

Monday, January 24, 2022

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held January 24, 2022, at Bridgeport Regional Aquaculture Science and Technology Educational Center, 60 St. Stephens Road Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:37 p.m.

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

Supt. Michael J. Testani was present.

### **STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE REPORTS:**

Angel Serrano of Bridgeport Military Academy reported on his school. Among the items he highlighted were this week's finals, and promotions in the Navy program and Civil Air Patrol.

Avery Flechtner of the Fairchild Wheeler IT School reported on her school. She highlighted the recent STEAM expo and a celebration of graduating seniors.

Michael Hemmings of the Fairchild Wheeler IT School highlighted the finals being held this week and a remote meeting with BCYL on entrepreneurship leadership training and college preparation.

Shermaine Elliot from Harding High said the school hosted a debate between Central and Harding last week.

**PUBLIC COMMENT:**

Ms. Baptiste-Perez moved “to *suspend the rules and hear the full 17 speakers.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown and unanimously approved.

Councilman Ernest Newton said he was here to support someone who supports our children. He said he remembered great coaches at Harding like John Lewis and Charles Bentley. He said Coach Eddie Santiago has done things he hasn’t seen in a long time, particularly working with children and parents. He said we needed to hold onto people with black and brown skins. He urged the superintendent to leave him as the football coach.

Byron Jackson of the Harding Class of 2008, who achieved a B.A. and an MBA, said he supported Coach Santiago, who he has known since 2004. He said Mr. Santiago gave him love and support over the years. He said he played pro football in Germany and came back this year to volunteer his time to help with the Harding team.

Bob Cole, a former coach at Harding for 27 years, said he had the privilege of coaching many young men in the room now, including Mr. Santiago. He said he knows the time and effort Mr. Santiago puts into the football program. He said the board and the community should do its due diligence on this issue. He said there has to be compromise on this issue such as a progressive step.

York Mario said he has known Mr. Santiago for 30 years. He coached Mr. Santiago and taught him at Harding High, and

he loved him like a son. He said you should be embarrassed for firing Mr. Santiago. He said Mr. Santiago had sent over 75 kids to colleges, including Division 1 scholarships. He said he was keeping boys out of the streets and out of gangs because they are a part of something.

Hector Reyes, valedictorian of the Class of 2014, who graduated with high honors from Fairfield University, said he would not be here today without Coach Santiago. He said he taught him how to come back from adversity. He thanked Mr. Santiago.

Doug Cotto, an assistant coach with Coach Santiago for four years, said this is not about football, but because we need leaders and role models in our communities. He said Mr. Santiago had often provided kids from all the high schools with a place to stay and food to eat. He said this is not in the job description. He said his best wins are sending kids to college or going to the military and becoming outstanding husbands and fathers.

Rev. D. Stanley Lord said as a former coach he worried about the progress of athletes academically and athletically. He said the Board of Education does not always follow its own policies and procedures, so it is a contradiction to evaluate Mr. Santiago with that statement. He said Coach Santiago gives his time and talent and stands up for his students. He said there should be a system of support for coaches to work with them in their weak areas.

Tremain Spodnik, a Harding graduate, described himself as Mr. Santiago's best friend since he was 17. He said Mr. Santiago works every single day with the children he coaches. Mr. Spodnik said he was shaking at the thought of Mr. Santiago being fired.

Giovanni Gerard, a senior football captain and wrestling captain at Harding, said he met Coach Santiago at middle school, where he helped him to better himself. He said most of the athletes look at him as a father figure. He said he was thankful and grateful for the coaches.

Terrance Carter, a sophomore at Harding, said Coach Santiago teaches young men how to be an adult. He said Mr. Santiago has taken him under his wing, including in dealing with problems at home. He said the coach's best advice was never to give up on himself despite any adversity. He asked that he be reinstated as football coach.

Dante Dicks, a football captain this year at Harding, said Coach Santiago was like a father to him. He said the coach helped get him a football offer to college. He said he would probably be on the street doing something dumb without Coach Santiago.

Tony Dorn, staff photographer and donor at Harding High, thanked Mr. Santiago. He said everyone in the room can't figure out why he was fired. He said Mr. Santiago was respected, loved, and was doing the right thing for the kids. He urged the board to find out what happened and walk back a couple of steps.

Tony Barr said he spent 21.5 years in federal prison for doing the wrong thing. He said Mr. Santiago was a good man trying to make sure kids did not go where he went. He said if Mr. Testani did not get this right, he would not be friends with him any longer. He said we gave Mr. Testani everything, but we still took that chance.

Joe Grits, a Central High graduate in 2003, said to have a man like Coach Santiago was important, and more for the work he was doing off the field. He said black and brown students relate to him. He urged to the board to make it right for the future of the kids.

Steve Nelson, former school security officer at Harding High, said he has known Coach Santiago since he was a student at Harding. He asked the board to pause, take a deep breath, and look at the whole picture. He said he heard through the grapevine there was a major personality conflict between the coaches and the school's athletic director. He said kids would be negatively affected by the loss of Coach Santiago. He said suburban coaches are paid almost double what Bridgeport coaches receive.

Jessica Martinez, a former Board of Education member and parent, said she was a Centra High graduate. She said we need more like Coach Santiago. She said she shared Mr. Santiago's evaluation with the board and asked that they investigate the matter. She urged Coach Santiago be reinstated immediately. She said her nephew currently in middle school deserves to be coached by Mr. Santiago. She said there was a lot of red tape and adult fights behind all of this.

Kevin Bednarz, a Harding graduate of 2019 and former football captain, said Coach Santiago had saved a bunch of us. He said the coach taught him to be a leader and everyone to be a leader in the family.

## **APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:**

Mr. Benejan move to approve the minutes of the Regular Meeting of January 10, 2022. The motion was seconded by Ms. Castillo and unanimously approved.

Ms. Brown moved to recess the meeting for three minutes. The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved. The meeting was recessed at 7:21 p.m.

The meeting was reconvened at 7:27 p.m.

### **CHAIR REPORT:**

Mr. Weldon said Ronald Stach, a career educator, passed away recently. He was a graduate of Central High and taught history for thirty years in Bridgeport. Services will be held on January 27th. The board observed a moment of silence.

Ms. Castillo moved that *“all district flags be lowered to half-staff starting tomorrow until the end of the day on Friday in remembrance of Mr. Stach.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown and unanimously approved.

### **COMMITTEE REPORTS/REFERRALS:**

Ms. Brown reported said the Ad Hoc Districtwide Branding Initiative Committee met on January 19th for a productive meeting. She thanked Ms. Castillo for her assistance on the agenda item on the district logo. The next meeting will be on February 16th.

Mr. Weldon said the Contracts Committee will meet in the first week of February to deal with the weight room at Central High and an RFP for special education services. Supt.

Testani said there may be an item on a new contract with We Transport.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Educational Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Committee will meet on January 31st.

Mr. Weldon said a facilities Committee meeting will be scheduled on security-related matters.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Finance Committee will meet on Wednesday.

Mr. Benejan asked for a report on charter schools' expenditures. The superintendent said a breakdown could be provided on the monetary contribution to the charter schools, along with in-kind services we're mandated to provide per statute.

Mr. Weldon said the Governance Committee will meet on February 10th to continue the discussion on public comment and the Make the Road Connecticut matter. High school magnet policy revisions will also be considered. The superintendent said they only apply to Central Magnet.

Mr. Weldon said the Personnel Committee needs to schedule a meeting for interviews of candidates for the position of executive director of specialized instruction. The superintendent said it is a critical position in the district and we want to be very thoughtful in the candidate selected.

Mr. Benejan said the Students and Families Committee will meet on January 27th.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Teaching & Learning Committee met last week. There was very good news out of the special

education department. There are no open state complaints. He said there was also good news about early childhood, with only five open slots in the 895-student pre-K program. The superintendent said the number was reduced to two slots today.

The next meeting will be on February 8th.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez referred a discussion on the Elevate Bridgeport program to the committee regarding \$800,000 in ARP funds. Supt. Testani said there have been discussions about this and we are still waiting for their proposal on the extended day program.

### **SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT:**

Supt. Testani said Big Futures Scholarship is the first scholarship offered by the College Board. He recognized four seniors who have been awarded \$500 scholarships: Felipe Errera from Aerospace/Hydrospace at Fairchild Wheeler; Melody Olivan from Central High; Sunzidah Choudhury from Central High; and Jennifer Tapia Pineda from Central High.

The superintendent said the science and engineering exposition – formerly known as the Science Fair – will be held on February 1st via a virtual event. He added the statewide Science Fair will also be held virtually.

Supt. Testani said the governor did a last-minute stop in Bridgeport to promote the CEA's efforts to give a broader picture of the teaching and learning environment for staff. The event was held at Blackham School and the governor spoke to students and staff. The mask mandate was discussed. The governor is receiving pressure from parent



groups to end the mask mandate. The superintendent said he addressed the media and said regardless of how he feels about it personally, it's a difficult decision to make midyear due to the number of factors involved. He said he believed we should end the year the way we started.

The superintendent said he did not believe the masks have impacted our students one bit, and the students are compliant with the mask rules.

Supt. Testani said if the decision on masks had to be made by local school boards it would be a difficult decision. He said he believed the governor will maintain the mask mandate until at least later in the school year. He noted cases have been dropping significantly.

In response to a question, the superintendent said a second batch of Covid test kits has been received from the state. They were distributed to every child in the district. Nearly every adult staff member also received one. Students were also provided with wipes to take home.

Ms. Brown thanked Supt. Testani for the e-mail about the opioid epidemic. The superintendent said he will be attending a meeting on strategies to provide more awareness, which will start with parents. He said dealers are now concentrating on hooking kids. Presentations to students will start at the middle schools.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said it seems larger schools do not have the positivity rate to the extent some smaller schools do. He noted the elementary schools have a higher classroom density than high schools.

In response to a question, the superintendent said the staff is the group in the district that requires the most testing. He said for the most part parents believe their children are safe in school. He said booster shots are available on Saturdays at Central High.

In response to a question, Mr. Weldon said the matter of Mr. Santiago is a frontline building-level decision that the board doesn't have any authority over. He said Supt. Testani could intercede if he felt he should do that. He said because it is a personnel matter, we are limited in how we can be discussing it. He said some of the community organizing that took place mistakenly believes the board has some level of authority on this matter.

Mr. Weldon said public comment was discussed at the Governance Committee a couple of months ago, along with getting more specific on what we allow the public to talk about at meetings. He said discussing staffing issues is inappropriate.

Supt. Testani said he has been talking with the health director and the city communications folks about public service announcements on fentanyl. He said he would keep the board informed. He suggested board members may want to participate.

In response to a question, the superintendent said some test kits have been held in the nurses' offices for students who are symptomatic. He said there has been some testing done on-site at schools, but the agencies were bombarded by requests and the test kit distribution was used to ease congestion at healthcare facilities and test sites.

Mr. Sokolovic moved to adjourn the meeting. The motion was seconded by Ms. Baptiste-Perez and unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:05 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

