

Monday, March 28, 2022

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held March 28, 2022, at Bridgeport Regional Aquaculture Science & Technology Education Center, 60 Saint Stephens Road, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:34 p.m.

Present were Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Bobbi Brown, Joseph Sokolovic, Christine Baptiste-Perez, Sybil Allen and Albert Benejan, and Erika Castillo. Michael Maccarone* joined the meeting subsequently as noted. (*remote participation)

Supt. Michael J. Testani was present.

STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE REPORTS:

Ruth Cruz of Bassick said she did not have a report tonight.

Avery Flechtner of the IT School at Fairchild Wheeler said the Spring Fling dance will be held this Friday.

Angel Serrano of Bridgeport Military Academy said the freshman color guard won a first-place award at a competition in New Jersey.

Latonia Ferguson of Central High described presentations related to Women's History Month and the highlighting of women teachers. Online SAT tests were held on March 23.

Shermaine Elliot of Harding High described a pre-SAT rally, a students vs. teachers basketball game, and the SAT

testing. She said the student council is creating a spring spirit event.

Stenielza Marseille of Bassick High described mentors working with students, seniors working on FAFSA; and a STEM competition.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Kate Smuckler, a 5th grade teacher at Thomas Hooker School, said there has not been a science teacher at the school for two years, which means 8th graders have not had science instruction with a certified teacher since they were in 6th grade, which was a year shortened in March 2020. She said this was highly unfair and inequitable. She said schools across the district are missing science, math and language arts teachers.

Mr. Maccarone* joined the meeting.

Alina Russell, a 7th grade student at Thomas Hooker, said without a science teacher at the school students cannot get a proper education in science. She wondered if she would have a science teacher next year or be prepared for high school science.

Coach Jamar T. Brown spoke on the stigma that prep and college coaches have for Bridgeport, which leads to them not recruiting our kids. He said these coaches automatically assume their grades are not good. He said he was willing to volunteer with the learning process. He said he supported Clayton Wilson

Wendy Martindale, a Thomas Hooker School parent, stated her concern that her 8th grader was approaching high school

without science. She said she worried about how students will fare on testing in science compared to their peers. Her son Amari said he was worried about going to high school because he has not had a science teacher for two years.

Alexis Maresca, a food-core teacher in Bridgeport, said she was here to advocate for a science teacher at Thomas Hooker. She said she teaches a lot of classes related to food and related subjects, which successfully engage students. She said students are missing out on vital learning experiences.

Erik Thomas, a social studies teacher at the IT School at Fairchild Wheeler, said the faculty learned on March 14th that Principal Beth Furnari was not present, and they were then notified that she would not be on campus for the week. No reason was given by Ms. Smith, who was covering Ms. Funari's duties, and there has been no further communication about the situation. She said students are also concerned and speculation and rumor has spread among the school.

Clayton Wilson said he runs a student-athlete program in Bridgeport. He said Supt. Testani took education seriously when he was an assistant principal and basketball coach. He said some students cannot send transcripts or pass tests. He said 8th grade students can fail all their courses and still play sports.

Joseph Sokolovic said he was embarrassed to be a board member for the first time when the Educational Diversity Committee did not support the holiday Eid al-Fitr as a day off from school after a fact-laden presentation by students, who also presented a solution. He said we are here for the students, not the teachers. He objected to not treating the

Islamic holiday the same as Christian and Jewish holidays. He said other districts celebrate Eid and Diwali.

Chaila Robinson, PAC president at Hallen School and parent of a Central High student, said she recently sat in on PPTs. She said a PPT for a 4th grader brought her to tears because the school is not doing anything to get the student on level. She said she was overwhelmed hearing tonight a school did not have a science teacher.

Jeanne Malquiglio, a parent of a Fairchild Wheeler student, said Beth Furnari changed her son's life by helping him with his education at the school. She said Ms. Furnari introduced him to an interesting class, but he has been left in the dark about her absence. She urged Ms. Furnari be returned to the school.

Wyatt Bloom, a Fairchild Wheeler student, said he was there to address the concerns of students who have not been told why they have not had a principal for a full week. He said Dr. Black and the superintendent have been walking around taking part of the principal's role in the school.

Shoody, a student, said she often wondered why we celebrate religious holidays like Christmas, but not Islamic holidays. he said as a Muslim it makes her feel ignored, left out and unheard. She said she has a concern if she does not go to school on the holiday, she will miss exams and other schoolwork. She said diversity, equity and inclusion should be something that we should celebrate for all students.

Gladys Walker-Jones appealed to female board members for their leadership for staff members and parents who are clamoring for more support. She thanked Mr. Weldon for responding to the NAACP's request to have women chair

board standing committees. She quoted Desmond Tutu who spoke in favor of standing up for the rights of girls and women.

APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:

Ms. Allen moved approval of the Regular Meeting of March 14, 2022. The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan. Changes and edits were noted.

Mr. Benejan moved to approve with the edits as noted by Ms. Baptiste-Perez. The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

CHAIR REPORT:

Mr. Weldon said in relation to the comments of Ms. Walker-Jones, he previously reached out to board members about what committees they wanted to serve on and whether they want to chair a committee. He said he does not just unilaterally appoint committee chairs. In the last cycle, Ms. Brown was the only female member who wished to chair a committee.

He said after reaching out to members, Ms. Baptiste-Perez said she would like to chair the Teaching & Learning Committee, so effective immediately, Ms. Baptiste-Perez will become the chair. He said the current chair, Mr. Sokolovic, is in agreement with the change.

Mr. Weldon said he would entertain further requests on chairing committees. Ms. Baptiste-Perez said she was not aware she could have requested to be chair of a committee at the time the assignments were made.

COMMITTEE REPORTS/REFERRALS:

Ms. Brown said the Ad Hoc Districtwide Branding Initiative Committee met last month and the district logo was worked on. The committee also looked at the district's billboards. The next meeting will be April 13th.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Educational Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Committee met on March 21st and discussed adding Eid al-Fitr to the calendar. A motion to push it to the full board failed. He said the next meeting will be on Monday, when the students will present again on the proposal.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani indicated he would be attending this meeting.

Mr. Benejan asked when there would be a security update at the Facilities Committee. Mr. Weldon said he requested Mr. Benejan e-mail him a list of the things he wants to know. Mr. Weldon said the issue of Edison and Hall Schools would be picked up at the next meeting.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Finance Committee met on March 26th and held a community information session. The next meeting will be on Thursday at Blackham School, and he urged the public to attend. He said we have a hard time recruiting science teachers, which is directly related to funding because all districts are fighting for the same teachers.

Mr. Benejan referred an issue on the review of the board's bylaws to the Governance Committee. Mr. Weldon said we can start with a review of the bylaws, which will involve many meetings and discussions.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez referred a review of the application and enforcement of student athletic requirements to participate. She said the 5000 series has not been updated in over ten years. There was a discussion of what committee should handle the matter. Mr. Sokolovic suggested the matter be handled at the Teaching & Learning Committee. Ms. Baptiste-Perez said the enforcement of the policies would go to the Teaching & Learning Committee, while referring the requirements to the Governance Committee.

Mr. Weldon referred a review of field trip policies to the Governance Committee.

Mr. Benejan said the Students & Families Committee met on March 17th. A district parent handbook was discussed; along with PAC/PTSO spending of parent engagement funds. He said the 100 Girls Leading gave an amazing presentation. The next meeting will be on April 20th.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Teaching & Learning Committee met on March 16th. One item was sent to the full board for approval. The committee also reviewed assessment data, along with a preliminary discussion of changing school start times.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez referred a review of the enforcement of the student-athletic policy at the middle school and high school levels.

SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT:

Supt. Testani said the spring community event was held Saturday, where 250 students and families in need received a number of resources. He thanked Ms. Brown for her attendance.

The superintendent said there are now 22 home visitors in a program designed to make connections and reengage students and families. He said the chronic absentee rate dropped by almost five percent last month. He said the district outperforms counterparts in other large cities in the state in this area.

Supt. Testani said there will be another round of restorative practice training for staff across the district in April, along with a diversity, equity & inclusion session with Dr. Derrick Gay. There will also be an SEL survey for parents.

The superintendent said playoffs for middle school basketball will start this weekend at Central and Harding.

Supt. Testani said Grades 8 to 11 participated in PSAT/SAT across the district.

The superintendent said requirements to play athletics at the high school level are governed by the CIAC. Students have to pass four classes to be academically eligible. About ten years ago, the board increased those requirements, which mandated passing the four core academic courses. There was pushback from the community about excluding students from athletics, so the requirement was not enforced.

The superintendent said one of the barriers to playing in college could be SAT scores or GPA scores. He said it is not correct to say students are not receiving opportunities to play in college because the policies are in line with the rest of the state. He said if we raise the bar too quickly, he fears we will have student-athletes not engaged in school. He noted tutoring is available for student-athletes on Saturdays, along with other opportunities.

Supt. Testani said the Islamic holiday will be reexamined for the next school year. He said it was important that students, not adults, had spoken in this instance.

The superintendent said we have tried searching high and low for a science teacher for Hooker School for the past two years. Science is a shortage area for teachers. He said we are looking to provide incentives for teachers to come to Bridgeport because we do not have a competitive salary schedule compared to neighboring districts. A teacher cannot simply be reassigned from high schools. He said we will continue to look and there will be a science teacher in place for next year at the school even if a teacher has to be reassigned from another school.

NEW BUSINESS:

The next agenda item was on healthy food certifications for school year 2022-23.

John Gerrity, director of food and nutrition services, said this was a required annual vote by state-statute. The district must meet Connecticut nutrition standards in a 'la carte sales in high schools as well as exemptions for the sale of food at sporting events and fundraising events.

Mr. Benejan moved *“pursuant to C.G.S. Section 10-215f, the Board of Education of the City of Bridgeport certifies that all 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, 2022, through June 30, 2023. 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, culinary programs, and any fundraising activities on school premises sponsored by the school or non-school organizations and groups.”

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

Mr. Benejan moved that “*the Board of Education for the City of Bridgeport or governing authority will allow the sale to students of food items that do not meet the Connecticut Nutrition Standards and beverages not listed in Section 10-221q of the Connecticut General Statutes provided that the following conditions are met: 1) the sale is in connection with an event occurring after the end of the regular school day or on the weekend; 2) the sale is at the location of the event; and 3) the food and 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 and must be the same place as the food and beverage sales.”*

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

The next agenda item was on the operation plan for the Discovery Interdistrict Magnet School.

Sangeeta Bella, principal, said she has been working on the operations plan for the last year and a half. She said every ten years there needs to be a new magnet school plan. The work has taken place in conjunction with the state Department of Education. School design, enrollment, composition, capacity, academic programs, community partnerships, among other things, are covered.

Ms. Bella said the school is a pre-K to 8 interdistrict school, comprised of urban and suburban students. Bridgeport students comprise 70 percent of the school population.

Ms. Bella described the academic and SEL program, and long-term educational goals. She said STEM education is promoted.

Ms. Bella described the work of community partners with Discovery Magnet; student programs; and activities and events. She added more details on parent engagement.

Ms. Bella requested board approval of the plan. She said the plan is for the next ten years, with a revision requested after five years.

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

The next agenda item was on a second read and possible approval of revised policy regarding public comment.

Mr. Weldon said the proposed language is the same as presented two weeks ago.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez Section 2-A, subsection 6 requested a language change. She suggested the language about violations of the policy be retained, but the following phraseology be removed: “Nor will the board receive any demands for specific disciplinary actions to be taken against any named personnel. Anyone who has a complaint or grievance regarding a specific employee may take the matter up with the superintendent so that the proper applicable procedures may be followed.”

The proposed revision was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said she consulted with the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE) regarding this language. She said parents will need an outlet to exercise their beliefs such as in a previous meeting regarding a football coach at Harding. She said based on conversation with CABE other districts permit this type of speech. She said keeping the language will prevent bringing people out to a board meeting and providing them an opportunity to meet board members. She said the board should know what is going on in matters such as these and it should not reduce speech in this area, including for students.

Mr. Sokolovic said he agreed in regard to advocating for a teacher or a staff member facing discipline, but he disagreed with calling for terminations and providing the board facts and information that may not be true. He said sometimes decisions on termination often comes down to the board members, and some types of public comment might result in board members having to abstain from decisions.

Mr. Weldon suggested submitting the language to CABE to see if they had some alternate language that would cover both concerns expressed tonight.

Mr. Maccarone said it is the superintendent's obligation to handle operation and the board's to make policy. He said making the suggested change would take operational responsibility away from the superintendent. Mr. Weldon said the board would want to hear issues with schools and for a lot of people this is their only forum for such concerns, but we don't want to cross the line to where people are specifically calling for disciplinary action.

Supt. Testani said asking CAFE in conjunction with collective bargaining agreements might be helpful because there is contract language which contains specific protections about the public making disparaging remarks.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez withdrew her motion; Mr. Sokolovic withdrew his second.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez moved "*to refer to CAFE for guidance in Section 2-A, 6.*" The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on a second read and possible approval of a revised policy regarding high school magnet entrance and performance expectations.

Supt. Testani said the only change is entrance requirements for 8th grade students to Central Magnet are a final grade of C-plus or better in core academic subjects on Grade 7 and 8 report cards. The student handbook and attendance must be aligned with Bridgeport Public School Policy. SBAC scores within a minimum of two in reading and two in math, or an average score above the 25th percentile in reading and math on the district benchmark administered in Grade 8. The magnet students who score in the top ten percentile in

the district assessment for the magnet will automatically be accepted to Central Magnet. A principal recommendation was added. All Grade 8 students in TAG and in Bridgeport Public School magnet elementary schools, including Classical Studies and Geraldine Claytor, may automatically enter Central Magnet if they have met the minimum entrance requirements stated above. All 9th and 10th grade students must enroll in four courses, which include two core academic courses – English, math, science, social studies, and world language – inclusive of four credits each of English, math, science, history, and three credits of the same world language.

Students must pass a minimum of three courses per semester or be placed on academic probation or reassigned to district schools. Students who fail two academic courses by the end of the school year will be deselected.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said core academics include science and the board just heard that for two years students at Thomas Hooker School did not have a science teacher.

Supt. Testani said that was one reason why the principal recommendation has been added, which can override hardships including trauma because test scores do not tell the whole story.

Mr. Benejan moved “*to approve the policy as the second read version.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 7:54 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Approved by the board on April 11, 2022