

Monday, February 28, 2022

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

The meeting was called to order at 6:32 p.m.

Present were Chair John Weldon, Joseph Sokolovic, Albert Benejan, Sybil Allen, Erika Castillo, and Michael Maccarone*. Christine Baptiste-Perez arrived subsequently as noted.

(*remote participation)

Supt. Michael J. Testani was present.

There was a moment of silence for the passing of Antoinette Carpenter. Supt. Testani said she was a dedicated Bridgeport educator, who was also the principal of the high school summer program for many years prior to retirement.

Ms. Castillo moved “*to lower flags to half-staff for the balance of the week in memory of Ms. Carpenter.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE REPORT:

Layla Wilson of the Biotech School at Fairchild Wheeler reported on her school. She highlighted a celebration of Black History Month that was planned by students; and the Beard Excellence Award given to a teacher.

Latonia Ferguson of Central High reported on her school. She highlighted an assembly referencing Black History Month and the upcoming Women's History Month. She also mentioned the SAT exams on March 23rd and associated prep activities.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez arrived at the meeting.

Aleena Khan of the Aerospace School at Fairchild Wheeler highlighted Black History Month; a door decorating contest; and an upcoming basketball tournament between teachers and students.

Avery Flechtner of the IT School at Fairchild Wheeler highlighted Black History Month; a magnet school of distinction award for the school; a magnet teacher of the year award to Ms. Oquendo; an award received by Ms. Flechtner; and two teams from the school competing in the math competition.

The representative from Bridgeport Military Academy highlighted the Naval JROTC inspection; SAT tutoring; the student/teacher volleyball game; and an upcoming drill competition in New Jersey.

Shermaine Elliot of Harding High highlighted an assembly for Black History Month; an appearance by board member Bobbi Brown; and ECE classes.

Ruth Cruz of Bassick High School highlighted Black History Month; FAFSA applications, which are up 50 percent; and Minecraft software usage.

Michael Hemmings of the IT School at Fairchild Wheeler highlighted the March 27th SAT exams and Black History Month activities.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Dasha Spell said she had concerns because board members, City Council members, the mayor, and the superintendent were invited to a town hall meeting to discuss Little Liberia and Bassick High. She said only Ms. Castillo attended, and she urged an open discussion on Bassick High. She asked the board to have an environmental impact study done. She also asked that when parents speak to the board that their concerns are followed up on and she noted issues she raised in December.

JoAnn Kennedy said the townhall committee on Bassick was very good. She said the details do make the difference and people need to pay attention, so the school is built as safely as possible. She said she has heard bathrooms are closed and locked at Harding High and Fairchild Wheeler.

Gladys Walker-Jones said she was appearing on behalf of the Greater Bridgeport NAACP as the education chair. She commended the board for extending the mask mandate until March 31st. She urged the board create an ad hoc committee for the health and safety for students and staff.

Julie Ortiz, an alum of Bassick High, Class of 2011, said she concerned about the environmental crisis in Bridgeport and across the globe. She said the Bassick community always gets the short end of the stick from the board. She said the voices of students, parents and community members are being outweighed by various political entities. She posed a series of questions to the board.

APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:

Mr. Benejan moved to approve the minutes of the Special Meeting of February 15, 2022. The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

Mr. Benejan moved to approve the minutes of the Regular Meeting of February 15, 2022. The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen. A correction was noted by Mr. Benejan

Ms. Baptiste-Perez moved to amend the motion to include the edits as noted by Mr. Benejan. The amendment was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The motion as amended was unanimously approved.

CHAIR REPORT:

Mr. Weldon said Bassick High had been a point of interest over the past week. He said the SCGR state office approved moving forward with the construction of the new Bassick in the summer of 2021 based on a design that places the school 18 feet above grade and well above the 500-year flood plan. The city provided environmental site assessments which found no material on the site that required remediation. The state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection determined the site is consistent with applicable standards and criteria under state statute. He said there is no issue regarding stormwater runoff as the design does not increase the amount of impervious material on the site. He said the Bassick project is designed to tie into a WPCA project which addresses sewer runoff. The design is also designed to tie into the Resilient Bridgeport project, whenever that project comes online for construction.

Mr. Weldon said the City of Bridgeport utilized a school demolition contract, which had four contractors on it. In other areas of the state there are allegations that state-level staff members directed school employees to select specific contractors. In this project, the city's school construction office went to all four companies, and they were invited to bid. Two companies bid and the higher of the two bidders was selected because the lowest bidder submitted a very low bid which indicated it was questionable whether they really understood the work that needed to be done. The engineer's estimate to do the work was about \$9 million. The highest bid was \$8 million, and the lowest bid was \$5 million. He said this very low bid made it questionable whether they really understood the work involved.

Mr. Weldon said these kinds of things can be sensationalized and good people can be made to look bad when they were just doing their job.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the district has engaged in meetings with Deputy Commissioner Hanks in coordinating with the Resilient Bridgeport project and how Bassick would fit in. He said there was concern due to how long the Bassick replacement project had been delayed. He said the discussions with engineers and architects has evolved into how Bassick will tie into to the resilient project.

Ms. Castillo said she was glad to hear this because information was presented last week that the two plans would not be cohesive with one another. She noted there had been flooding in the past in the South End.

Supt. Testani said final approval would not have occurred for

Bassick unless DEEP and other agencies signed off on it. He said the bidding process for the construction of Bassick will begin sometime this month. He added there was a public forum with local community members that only slightly discussed flooding but included disparaging remarks about the Bassick student body by some participants.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested the board hold a community forum to make people aware of where we are on the Bassick project. Mr. Weldon described it as a city project, not our project. He said that request could be conveyed to the city.

COMMITTEE REPORTS AND REFERRALS:

Mr. Weldon said the Ad Hoc Districtwide Branding Initiative Committee included a report on Blackboard, the website designer, providing branding assistance; and also, billboard advertising.

Mr. Weldon said the Contracts Committee met and produced the four new business items on tonight's agenda.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Educational Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Committee met on February 22nd. He said Bridgeport Generation Now offered the board free antiracism training, which the committee thought would be a good idea. He said the committee also looked at data on paraprofessionals, with a large disparity noted among the Hispanic population. The education level of the paraprofessionals was also looked at. A districtwide diversity celebration was also considered.

Mr. Weldon said the Facilities Committee would meet tomorrow. The HVAC system at Columbus School is on the agenda, along with a report on the district's portfolio of

buildings, and the Curiale School and nutrition center roof replacement projects. The next meeting will cover Hall and Edison Schools and security-related issues.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said not all high school bathrooms are open due to vandalism that has been occurring at an alarming rate, some of which is attributed to TikTok media postings. The facilities department is replacing soap and paper towel dispensers at an excessive rate. He said bathrooms that can be monitored are being unlocked and the problems have improved. He said all the bathrooms could be unlocked if the board would like.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested a committee discussion on this subject.

Ms. Wilson said a lot of the bathrooms are locked at Fairchild Wheeler, which is irritating. Ms. Flechtner it was annoying to have to go all the way downstairs and potentially missing something important in class.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said high school principals indicated there was congregation going on in ladies' bathrooms that prevented students who needed to go in there from entering. He said there are not a lot of female security officers available to clear out the bathrooms in such situations.

Mr. Weldon suggested the matter be handled at the Facilities Committee. He noted bathrooms were covered by building codes. The superintendent said the high school principals would attend the meeting.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Finance Committee met on February 23rd. He said there was the usual discussion of the ESSER

funding balance, along with a report on charter school expenditures, which amount to about \$3.48 million per year from the board's budget. He said the next meeting will be on March 9th.

Mr. Weldon said the Governance Committee will meet on March 7th and discuss public comment and the high school magnet policy.

Mr. Weldon said the Personnel Committee's meeting was cancelled because a candidate dropped out of consideration.

Mr. Benejan said the Students & Families Committee will meet on March 3rd.

Mr. Sokolovic referred an item on student suspension and school climate data to the committee.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Teaching & Learning Committee will meet on March 16th.

SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT:

Supt. Testani said the district received 506 cases of iHealth test kits today, which is enough to follow the guidelines to send every student and staff member home with two test kits prior to any changes to the masking requirement. He said the positivity rate is trending to an all-time low in Bridgeport.

The superintendent said Liberation Program, Inc. has started presentations to 7th and 8th grade students to raise awareness on the dangers of illicit drugs, including fentanyl. There was also a virtual presentation for parents made available.

Supt. Testani said March 11th is National SEL Day and all schools will participate in activities.

Supt. Testani congratulated Avery Flechtner, who was recognized as a 2022 National Certificate of Distinction recipient of a computing award with an interest in STEM.

The superintendent congratulated the students at Park City Magnet, who were the first recipients of the school's new Heart Award for showing honesty, effort, attitude, respect, and teamwork.

Supt. Testani said Harding High held a Breakfast with Brown event to celebrate 437 students who achieved first honors, second honors and/or perfect attendance during the first semester.

The superintendent recognized 7th grader Jaden Pinkney of John Winthrop for receiving first place in the Martin Luther King Jr. essay contest. Essays were published in *The Connecticut Post*.

Supt. Testani said Mr. Planas hosted the first annual Mathematics Winter Olympics last week for all 5th and 6th grade students, with 53 classrooms and over 1500 students participating. The winners of the 5th grade competition were classes from Multicultural Magnet, Read School, and Claytor School. The 6th grade winners were classes from Tisdale School and Winthrop School.

The superintendent said Bassick High celebrated Black History Month with student performances and presentations.

Supt. Testani said the Bridgeport Islanders hockey team is hosting a teacher appreciation night on April 3rd. The New

York Yankees have teacher appreciation nights with severely discounted tickets available beginning in May.

In response to a question about the committee on the mask mandate, Supt. Testani said he has discussed the issue with the city health director. He said they agreed the makeup of the committee will drive the decision of the committee. He said there will be a parent survey to gather information, along with further study of the data. He said the next weeks will give an indication of how other districts in the state are faring. He said about 91 percent of the state's districts are mask optional.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said he will be asking the teachers' union to survey their own members.

In response to a question, the superintendent said the city uses a lobbyist in Hartford. He said he has spoken with the lobbyist, along with the legislative delegation.

In response to a question about home-school coordinators, Supt. Testani said there could be no next steps unless additional money is provided. Mr. Benejan said he would like to see the matter discussed at the Finance Committee so the positions could be restored.

Mr. Sokolovic said the board voted to form the committee on the mask mandate. The superintendent said survey data was needed first. Mr. Sokolovic said there was a short time frame in which to form the committee and turn around a recommendation. The superintendent said the committee will be formed.

Ms. Castillo said she liked the idea of surveying all parents, with all parents having the opportunity to participate in the

survey, along with the faculty and staff. She said she liked this inclusive approach.

The superintendent said people would retain the option of wearing the masks even if the mandate is removed.

NEW BUSINESS:

The next agenda item was on awarding a contract to install new weight room equipment at Central High.

Supt. Testani said the point person on the project was Dave Cadelina, assistant principal and former football coach. There were three companies bidding on the RFP, and the proposed contract is from the lowest bidder. He said the current equipment was donated, and some of it is dated and broken. He said the approximate cost is \$124,000.

In response to a question, the superintendent said Harding High has new equipment because of the new school construction and Bassick will receive equipment as part of the new building.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the original construction manager for the Central project was Morganti, which was replaced by Bismark Construction. He said the remediation was done by SMI of Rhode Island. The remediation led to change orders in order to complete the project and money had to be taken away from other areas such as the weight room.

In response to a question, the superintendent said funding for the project comes from federal grants.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez moved “*to award this project to Total Fitness.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was awarding a contract for athletic training services.

James Denton said the process started in the summer with the development of the RFP. He said the final contract was developed with the city attorney’s office and was reviewed by the Contracts Committee. He said it is a three-year contract at \$130,000 a year. Three athletic trainers, one at each high school, will be provided.

In response to a question, Mr. Denton said injured student-athletes are referred to a doctor for treatment, but that is not part of the contract. He said in the absence of the contract, the district would have to hire three full-time employees.

Mr. Denton said the selected vendor, Select Physical Therapy, has provided athletic trainers for several years.

Mr. Benejan moved “*to approve awarding this contract.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and approved by a 6-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Maccarone, Baptiste-Perez, Castillo, Sokolovic, and Benejan. Ms. Allen abstained.

The next agenda item was on an RFP for special education auditing/review services.

Supt. Testani said it has been eight years since the last review of special education service delivery. He said he would like to put this out for bid to have an outside lens

assess the situation. It is anticipated the process will take six to eight months.

In response to a question, the superintendent said the assessment will be of the services provided to the students and the staffing levels. The report will include the things the district does well and the things that need improvement. He said the services provided to charter schools will be difficult to assess because the district participates in PPT meetings at charter schools, but the final decisions are made by the team at the school.

In response to a question Supt. Testani said the new software being implemented will be used statewide.

In response to a question, the superintendent described how the outside entity will make recommendations on the delivery of services.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the process is not about saving money because he does not know what the report is going to find. Mr. Sokolovic noted these are our most vulnerable students and the services will have to be delivered no matter how much they cost. The superintendent said it was about providing effective services and the efficiency of the process.

Mr. Sokolovic moved “*to approve issuing this RFP.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Baptiste-Perez and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on issuing an RFP for student transportation services.

Supt. Testani said, as discussed at the Contracts Committee, our contract with We Transport is expiring at the end of the school year, and it cannot be extended under city ordinances.

In response to a question, Mr. Weldon said the city is looking at modifying the city charter in this area. Supt. Testani said he hoped this was the case, because it would benefit the board if it was able to enter into contracts and purchasing for longer periods.

Mr. Benejan moved “*to approve issuing the RFP for student transportation services.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod