

Monday, February 22, 2021

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held February 22, 2021, by video conference call, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:31 p.m. Present were members Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Bobbi Brown, Secretary Joseph Lombard, Albert Benejan, Sosimo Fabian, Albert Benejan, and Joseph Sokolovic.

Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Ms. Rita Valle-Shastri said no one had signed up for public comment.

APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:

Ms. Allen moved to approve the minutes of the Special Meeting of February 3, 2021. The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan and approved by a 6-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Brown, Sokolovic, Fabian, Allen, and Benejan. Mr. Lombard abstained.

Ms. Allen moved to approve the minutes of the Regular Meeting of February 8, 2021. The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan and unanimously approved.

CHAIR REPORT

Mr. Weldon said some board members have suggested literature for use by the board. He said he was also looking into having CABE help conduct a board self-assessment.

COMMITTEE REPORTS/REFERRALS:

Ms. Brown said the Ad Hoc Committee on the Districtwide Branding Initiative would hold its first meeting on March 5th.

Dr. Fabian said the Educational Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Committee will announce its first meeting shortly.

Mr. Weldon said the Facilities Committee would meet on March 1st.

Mr. Benejan referred an item to the committee on cleaning schools under Covid. He also asked about the status of the naming of Columbus School. Supt. Testani said he would update that matter during his report.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Finance Committee met on February 10th. Ms. Siegel updated the committee on the 2020-21 and 2021-22 budgets. No major changes were noted from the update received at the special meeting the week prior. The federal Covid-related funding of around \$40.5 million was also discussed. He said the consensus of the committee was that the board needs to have final approval of any spending plan.

Mr. Sokolovic said the governor's budget proposal for the 2022 and 2023 fiscal years considers the federal Covid-2 funding as a state contribution and flat funds the ECS for the next two years. He said this would cost the district over \$7 million and change the time it takes for the new ECS formula to take effect. He said it was the consensus of the committee

that there should be a presentation to the public via Facebook Live. He said the public should be encouraged to provide testimony on March 1st on the state education budget. He suggested this be highlighted on the district's website.

Mr. Sokolovic said the overtime budget was also discussed and there were questions about the lines of responsibilities amongst staff. He said the next meeting will be on March 10th.

Mr. Weldon said the next Governance Committee meeting will be on March 1st.

Dr. Fabian said the Personnel Committee met on February 11th and February 16th to discuss a number of personnel issues. Staffing recommendations were made to the superintendent.

Mr. Sokolovic said the board needed an updated chart of lines of responsibilities, including any city employees. Dr. Fabian suggested a color-coded org chart.

Mr. Benejan said the Students & Families Committee met on February 18th. There was a bullying report from Mr. Young. He said he was surprised to learn that elementary schools had more incidents of bullying than high schools. He said the next meeting would be on March 18th.

Dr. Fabian referred an item on Mothers in Action, who are interested in bilingual education, and issues that they have confronted in the district to the committee. Mr. Benejan said he met with Mothers in Action last week and the superintendent has also met with them. Supt. Testani said

he would like to have a meeting with Dr. Fabian to update him on almost two years of contact with Mothers in Action.

Dr. Fabian said he would like to hear more about the issue, particularly since Mothers in Action explained to him that his experience has not been their experience.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Teaching & Learning Committee met on February 16th. There was an update on special education services, with no major issues to report; as well as a report by Dr. Jenkins on the language arts/literacy curriculum in regards to culturally responsive teaching.

Mr. Sokolovic said there was a discussion of the psychological and social-emotional impact Covid has had on students. He said he was especially concerned about students losing or not gaining socialization skills. He said the superintendent said it best when he said learning cannot be done if the mental state of the student is not taken care of.

Mr. Sokolovic said the need for more social workers and the support they provide was also discussed.

The next meeting will be on March 16th.

Dr. Fabian suggested the information on social-emotional impacts put out by Mr. Testani be sent out to the broader community.

SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT:

Supt. Testani said there is a statewide issue over the lack of substitute coverage for absent staff members. He said the district has been working with the Department of Public Health to inoculate the district's staff. On March 1st, the

state will be opening up the vaccine to those 55 and over and to educators and child-care providers. The goal is to have the entire staff vaccinated by sometime in April. This should allow an increase in in-person instruction.

The superintendent said Bridgeport is lagging behind in vaccinations compared to other towns, and some other providers and locations are being explored.

Supt. Testani said Hartford Healthcare/St. Vincent's has increased the vaccinations at the Central High location. He said there was an incorrect report that testing was being at the school. The vaccinations are given in the gym without access to the school itself. He noted Ms. Allen received her vaccination at Central High.

The superintendent said vaccinations needed to be widespread for our community and to get back to normal so kids can get back to school. He said remote learning is not working and should not be considered a viable option when in-person learning is resumed.

Supt. Testani said the plan would be to vaccinate district staff only during certain hours and certain days, including Friday afternoons into the evening and Saturdays. He said the process will proceed school by school, with those with the most in-person learners going first.

The superintendent said the superintendents of the 33 Alliance districts have sent a letter to the governor that he will provide to the board. The letter discussed the proposed ECS proposal by the governor, which would cost Bridgeport \$7.1 million over two years.

Supt. Testani said there was a meeting with the legislative delegation, although he was discouraged that there were not more legislators in attendance. Another meeting will be scheduled.

The superintendent said the abbreviated winter sports season has proceeded. The safety guidelines includes weekly testing and proof of negative testing. One team had to quarantine for two weeks as a result of a positive test.

Supt. Testani said some coaches do not understand the hierarchy of authority and mistakenly believe the building principal is their supervisor. At one school a coach is not following the directives of the principal and the athletic director. He said some coaches have received corrective counseling from HR, but there is a belief that there will be public support if further discipline is taken. He said if directives are not followed they will not continue to coach, regardless of who supports them. He said over the weekend he made the board aware of a blatant disregard of health protocols and a violation of CIAC regulations.

The superintendent said the principal at one school will attempt to meet with a coach to rectify the situation and the principal will have his full support.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the vaccinations at Central High take place in the gymnasium, which is not being used by students and staff this year. The vaccinations began on Wednesdays when students are not in the building, and was later increased to Saturdays. They are now expanded to other days. He said the entire gymnasium is sanitized at the end of the day. He said the school could hold two thousand, but only roughly three hundred students attend in-person. He said a letter was sent

to Central families indicating that there would be an increased usage of the gym and it would not impact the school day.

Dr. Fabian suggested the superintendent remind the coaches of the role they play as role models and the responsibilities that they have to train students to follow instructions. The superintendent said he met with coaches earlier in the year and he also stressed to them the mistaken belief expressed by some athletes at a board meeting that their only way out of Bridgeport was through athletics.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the health department is doing vaccinations at its location, but it is a small building, so larger buildings are needed. There are no costs to the board for any overtime on Saturdays, which is paid by the city.

Mr. Sokolovic said learning about the use of a district school on News 12 was not a good way to do business. He said the mayor making an announcement made it look the superintendents is reporting directly to the mayor, instead of the board.

Mr. Weldon said it seemed to be a case of miscommunication and although it was a decision in the superintendent's realm it should be communicated to the board. Supt. Testani said the situation was on him. He said he apologized for not realizing there was going to a press kickoff and a political end for the start today. He said it was inaccurate to call it a mass vaccination site like Yankee Stadium.

Supt. Testani said the Central staff and community was informed last week, but he would do a better job in the future if there is a thought of another site.

The superintendent said the snow day versus remote day issue has come up. He said he was not a proponent of throwing more remote days at students. He said students look forward to snow days. He added there are complex collective bargaining contracts with noncertified staff, which are negotiated by the city. He said there would have to be discussions with the unions if the policies regarding remote and snow days is to be changed next year.

Supt. Testani said he had concerns about Wi-Fi connectivity into the 2021-22 school year across all homes. He said many families may lose the free 12-month Altice service and hotspots. Unless 19,000 students can access reliable internet connectivity, the 2021-22 year will consist of old-fashioned snow days and days that have to be made up will be made up. He said surrounding districts do not have the same issues that Bridgeport does.

The superintendent said snow days are used because students traveling to school need to be safe; the snow days were not created for adults. He said remote days will not be the go-to option.

In response to a question. Supt. Testani said there were remote days on Wednesday and Thursday, and Friday was cancelled as a regular snow day. He said collective bargaining contracts impacted the decision.

Mr. Weldon said it seemed that something was tried as a workaround to a straight snow day, but the contracts made it

too complicated. He said he supported Mr. Testani's decision.

Mr. Sokolovic said he never liked the city negotiating contracts with the majority of our bargaining units because it saddles us with costs. Supt. Testani said he has had discussions about getting control of the contracts and in order to be able to take over the discipline. He said there are also complications with holidays for bargaining units. He said negotiations with some of the unions have hit a brick wall on many fronts.

Mr. Weldon said sometimes unions have individualized contracts that cover employees at certain properties, which could perhaps be used with the bargaining units that work for the district. Supt. Testani said colleagues in other cities indicate they do not have same challenges Bridgeport has.

Dr. Fabian said the amount of e-mails received on snow versus remote days do not seem to suggest it was a big issue and he believes the superintendent's decisions are based on the interests of our children.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said children do not receive education on snow days but if the day is made up the children who want to come to school will get another day of in-person learning. He said teachers at home during snow days who might have children would be challenged to provide education to their classes. He noted the use of many devices in one home often interferes with internet access. He said he sympathizes with employees who live far away, but weather decisions are made on what is happening in Bridgeport.

Supt. Testani said at Columbus School three parents have volunteered to be part of the committee to discuss changing the name of the school. Three staff members have also volunteered. He said he will be at the first meeting, along with the principal, next week. The survey results are final. Staff responses included 17 who supported changing the name of the school and 19 were opposed. Parent responses were 60 in support and 97 in opposition.

NEW BUSINESS:

The next agenda item was on new mathematics program for Grades 2 to 5 and 9 through 10.

Herminio Planas, executive director of elementary education, said he was asking for the board's support in purchasing the new math programs.

Mr. Planas said the textbook licenses for Grades 3 to 5 expire in June 2019. There are hardcover books and teacher manuals that have been used throughout, along with the Greg Tang program as a supplement. He said it was time to have one cohesive textbook from Grades K to 8. There are currently three programs in use in K to 8.

Mr. Planas said a committee looked at the issue beginning last year and selected six pilot schools to use the new curriculum. The results from the pilot showed successful implementation. The electronic resources helped the teachers greatly through the pandemic.

Mr. Planas said the plan is to add Grades 2 to 5 this year, and K and Grade 1 the following year when those licenses expire. A pilot program will be implemented in K-1 next year. He said IT has field tested the devices for this

implementation and the curriculum will be updated in the summer.

Mr. Planas said the Grade 2 to 5 cost is close to \$1.2 million, for six-year licenses of the Into Math program, including all electronic components, print documents for students, all teacher material in print, the use of Waggle, as well as professional development.

Mr. Benejan said Mr. Planas's presentation was amazing. He asked how the program is different from prior programs. Mr. Planas said the program provides a sound foundation of thinking, not just memorizing. He said it focuses on reasoning in the Common Core standards, including pictorials of the concepts, which teaches the abstract. He said this teaches students how to problem solve.

Mr. Planas said the program has essential built-in assessments to see where students are on a day-to-day basis. He said the program can be more easily grasped by ELL students than other programs.

Mr. Planas said a committee was also formed in October 2020 for the Grade 9 and 10 program. The committee had teachers from all seven high schools. A rubric was created and the list was narrowed to three different books. Into AGA was chosen out of the three finalists. It includes a six-year license for all seven high schools, online textbooks and teacher books. The committee decided a full set of physical textbooks was not needed for every student, so only some will be purchased. Professional development is also included.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *"to authorize the purchase of the new mathematics program for Grades 2 through 5 and 9 through*

10 as recommended by Mr. Planas.” The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on a recommendation from the Aquaculture floating classroom naming committee.

David Henry, principal of Aquaculture and science director for the district, said the committee started with the idea of rooting the naming in historic Black Rock like with Catherine Moore, a longtime lighthouse keeper. He said there was not much controversy and the name of Kaye Williams rose to the surface. Mr. Williams is the founder of Captain’s Cove and the subject of a book. He said Mr. Williams is 94 years old and still going to work every day. He said Captain’s Cove as a neighbor has supported the Aquaculture school for a long time.

Mr. Henry said other names floated with Gustave Whitehead, the aeronautical pioneer, and John Curtis, a former director of the Aquaculture program.

Mr. Henry said boats used for research receive an RV prefix, so the official name submitted is the *RV Kaye Williams*. He said most such vessels exist at the university level.

Mr. Weldon said in the event using the term “research vessel” causes a problem with the funding that’s paying for the boat that that be dropped and if it’s not an issue that it be kept.

Ms. Brown moved *“to accept the committee’s recommendation to name the Aquaculture floating classroom the R/V Kaye Williams, with the caveat that if the school construction office determines that the term ‘research vessel’ would be problematic funding-wise that that element be*

dropped, but only in that case.” The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:09 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Approved by the board on March 8, 2021