vaccination rates in the state. He added that now three school years have been impacted by the pandemic.

Ms. Castillo said she recently tested positive and couldn't get an appointment with her doctor until March, so it seemed the healthcare system is stressed. She said parents deserve some grace because of this situation.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the quarantine period is five days from exposure or symptoms. He said for students or staff exhibiting symptoms there are test kits that have been distributed last week to school nurses. He said work will be provided to students who are out of school because they are quarantining.

Supt. Testani said a lot of the guidance has evolved because on what has occurred in the pandemic.

In response to a question, the superintendent said those who have quarantined for five days can return unless they still have a fever.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said ESSER funds have been used to hire staff that do check-ins with students that are quarantined, and they are able to work with the students on Teams. He said this is possible due to one-to-one devices. Such students are not marked absent.

The superintendent said the performing arts Fame Academy at Harding has opened. He said early reports are very positive. Next year, there will be a middle school component on Saturdays.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said Covid-related absences among staff did not seem as high as prior to the Christmas break.

CHAIR REPORT:

Mr. Weldon said the Contracts Committee would meet in February. The superintendent said there was a pending RFP for a special education review districtwide. Mr. Weldon said the committee would look at authorizing issuance of the RFP.

Mr. Benejan renewed his request for a referral to the Facilities Committee on a security report. Mr. Weldon said the committee would meet in February.

Mr. Weldon said the Governance Committee would return to the discussions with the Make the Road Connecticut group regarding student transportation, the matter related to board policy on public comment, and the magnet policy for Central High.

The superintendent said a meeting of the Personnel Committee might be needed in about two weeks. In response to a question, he said the recommended candidate for the assistant principal at Bassick High was chosen, Ms. Lynn.

NEW BUSINESS:

The next agenda item was on the 2022-23 academic year calendar. Mr. Weldon said the proposal was provided to the board in the package.

The superintendent said the district follows a similar calendar with Fairfield County districts so the days off for staff members coincide with those of their children. There are 181 school days for children and 186 contractual days for teachers and staff. He said starting school as a full day is more advantageous because attendance is better.

Mr. Benejan moved “*to adopt the calendar as presented.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on supplemental district employee compensation related to work performed during Covid-19 pandemic.

Mr. Weldon said the unions have approached himself, Mr. Sokolovic as the finance chair, and the superintendent to express their brief that the district should provide this compensation, even if only symbolically. He said he agreed to bring it to the full board for a discussion.

Supt. Testani said in the Thanksgiving time period the unions held a press conference and met with the mayor on this issue. He said the city seemed receptive to compensation. He said more clarification is needed if American Rescue Plan ESSER funds can be used for this purpose.

Mr. Benejan said he would like more information about the issue. He said he hoped the staff would receive the compensation because they were always in the frontlines. He noted Mr. Testani had received a nice raise and the same should be done for the staff.

Mr. Weldon said the matter could also go to the Finance Committee following this discussion or not as the board wished. Ms. Brown said she believed that Ms. Siegel should be part of the discussion.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said it sounded like there were issues around remote learning and we had to be cautious on making promises we cannot keep.

Mr. Sokolovic said the matter should be vetted through the Finance Committee. He said the staff is deserving of compensation, but the question is whether we should do it or not because every dollar has to come from somewhere. He noted the ESSER funding is a limited bucket of dollars. He noted he had heard price tags of \$1 million to \$5 million for this. He said he believed the committee could look at it dispassionately.

Ms. Castillo said she agreed the staff worked very hard during the pandemic, but whether this is the proper use of the funds has to be considered. She said it seemed perhaps this was not an allowable expenditure for ESSER funds.

Supt. Testani said there is no mention specifically of this in ARP/ESSER guidelines. It is mentioned in ARP funds received by municipalities, not boards of education. He said he believed Stamford provided compensation of \$500 to staff from municipal funds. He said people deserve compensation, but the parameters must be determined.

Mr. Lombard said there may be complications regarding retired employees or those who left the district. He said no good deed goes unpunished, which the Finance Committee should keep in mind.

The superintendent said from March 12, 2020, to the end of the school year no one worked in the buildings except limited food, clerical, and security staff. He noted everyone was paid a full salary for this period. He said perhaps September of 2020 when the full reopening occurred might be considered the frontlines.

Mr. Weldon said we did not want to inadvertently pit one group of employees against another.

Mr. Benejan said this would not be money taken from children because it would be from ARP money for pay.

In response to a question, Mr. Weldon said the matter was brought to the city by NAGE and AFSCME, who share employees with the board, and then was expanded to the BOE. The BEA then became involved. He said the unions did not get into specifics as to what time period the request covered. He said he did not view this as a negotiation with give and take, but totally within the board's discretion.

Mr. Lombard said he believed in recognizing everyone – student, faculty, administrators – going through the pandemic. He said something as a recognition of the battle wounds was needed as opposed to just certain workers receiving a monetary award for their incredible work.

The superintendent said the city ARP guidelines include an income eligibility threshold, so everyone could not receive a monetary bonus, although the vast majority of staff would qualify. He said ARP and ESSER dollars have different rules on what are allowable expenditures. The vast majority of the latter are to be spent on students. He said the ARP provisions for municipalities allow up to \$13 per hour for workers, with a cap of \$25,000.

Mr. Benejan suggested a special meeting with all the board members before it goes to the Finance Committee.

Ms. Allen moved “*to refer this item to Finance.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown.

The motion was approved by a 7-2 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Brown, Sokolovic, Allen, Castillo, Baptiste-Perez, and Maccarone. Mr. Lombard and Mr. Benejan were opposed.

Mr. Weldon thanked Ms. Brown for chairing the meeting and starting on time while he was delayed with a subway issue. He added his sympathies to Mr. Benejan for the passing of his mother.

Mr. Benejan thanked all the board members who reached out to him.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 7:51 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Approved by the board on January 24, 2022