

Monday, January 25, 2021

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held January 25, 2021, by video conference call, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:33 p.m. Present were members Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Bobbi Brown, Secretary Joseph Lombard, Albert Benejan, Joseph Sokolovic, Chris Taylor, and Sybil Allen.

Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

JoAnn Kennedy spoke in opposition to the cancellation of the boys' basketball season. She said every other school district except New Haven is participating under the CIAC guidelines. She said it was unfair that athletics always goes first historically in the district. She said athletics and things like art and music help build a well-rounded student. She said she attempted to have a meeting with the superintendent today with students.

Mr. Weldon noted appointments are needed to enter city hall under the pandemic.

Supt. Testani said he was not in the building at the time the students apparently arrived during the school day.

Sean Allen, a Harding basketball player, said he came to the superintendent's office today. He said he is only interested in playing under the protocols being used in other school districts. He said this is the only route out of Bridgeport and

the way to succeed for some people. In his case he said he will be unable to provide colleges with film of him playing basketball. He said without sports, particularly the eight seniors at Harding, the players would really be affected.

Joshua Santiago, a Bridge Academy student and Bassick High basketball player, said there should be a way for students attending to play basketball. He said some kids in Bridgeport only go to school to play basketball, while for other students it is their last chance to get a scholarship. He said the players all agreed to safety protocols.

Dasha Spell, a Bridgeport parent, said she was in support of student-athletes in the city. She said there were guidelines given to student-athletes and they signed off on them with their parents, and then were told they can't play. She said transparency was important and there needed to be a conversation with the young people. She said a lot of the students have indicated they don't know why their season ended.

APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:

Ms. Allen moved approval of the minutes of the Regular Meeting of January 11, 2021. The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown. The motion was approved by an 6-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Benejan, Weldon, Sokolovic, Brown, Allen, and Lombard. Mr. Taylor abstained.

Ms. Allen moved approval of the minutes of the Special Meeting of January 20, 2021. The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan. The motion was approved by a 6-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Benejan, Weldon, Sokolovic, Brown, Allen, and Lombard. Mr. Taylor abstained.

Mr. Taylor asked the board to observe a moment of silence for the passing of Eleanor DeShields, paraprofessional at Wilbur Cross School, and Maryann Paci, who started in the grants department and went on to the Lighthouse Program

COMMITTEE REPORTS/REFERRALS:

Mr. Weldon said the Facilities Committee would meet on Monday and the agenda includes a general facilities report and a basketball court at Black Rock School.

Mr. Benejan referred the naming of Columbus School and the survey of parents and staff to the Facilities Committee.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Finance Committee met on January 13 and the budget proposal was discussed, which will be covered in a special meeting.

Mr. Benejan asked that he receive a report on overtime costs at the Facilities Committee.

Mr. Weldon said the Governance Committee will meet on February 1st and handle items on inclusion of nonvoting members on standing committees and the mechanics of remote participation in board and committee meetings by board members.

Mr. Sokolovic referred the magnet school policy review to the committee.

Mr. Benejan said the Students & Families Committee would meet on January 28th because he had a personal issue that conflicted with the proposed January 21st meeting.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Teaching & Learning Committee met on January 19th. There was a presentation on the development of the Grade 7 to 12 social studies curriculum by Chris Johnson, with an update scheduled in two months on the progress.

SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT/AGENDA:

Supt. Testani said the state gave the district a grant of \$14,000 that Ms. Rocha-Reaes is using to help support school counselors in increasing the FAFSA numbers as part of a state challenge. He said for many students getting into college is the easiest part, while affording it and being able to stay there is the biggest challenge.

The superintendent said the reopening of schools on January 11th to in-person learning has been successful. A few cases have popped up but in isolated situations. He said the hybrid schedule has helped minimize disruptions. He said the vaccination process for board employees has been delayed due to short supplies of the Moderna vaccine.

Supt. Testani noted the public comments on winter sports and basketball. He said basketball was in the moderate to high risk category. He said he did not know how many teams and districts are participating in basketball. He said Stamford has yet to make a decision and their health officials have discouraged participation. He said health officials he has spoken to have raised many concerns. He said Darien and Wilton teams are on quarantine due to COVID exposure.

The superintendent said his concerns are because high school are not in full attendance and it has been a hybrid model the entire school year. He said he has confirmed many of the students have not had updated physicals in over

a year, which would be needed to participate in sports. He questioned whether some teams would be able to put a team on the court due to the lack of physicals. He said he had concerns about a child playing basketball with a mask after seeing a college basketball player collapse on the court due to respiratory issues. He said he had concerns about ventilation in high school gyms and the problems the use of masks create. He said a lot of referees have opted out of participating in basketball.

Supt. Testani said he has been a coach in the city and is a huge supporter of athletics, but we are not close to being able to get teams on the court due to physicals. A practice period of two weeks would be needed before competing against other schools.

The superintendent said according to the board's counsel any waiver signed by parents for sports would not cover anyone other than the child.

Supt. Testani said he did not feel comfortable putting a child at risk to compete in a sport with a mask that will be detrimental to their health. He noted the season would be condensed in any event with ten to twelve games.

Mr. Taylor said the superintendent has done an outstanding job managing the COVID situation. He noted students and teachers can be put in the classroom, but students can't engage in athletics. He said if schools are open, it is unjust that students are not able to play sports. He asked the superintendent to reconsider and asked the board to take a vote to instruct him to do so.

Supt. Testani said students are brought into classrooms social distanced, which would not work in basketball. He said

there are over 8,000 students who have not come to school in-person one day this year. He said one parent who contacted him about the possibility of a season said that their child could not attend in-person because of asthma, while that student could play basketball with a mask. He said the student-athletes were students first, athletes next. He said if the board chose to permit play, the liability would be on the board and not on him.

Mr. Taylor said he agreed those that do not attend school in-person should not be able to play. He said the seniors had got a bad deal and he supported basketball if it could be done safely.

Mr. Taylor moved to add to the agenda instating the basketball season for Bridgeport athletics to the agenda. The motion was not seconded.

Mr. Benejan noted he did not agree with opening the schools with the COVID situation. He said if sports could not be played, the schools should not be open.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said nurses are only responsible for physicals to attend school. Coaches work with parents to get sports physicals to get athletes cleared to play.

The superintendent said it is still expensive to run the schools under the current model due to PPE and other mitigating equipment. He said this is not a budgetary decision, but based on the lack of safety to play. He said it was very easy to spread out 300 students in Central High on any given day, but that was not possible with the close contact in basketball. He said if there was a positive case, it would have to be shut down immediately.

In response to a question, the superintendent said in the hybrid model COVID cases at schools that do appear can be isolated. He said when the district closed to go fully remote there were 58 staff members who reported positive case and after being closed for five weeks there were almost as many reported cases. He said this narrows down that school is not the spreader that people previously believed.

Mr. Sokolovic asked if the superintendent could have a discussion with the students who came to his office today. Supt. Testani said he would love to have a conversation in the gymnasium when the students are in school and could be spread out perhaps in the gym. He said teams could not be opened to charter school students who would intermingle with district students. He said the original plan was only to involve 12 or 13 students, without freshman and JV teams, but calls for an increase resulted. He noted basketball had a full season last year. He said alternatives could be looked once it is seen how other districts playing basketball do.

Mr. Sokolovic said he wanted to caution students who believe sports are only way out of Bridgeport. He said our students are intelligent and can achieve anything they put their minds to.

In response to a question, the superintendent said he has talked to parents and coaches who told him there was a fall AAU basketball season and there is a planned spring and summer AAU season. He said AAU is one of the biggest drivers for college recruitment because coaches find it more convenient than visiting multiple high schools while recruiting.

Ms. Brown said she appreciated the students sharing their views in a respectful manner. She said she supported Mr. Testani having a meeting with the students. She said it seemed the students were receiving mixed messages from coaches and parents.

Supt. Testani said students are sometimes getting mixed messages. He noted coaches want to have their season and they want to coach, and oftentimes parents are misinformed. He said sports should be played for enjoyment since for many kids high school is the end of the road for their athletic careers. He said academics will carry students through the rest of their lives.

Mr. Benejan said he believed the colleges around us did not look at Bridgeport athletes.

Supt. Testani said he spend a lot of time talking to parents and students in the fall during football season, which was not a pleasant experience. He said many folks misconstrued the message because of their emotional investment. He said he was called all kinds of names about football and in the end no district in the state played football.

NEW BUSINESS:

The next agenda item was on the application of Wilbur Cross School to the Commissioner's Network

Supt. Testani said this was in the planning phase, the application having been submitted about a year and a half ago, prior to his tenure. He said he worked with the state Department of Education to assure them we were changing leadership at the principal level and certain conditions were followed.

The superintendent said the plan will be solid, whether we get into the Commissioner's Network or not. The staff will be reconstituted, with the staff members having to reapply for their jobs at the school. He said he was looking forward to the commissioner and the state Board of Education signing off on the entry into the network.

The next agenda item was on a districtwide branding initiative committee. Mr. Weldon said this was discussed during a special meeting that suggested the district could brand itself and the things it does in the community in a better fashion.

Ms. Allen moved "*to establish this committee.*" The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested an ad hoc committee might be more appropriate.

Ms. Allen moved to amend the motion "*to make it an ad hoc committee.*" The amendment was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and approved by a 6-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Brown, Lombard, Allen, Benejan, and Sokolovic. Mr. Taylor abstained.

Mr. Weldon said the discussion was about making sure that the logo and the phrase "every student, every day" gets used consistently, along with protocols for interactions with the media about highlighting good things.

Mr. Taylor left the meeting.

Ms. Brown said she does marketing by day and she wanted to highlight the good work done by the district. She said this

will help to communicate what is happening across the district.

Supt. Testani said the district had been lacking a communications person for over a decade. He said the pandemic has shown that this is a void that needs to be filled in some way, perhaps even with a parttime individual. He said all other large districts have a fulltime staff member who works in communications.

Mr. Lombard said budget should be considered in this effort. Mr. Weldon said there would not be a budget for the committee, but the committee could work with staff to determine what costs would be for a branding initiative. He said he had been involved in a branding initiative in the past and depending how far it is taken it could cost tens of thousands of dollars.

The superintendent said he did not think it would be cheap to get a high-quality person to work in this area.

Ms. Brown indicated she was interested in serving on the committee. Mr. Weldon said Dr. Fabian seemed to have a real interest in it. Mr. Benejan said he would like to be on the committee.

The motion was unanimously approved.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 7:52 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Approved by the board on February 8, 2021