

Monday, October 26, 2020

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held October 26, 2020, by video conference call, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:31 p.m. Present were members Chair John Weldon, Secretary Bobbi Brown, Jessica Martinez, Albert Benejan, Joseph Sokolovic, and Joseph Lombard. Sybil Allen joined the meeting subsequently as noted.

Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present

APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:

Ms. Martinez moved approval of the minutes of the Regular Meeting of October 13, 2020. The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown and unanimously approved.

Ms. Martinez moved approval of the minutes of the Special Meeting of October 15, 2020. The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan. The motion was approved by a 5-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Benejan, Brown, Weldon, Sokolovic, and Martinez. Mr. Lombard abstained.

COMMITTEE REPORTS/REFERRALS:

Mr. Sokolovic reported on the Educational Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Committee. The committee met on October 19th and discussed committee goals and objectives and the need for board-level training in culture competencies and recognition of institutional biases.

Mr. Sokolovic reported on the Finance Committee meeting of October 14th. The 2021 budget was updated, including concern about the loss of enrollment of about 800 students and continued pressure on the budget through increased special education services and a possible shortfall in revenue from nutrition services. Also discussed was a budget timeline for the 2020-21 budget cycle and the need to meet with the state delegation. He suggested Supt. Testani arrange a meeting with the delegation. The superintendent said Ms. Vickers from the mayor's office has started that process.

Mr. Benejan said the Students & Families Committee will meet on November 19th.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Teaching & Learning Committee met on October 20th, and the superintendent presented a district learning update. For the most part, things are going well, with a few areas of concern. Mr. Arnold provided a special education update, with no serious issues to highlight. Also discussed was a curriculum review of social studies. Supt. Testani is putting together a team to update the curriculum to provide more culturally competent curriculum. Mr. Sokolovic said Alicia Robinson provided an awesome update on the arts curriculum with a focus of cultural competency.

Mr. Benejan noted he made some referrals to the Facilities Committee regarding IT that Mr. Illingworth forwarded to the superintendent. Supt. Testani said he would confer with Mr. Illingworth and if necessary take the lead on that.

SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT/AGENDA:

Supt. Testani said an update has been received that Altice is reviewing the list of two thousand families who asked for the offer of one year of free service. To be qualified families cannot be a current customer. He said it seemed that anyone who is arrears from prior Altice subscriptions will not be approved.

The superintendent said the social studies team had its initial meeting.

Supt. Testani said he has reached out to a dynamic speaker on equity, diversity and cultural competency. He said he was thinking in terms of two days of professional development. He said he believed it was critical to staff and students.

The superintendent said new devices are being given out every day. He said the district in most cases is going above and beyond the health department's recommendation on COVID. He said the information on social media is not always accurate; decisions are being made with health and safety at the forefront. He said a lot of research was coming out that indicated schools are safe.

Supt. Testani said there is an uptick in COVID cases in Connecticut. He said if we're not diligent we could get into a "red" state quickly. He said the district was prepared to transition to remote learning if necessary.

Ms. Brown said there had recently been inaccurate information online. She asked about protocols for teachers with health issues and prohibitions against writing and graphics on students' masks.

Supt. Testani said teachers with health issues go through HR to apply for accommodations. ADA accommodations have been offered, including Plexiglas dividers or being excused from lunch duty. About a dozen teachers with severe issues have taken FMLA or a leave of absence. He said a teacher who applied for the sick bank did so to extend their maternity leave. He said requests like that have never been granted.

Ms. Allen joined the meeting.

The superintendent said it was decided to prohibit political statements on masks, although other creative masks are allowed.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said for the most part closings have been contained to a classroom or a grade level or two, with the exception of some schools. He said many schools have not been impacted at all. He said adults have the opportunity to socially distance from each other so several do not have to quarantine from one positive case in a school.

In response to a question, the superintendent said when a positive case is discovered the district gets a copy of the results and if the transmission is more than 48 hours from the last time the person was in the building the school is not closed. He said he believed this is why there has not been a super spread at any school.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said all the students impacted at Multicultural Magnet were picked up by their parents today, not transported by bus.

In response to a question, the superintendent said when students have had connectivity issues they have been provided with a hotspot.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said some high school students in the remote component have begun to disengage and there is work to reengage them. He said other superintendents in Fairfield County have expressed the same frustration. He said he has heard from high school students that it is much easier to not to log on to class or to close the laptop than to have to be in a school building. He said this is not an ideal situation. He said he has expressed his frustration to the Commissioner of Education and the need for support to Bridgeport academically and social emotionally. He noted Bridgeport has been shortchanged on COVID relief funding compared to New Haven, where the district is operating completely remotely.

Supt. Testani said at the elementary level students who do not sign on in the afternoon are being marked absent.

Ms. Martinez said her son chose to go remote because the classroom teachers seem to be teaching to a tablet, which is an example of what our kids have to go through. She said the superintendent's report indicates he and his team are on top of everything. She said perhaps there could be inspirational campaign to get students to log on.

The superintendent said it is not an ideal situation, but teachers are doing the best job they can to balance the remote and the in-person students. He said the challenge of young students working from home is very tough.

Ms. Brown asked if outside partners could tap Into Teams to help keep students in engaged. Supt. Testani said outside

agencies and partners are needed more than ever to participate outside of the school day. He said there is after-school Lighthouse at the elementary level. He said unfortunately many offers of assistance coincide with school hours.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said some staff members at Columbus School urged waiting on a process to change the school's name. He said he will begin with the staff survey on the professional development day, and he would report back.

In response to a question, the superintendent said he did not know the offenses involved in upcoming expulsion hearings. Subsequently, he reported that Dr. Black informed him that they were weapons-related.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said he can provide to the board the numbers on meal service at night.

In response to a question, the superintendent said the district is set for the elementary schools going to hybrid in November. Mr. Sokolovic said he agreed with the decision, noting the district had been ahead of the game.

NEW BUSINESS:

The next agenda item was on a memorandum of understanding between the board and the Housing Authority for usage of the Trumbull Gardens computer room as a satellite adult education location.

Supt. Testani said adult education has historically had satellite locations. He said several meetings led to an agreement where the housing authority would provide the

space without rental and the district would provide the instructor and supplies.

In response to a question, the superintendent said the district would like to register at least 15 people per class. He said the cost is an hourly rate of \$37.50 for the teacher, which is built into the adult education state grant.

Ms. Allen moved *“to approve the execution of the memorandum of understanding between the Bridgeport Board of Education and Bridgeport Housing Authority for usage of the Trumbull Gardens computer room as a satellite adult education location.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on Addendum 1 to the student transportation contract with We Transport.

Supt. Testani said the matter also came out of the Contracts Committee. The addendum would give We Transport the responsibility for bus routing, using the district’s Transfinder software. The district will have final approval on the routes to make sure they are operating at maximum efficiency. He said this would take a lot off the district’s plate, although a district transportation hotline would still be operated at the beginning of the year. He said it would put more accountability into We Transport and provide some savings to the district that was reallocated to the coordinator of school counseling and parent partnerships.

In response to a question, the superintendent said students are not tested before they get on school buses. He said the regular buses are running at a low capacity; students without masks are given a mask to wear. He said no one from We Transport participated in the Contracts Committee meeting.

Ms. Martinez moved “*to approve execution of Addendum 1 to the student transportation contract with We Transport, LLC, as presented by the superintendent.*”

The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown and approved by a 6-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Brown, Sokolovic, Allen, Lombard, and Martinez. Mr. Benejan abstained.

The next agenda item was on an RFP for specialized substitute staff services for the period March 20, 2021 to 2024.

Supt. Testani said as discussed at the Contracts Committee this is because the current three-year contract with Delta-T is expiring. He said the city character requires a new contract.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said Kelly Services provides coverage for certified staff, while Delta-T provides paraprofessionals. He said there have been no issues with the current provider.

In response to a question, the superintendent said the paraprofessionals are covered by their company’s insurance. He said an incident mentioned by board members involving a disturbing episode in the past did not occur with Delta-T or Kelly Services. Mr. Weldon said he understood insurance requirements were beefed up following the incident.

Ms. Allen moved “*to approve the issuance of an RFP for specialized substitute staff services for the period of March 2021 to 2024.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan and unanimously approved.

Mr. Weldon noted the board would have to approve the award of any new contract.

The next agenda item was on exercising option year one of the legal services contract with Berchem Moses. Supt. Testani said the three-year contract was expiring. Two one-year extensions are included in the contract. He said Berchem Moses is doing excellent work and we have a great working relationship. He said the firm was willing to continue the current billing rates and this would allow continuity on items being worked on now.

Mr. Weldon said Berchem Moses is employed primarily for its employment law and school law expertise. He said the city attorney's office has indicated it will not have an issue with continuing the arrangement.

Mr. Sokolovic moved "*to approve the exercising of option year one of the district's legal services contract with Berchem Moses, P.C.*" The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 7:53 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Approved by the board on November 9, 2020