

Monday, March 14, 2022

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held March 14, 2022, at Bridgeport Regional Aquaculture Science & Technology Education Center, 60 Saint Stephens Road, Bridgeport, Connecticut Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:33 p.m.

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

(\*remote participation)

Supt. Michael J. Testani was present.

### **STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE REPORT:**

Angel Serrano from Bridgeport Military Academy was present but did not report.

Ruth Cruz from Bassick High reported on her school. Among the items she highlighted were the benchmark completions by the My Path team and the boys' basketball team playing in round three of the state tournament.

Avery Fletcher of the IT School at Fairchild Wheeler said a class has opened the school store, proceeds of which go back to the school.

Mr. Lombard\* joined the meeting.

**PUBLIC COMMENT:**

Gladys Walker-Jones, chair of the education and health committee of the Greater Bridgeport NAACP, said she was following up on discussion at the February 22nd meeting to reestablish a working health and safety committee of the board, supported by active medical personnel. She commended the board for extending the mask mandate. She urged any staff member injured be supported with reasonable workplace accommodations. She asked the board to respond to the NAACP with the outcome of these requests. She noted that none of the standing committees of the board are chaired by a female.

**APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:**

Mr. Sokolovic moved to approve the minutes of the Regular Meeting of February 28, 2022. The motion was seconded by Ms. Castillo and unanimously approved.

**COMMITTEE REPORTS/REFERRALS:**

Ms. Brown said the Ad Hoc Districtwide Branding Initiative Committee will meet on Wednesday.

Mr. Sokolovic referred the budget presentation to the committee due to the focus of the committee on marketing.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Committee will meet on March 21st.

Mr. Weldon said the Facilities Committee met on March 1st and received a briefing on the status of the heating system

at Columbus School, where everything is working as it should, and handled an item on roof replacements at Curiale School and the Nutrition Center.

Ms. Allen arrived at the meeting.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Finance Committee will meet on March 17th.

Mr. Weldon said the Governance Committee met on March 7th and moved forward two items to the board.

Mr. Benejan\* joined the meeting remotely.

Mr. Benejan said the Students and Families Committee will meet on March 17th.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Teaching & Learning Committee will meet on March 15th.

### **SUPERINTENDENT'S AGENDA/REPORT:**

Supt. Testani said SEL day was celebrated across the district on Friday. He said he would forward to the board some of the highlights in an e-mail.

The superintendent said last week was school social worker week, and he noted the hard work the social workers have engaged in.

Supt. Testani said the Bassick boys basketball team is playing in the quarterfinals of the CIAC Division III tournament tonight.

The superintendent said Luisa Wolf, principal at Johnson School, is finalist for elementary school principal of the year. He said it is an honor to have a Bridgeport educator be a finalist. There will be an extensive process from here to a final selection.

Supt. Testani said he is hosting a fundraiser in collaboration with 100 Girls Leading, a 501(c)(3) organization founded by Ms. Brown. The event will be held on April 28th. In response to a question, the superintendent said he had been doing a lot of community outreach in the last few years. He said the organization is working with public school young ladies on a regular basis.

Mr. Benejan joined the meeting in person

### **OLD BUSINESS:**

The next agenda item was on in-school mask requirements. Mr. Weldon said the board previously moved that a committee be formed to evaluate this and come back with a report for the board to make a decision.

Supt. Testani said a survey was conducted of parents: 1072 responded they would like to continue the mandate, 955 favored masks be optional. He said about 10 percent of district families participated in the survey. The staff response was 250 in favor of continuing the mask mandate; 423 favored a mask optional policy. He said he has held roundtable discussions at Harding, BMA and Central with about fifty students. He said all the students present supported mask optional. He said the discussions were really good because they brought out the effects of wearing masks.

Mr. Serrano said he supported the masks being optional because wearing a mask all the time interferes with students breathing. He said it was difficult to wear a mask during gym class.

Supt. Testani said the metrics for the Bridgeport community from February 20th to March 5th indicate the positivity rate dropped to 2.5 percent. The reporting of new positive Covid-19 cases for Friday, Saturday and Sunday totaled 13. The superintendent said the committee included Mr. Sokolovic, Ms. Castillo, Ana Batista from the BEA, along with representatives from NAGE, the BCAS, and Ms. Earley. He said he believed there was a committee consensus – although not unanimously – that we were in a good time to go mask optional. He said he heard Hartford will go mask optional at the end of the month.

Lizette Earley, school health nursing supervisor, said based on trends this is an optimal time to go to mask optional. She said the parochial schools in Bridgeport went to mask optional at the end of February. In the last two weeks, there is one reported case amongst those five schools.

Ms. Earley said there has been one case this week and three cases last week in the district. She said there has not been any difference in numbers between the lower age groups - where there is a difficulty keeping masks on - and older students.

Ms. Earley said the building administrators and nursing staff report to her daily their Covid numbers. She said we can pivot back to a mask requirements at particular grade level or classroom levels depending on the numbers. She testing, vaccination, distancing, and hand hygiene continue to be promoted.

The superintendent said there are 45,000 test kits that will be distributed to every staff member and student before the mask mandate is lifted. This will provide instant results at home. Ms. Earley said, as recommended by the state, we are prepared to give a test kit to every student and staff member prior to going mask optional.

Ebony Jackson-Shaheed, the city health director, said we mimicked the CDC metric guidance. She said ten percent of the school population is considered an outbreak, which would be considered on the high scale. She said individual schools are tracked due to different populations. She said right now all schools are in the low category. Schools in the medium category would gear up towards masking and physical preventive measures.

In response to a question, Ms. Earley said the immunization rates in the district are 19 percent for the 5 to 12 age group. She said 68 percent of the 12 to 18 age group are partially vaccinated and 57 percent fully vaccinated.

Ms. Earley noted the effects in the classroom of masking, including being able to understand speech and reduced loss of visual cues, especially at lower grade levels.

Ms. Sokolovic said Ms. Jackson-Shaheed's initial recommendation was to stagger dropping the mask mandate. He said he believed there is no data available from schools that have dropped the mask mandate. He asked if it would be harmful to collect further data before dropping the mandate.

Ms. Jackson-Shaheed said it depends on what you're looking at. She said weeks are not enough to determine

trends, but she noted there is daily data collected by the city. She said the schools have low case rates, which is a good thing. She said she was not aware of data from other school districts that have dropped the mask mandate. She said increases would more likely be attributable to spring break than masks becoming optional. She added if the board dropped the mandate at the end of the month, trends would not be seen until after about three months.

Mr. Sokolovic noted he was the sole voice on the committee in opposition to dropping the mask mandate. He said we don't have enough data yet. He said students in Bridgeport have more co-morbidities than suburban students, so extra precautions are needed. He said he supported mask optional for high schools and staff, and then moving on to younger children after spring break.

The superintendent said districts where the mask mandate has been lifted have reported no difference in reported cases, but about 60 percent of the students still wear a mask. He said he gave the students in the roundtables the choice of keeping masks on or not during the session. He asked what would be accomplished if high school students who choose not to wear masks went home where younger siblings live.

Mr. Sokolovic said our younger children are more vulnerable. He noted CDC guidelines for students with asthma require more distancing. He said parents with children with co-morbidities could be charged with educational neglect if they keep their children home.

The superintendent noted the protective measure of the vaccinations are not being utilized by 80 percent of parents of young children.

Ms. Flechner said since Fairchild Wheeler is a multidistrict school since students come in from other districts, with different positivity rates and mask policies.

Ms. Earley said other districts have different vaccination rates and there are different behaviors in different communities. She said there is more adherence to masking in Bridgeport than in surrounding districts, while immunization rates are higher in other districts. She said as long as other mitigation measures followed, there should be no increased concerns here. She said students have less risk compared to the adult population when they develop the virus. She said families with students with asthma have concerns about wearing masks and breathing recirculated air. She added that some students' doctors have requested more mask breaks.

Ms. Fletchner suggested waiting until after spring break to see if there are increased cases like after Christmas break.

Supt. Testani noted the Christmas break included the breakout of the Omicron variant. Ms. Earley said there was a lot of congregating inside during the Christmas/holiday break.

Mr. Benejan said he believed staff members needed to understand the concerns of parents about safety. He noted former President Obama contracted the virus. He suggested waiting until after spring break

In response to a question, Ms. Earley said she believed students would be safe with a mask optional policy. She said she considered all 19,196 students the district our kids as



well. She said she believed many families would continue to be cautious, including using masks.

Ms. Jackson-Shaheed said as a public health official she can't guarantee things due to uncertainties about the disease. She said we can only do the best with the information we are given.

In response to a question, Ms. Earley said there is no data of what percentage of students have experienced learning loss or physical ailments associated with wearing a mask. Ms. Earley said her comments are based on the research of the speech and learning department about results from across the country.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said he could not put a percentage on social-emotional issues pursuant to solely wearing masks, but he said students at the roundtable indicated not wearing masks would help interacting with people in a more appropriate way and help with instruction. He said all the students welcomed a return to normal at their own pace.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said in-school testing would give real data in place of at-home testing that result in false positives. The superintendant said parents have access to testing anywhere in the city they'd like. He said he did not believe the district was prepared to take this on. Ms. Earley described the weekly testing for district staff and students tested over the summer at Walgreens as part of a pilot program.

In response to a question, the superintendant said very close to 100 percent of teachers are vaccinated. Ms. Earley said over 90 percent of staff are vaccinated. The superintendent

said exact numbers were not available because we haven't asked for vaccination information since the state policies changed.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the survey results of staff were not broken out by category such as teachers.

In response to a question, the superintendant said there was no discussion with PAC presidents or parent leaders regarding the mask mandate.

In response to a question, the superintendent said the roundtable discussions for the other high schools are scheduled for after tonight's meeting.

Supt. Testani said he did not understand why the testing kits sent home with students provided by the state and the federal government are not sufficient. Ms. Baptiste-Perez said she had read articles that questioned the effectiveness of the tests. She said there is no duty to report test results. Ms. Earley said there are false positives in all types of testing, including PCR and rapid antigen. She said reporting the results of home testing is on the honor system. She said the name and date is requested on a photo of testing result.

In response to a question, Ms. Earley said she could research the data on the effectiveness of PCR tests compared to rapid tests and provide that information. She said the PCR test is considered the most accurate result. The rapid and at-home tests look more for active infection.

Ms. Castillo said she learned much of the information shared this evening at the committee last week. She said the data is a moving target and will continue to be so. She noted the

wide variety of experience of the board members, but said there are no health experts to make a better decision than the superintendent, who is in regular communication with public officials and staff, students and families in the district.

Ms. Castillo said mask mandates are a polarizing issue and it is best to streamline the decision. She said she trust Supt. Testani to make decisions that are in the best interests of our community

Ms. Castillo moved that *“the board not vote on the mask mandate and that the executive decision lie rely solely with Supt. Testani.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Lombard.

Mr. Sokolovic said the decision should remain with the board. He moved an amendment to keep the mask mandates in place for the high school students until March 31st. Mr. Weldon said that sounded like an entirely different motion.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said part of the board’s obligation is to review reported information or data. She said she would not vote to relinquish her oversight duty.

Mr. Sokolovic said the board decided on February 15th that it would make a decision as a board. He said it was unfair to the superintendent to defer the decision to him.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said proof of vaccination was requested of employees when the governor’s executive order was in place. He said since the order was lifted, unvaccinated staff have made a choice. He said everyone who is sick is encouraged to stay home and undergo testing prior to returning.

The superintendent asked if it is going to remain a board decision, will it also be a board decision if a pivot has to be made for a certain classroom, grade level or school. He said he did not believe we would have the time to wait for a board meeting to make those types of decisions. He said he believed students and staff have spoken on the issue. He noted teachers are already removing masks in classrooms when they're instructing. He said masks are often not worn in after-school programs.

Mr. Benejan said he respected Supt. Testani's view and everybody's opinion, and we also have to respect parents' views. He said the nine board members are here to make decisions.

Mr. Weldon said the board made the decision to come back here today to talk about the mask mandate effective March 31st.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said the decision is not easy, but she has not heard of a school board itself not making this decision. She said she disagreed with the generalization that parents and staff have spoken, especially in the absence of data. She said we were elected to make difficult decisions, not Mr. Testani.

Mr. Sokolovic said the superintendent would not have to come back to the board for every decision, which would be in day-to-day operations. He said this was a districtwide decision at the executive level.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said CAPSS did a survey after February 28th and the last number he received was 124 school districts were mask optional and since then other districts have followed suit. He said if he was given the

authority to make the decision, it would be to make mask wearing optional so people have choice.

Mr. Serrano said the students actually have to live with the policies. He said it is sad we are living through this. He urged trying out the mask optional policy and seeing how it goes. He said students in lower grades are not switching masks so they stay with dirty masks throughout the day, which leads to them breathing dirty air whether they're wearing masks or not. He suggested mandating masks for the first two weeks after spring break.

Mr. Maccarone noted New York City, one of the largest school systems in the country, has gone to mask optional. He said we should also follow the same direction.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez moved for a three-minute recess. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved

The meeting was recessed at 7:50 p.m.

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

Mr. Weldon said the motion is to defer to the superintendent the decision as to whether or not masks become optional in Bridgeport Public Schools. The motion failed by a 4-5 vote.

Voting in favor were members Weldon, Allen, Maccarone, and Castillo. Voting in opposition were members Sokolovic, Brown, Baptiste-Perez, Lombard, and Benejan.

Ms. Castillo moved that "if the board is unable to come to a majority vote decision this evening that the final decision will

lie with Mr. Testani so that a decision is made tonight.” The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said she believed it goes against Robert’s Rules to have a contingent motion. She said the majority of the board has spoken and it does not want to give Mr. Testani the authority. She said she believed the current motion was illegal.

Ms. Castillo withdrew the motion. Ms. Allen withdrew her second.

Mr. Lombard moved that *“the board votes on the issue on the agenda for deciding if we will remove the mask mandate and make it optional as of March 31st.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Castillo.

Mr. Sokolovic move to amend to add the words “for high school students” and “after the first day back from spring break, K to 8 students.” The amendment was seconded by Ms. Baptiste-Perez.

The amendment failed by a 4-5 vote. Voting in opposition were members Weldon, Lombard, Allen, Maccarone, and Castillo. Voting in favor were members Sokolovic, Brown, Baptiste-Perez, and Benejan.

The motion was approved by a 7-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Lombard, Allen, Brown, Benejan, Maccarone, and Castillo. Voting in opposition was Mr. Sokolovic. Ms. Baptiste-Perez abstained.

## **NEW BUSINESS:**

The next agenda item was a first read and discussion on a revised policy regarding public comment. Mr. Weldon said the document was provided to board members; items in red were the new language added. He noted it went through two meetings of the Governance Committee.

The next agenda item was the first read and discussion of revised policy regarding high school magnet entrance and performance policy.

Supt. Testani said there is a blind lottery at Fairchild Wheeler and BMA. He said the only aspect reviewed and altered was regarding central Magnet. He said a committee was formed at Central to go over the outdated entrance requirements. He said a principal recommendation can be used to assist students who may not have done well on the assessment.

The superintendent said the requirements for Central Magnet are (1) Bridgeport resident; (2) a selection by lottery for non-feeder and TAG students; (3) a final grade of C-plus or better in core academic subject areas in Grade 7 and 8; (4) student code of conduct and attendance must be aligned with BPS policy. He said that should be changed to student handbook for the second read. Additionally, (5) SBAC scores with a minimum of 2 in reading, 2 in math, or an average score above the 2

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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:15 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

DRAFT