

Monday, January 11, 2021

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held January 11, 2021, by video conference call, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:33 p.m. Present were members Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Bobbi Brown, Secretary Joseph Lombard, Albert Benejan, Joseph Sokolovic, Sosimo Fabian, Chris Taylor, and Sybil Allen.

Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

**PUBLIC COMMENT:**

Rev. Stanley Lord said he was in favor of changing the name of Columbus School and urged the board to do so. He suggested the name of Edwin Gomes as a new name.

Calabria Gale Heilmann, president of Bridgeport Generation Now and an Italian-American, said she supported establishing a committee to rename Columbus School. She said her grandfather, who was born in Italy, a World War II veteran and a public school teacher for 40 years, would also agree. She said he changed his name because of discrimination faced by Italian-Americans. She said Columbus was chosen as a hero, but comes from an immoral, dark side of our history. She said Italian-Americans chose the wrong hero in a country where racism is in the air we breathe. She said Columbus needs to go, period.

Barbara Rogo, a Bridgeport resident for 70 years and retired board employee, said she was born across the street from Columbus School in the Hollow. She said she had never

heard even a suggestion of renaming an existing school in Bridgeport. She questioned the board's focus on this with all its challenges, particularly without the ability to hold in-person hearings. She said her grandfathers were coalminers in Pennsylvania and her father was a factory worker in Bridgeport and their hard work, like others, allowed our families to incrementally achieve the American Dream despite discrimination, including internment camps.

Christopher Caruso, a Bridgeport resident representing the Council of Italian-American Societies and ten other Italian-American organizations, spoke against the possible renaming of Columbus School. He said he believed the expectation by the public when the school was opened in 1966 is that the name would be permanent unless the school was torn down. He noted Longfellow School was renamed after it was torn down. He said the entire school community is built around a school name. He said Columbus is being judged by 21st century standards without hearing the full and complete story, rather than cherry-picking items as in the Howard Zinn version of Columbus.

### **APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:**

Ms. Allen moved approval of the minutes of the Regular Meeting of December 21, 2020. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic. The motion was approved by an 7-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Benejan, Weldon, Sokolovic, Brown, Allen, Fabian, and Lombard. Mr. Taylor abstained.

Ms. Allen moved approval of the minutes of the Special Meeting of December 22, 2020. The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown. The motion was approved by an 7-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Benejan, Weldon, Sokolovic, Brown, Allen, Fabian, and Lombard. Mr. Taylor abstained.

Ms. Allen moved approval of the minutes of the Regular Meeting of January 4, 2021. The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown. The motion was approved by an 7-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Benejan, Weldon, Sokolovic, Brown, Allen, Fabian, and Lombard. Mr. Taylor abstained.

### **CHAIR REPORT:**

Mr. Weldon said the board would be rejoining the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education (CABE). He said they contacted him and offered an introductory rate, which would present opportunities for training and advocacy. He said some board members had already signed up for training tomorrow and Thursday.

Mr. Weldon said a board member asked whether the board should be a member of the Council of Great City Schools, which is a national organization. He said the current invoice for continued membership is in excess of \$30,000. He said he concurred with Mr. Testani's hesitancy to pay that amount.

Mr. Sokolovic said the statement of the Great City Schools accompanied the white paper and the resources were used in the Males of Color Committee. He said he believed Dr. Jenkins, Dr. McPherson, and Mr. Young used the references quite a bit. He said CABE includes many smaller districts that are mostly Caucasian, while the Great City Schools has a lot of diversity initiatives. He said he attended one of their recent seminars which was very informative.

Mr. Weldon said perhaps the services could be used on an a la carte basis. He said the question came up and he wondered if the board was getting \$32,000 worth of services.

Supt. Testani said he would like to ask staff members about their use of the services. He said the membership had not expired yet and he could report at the next meeting.

Dr. Fabian said when he hears numbers in that magnitude he considers how many kids we can educate for that kind of money.

Supt. Testani said the \$32,000 covers one year of membership.

Mr. Weldon asked the board members to indicate their availability for a date to assemble to work on the board's objectives for the year. He said he would schedule something next week in the 6:30 time slot.

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

Dr. Fabian reported on the Educational Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Committee. He said the next meeting would be on next Wednesday to set committee's priorities.

Mr. Sokolovic referred to the committee a review of data on AP course participation by race. He said he would also like to hear a presentation about hiring practices and diversity initiatives.

Supt. Testani noted the HR director has not been with the district long and only during the pandemic and would need some time to gather the information.

Mr. Weldon said the Facilities Committee would meet on February 1st and would consider an item on a basketball court at Black Rock School.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Finance Committee would meet this Wednesday and the meeting would include a first look at the upcoming budget.

Mr. Weldon said the Governance Committee will meet on February 1st and handle items on inclusion of nonvoting members on standing committees and the possibility of remote participation in board and committee meetings by board members.

Mr. Sokolovic referred the magnet school topics to the committee. He said he would like to hear how the current policy is going, including principals' perspectives. Supt. Testani said he believed principals would be more than happy to share their assessments.

Dr. Fabian said the Personnel Committee would meet on January 25th and the meeting would include the interview of a candidate.

Mr. Benejan said the Students & Families Committee would meet on January 21st. He said bullying would be one topic covered.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Teaching & Learning Committee will meet January 19th.

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

Supt. Testani said it was very exciting to welcome students back to in-person learning today. He said Grades K to 12 are on hybrid schedule. If K-8 class sizes are below 15, those students will attend four days a week. He said hybrid is used to reduce the density of each classroom. ELL, special education, and pre-K students will be in fulltime.

The superintendent said there will be interim directors of the health department after January 16th until a permanent candidate can be found. He said Ms. Earley, the nursing director, has worked closely with Ms. Morrissey, the outgoing health director.

Supt. Testani said vaccines in Bridgeport are being given to health workers, essential employees like police and fire, and nursing home and extended healthcare residents. He said board employees such as occupational/physical therapists and speech and language pathologists, social workers and school counselors are now eligible and have been scheduled to receive vaccines.

The superintendent said the lists of all staff for Phase 1-B have been submitted to the state. He said he was informed those appointments can be scheduled beginning January 18th.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani there was a meeting last week with the city's legislative delegation, although all did not participate, and the district's priorities were presented to them. He said he has requested the delegation meet with the board's Finance Committee. He said it was exciting that Rep. Felipe was co-chair of the Education Committee.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the contract was being finalized for systemwide training on diversity with Dr. Derrick Gay for \$12,000. He said he would provide information to board members on how to participate.

Dr. Fabian said the members of the public made excellent presentations tonight and it reflected our ability to have difficult conversations in a civilized way.

Mr. Taylor said the superintendent has done a fabulous job. He said he was disappointed that Dr. Carolyn Nah, a former NAACP president, was not considered for diversity training.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said it was not mandatory that all employees receive the vaccine.

Supt. Testani said there is a nice video presentation of recognitions of students and staff on the website thanks to the efforts of Tim Grasty.

The superintendent said it was learned today that the district is one of ten in the state that was chosen to participate in the FAFSA completion challenge.

Dr. Fabian said he has been impressed by the quality of the work and the efforts that the district is making, along with many successes, but it seems the public never hears about it. He encouraged everyone to help share the good news and he said he would like to see the *Connecticut Post* speak to our successes.

The superintendent said the mayor's office had done some press releases for the district recently and work was continuing. He said he had appeared on WICC to promote some of the successes.

### **NEW BUSINESS:**

The next agenda item was on considering establishing a committee to rename Columbus School.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *"to form a committee to consider renaming the elementary school located at 275 George*

*Street in Bridgeport.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown.

Ms. Allen said she did not see the necessity to rename the school, but if the community wants to do it she will act accordingly.

Ms. Brown said she supported the change as a result of engaging with students this summer. She said she would like to hear the community’s input on this.

Mr. Sokolovic said the time has come. He said the curriculum was Eurocentric, but the student body is not Eurocentric. He said the school was 23 percent black, 64 percent Hispanic, and 11 percent white, with two percent being other. He said those who know the true history of Columbus would be insulted by the name being on the building, which represents institutionalized racism.

Mr. Sokolovic said the board can multi-task and change the name while working on other issues.

Mr. Benejan said he believed the board should concentrate on more important things. He asked if the school community had been surveyed and said their views should be considered. He noted he was a former PAC president at Columbus. He said there was a fight over the name of Harding High, but the name was not changed.

Supt. Testani said a survey of the staff indicated 17 people supported changing the name; 19 did not. A survey of the families is underway. So far 160 responses have been received, with 60 supporting renaming the school and 100 opposed.



In response to a question, the superintendent said he did not believe the name of a school would affect academic achievement, nor would it lead to more funding.

Mr. Taylor questioned the waste of time and resources.

Dr. Fabian said he listened carefully to Mr. Caruso's presentation, but even he conceded Columbus was a controversial historical figure. He said at a time when we are looking to present our diverse population with role models he said serious consideration should be given to renaming the school. He said he agreed with Mr. Caruso that Columbus was being judged by our standards today and it was appropriate to find other names.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the parent survey is being conducted by e-mail, text, and phone. He suggested there be a community forum on the issue, perhaps at Kennedy Stadium in the spring.

Mr. Benejan said he spoke to Tammy Boyle's grandmother, who is 99, and she was quite upset about changing the name of Columbus School.

Mr. Weldon said he found it interesting that about two-thirds of the school community surveyed so far did not want a change. He said he might feel differently if the effort to change the name was coming from the community. He said he sees both sides of the issue as Columbus is a controversial figure.

Mr. Lombard said he wondered if there was a need to have a committee until the survey is completed and the community's views are determined.

Mr. Sokolovic said the survey was problematic because we were depending on a survey of children who have been educated under the Eurocentric method. He said the public speakers trying to keep the name probably had a median age of 65 to 70. He said symbols had to be changed with real memories for the future of our children. He said Columbus slaughtered an entire nation in Puerto Rico, the Taino Indians.

Mr. Weldon said if the community is voicing their feelings, we should be respectful of them. He said the survey should be completed before the board takes action.

Dr. Fabian said the committee should be formed and there should be a clear input and direction from the community because they are the ones that attend the school. He said he would like to hear a robust dialogue.

Mr. Benejan said there is a Puerto Rican song to its flag that references Columbus's name. He asked if Harding's name was not changed, why would this school's name be changed.

Dr. Fabian said some other districts have successfully changed names of schools, including in New Haven. He said the board would be better informed if it waits for the survey to be concluded.

Mr. Benejan urged listening to the parents and staff.

Supt. Testani said the survey results could be provided to the board on Thursday. He noted there is currently a middle school in New Haven named after Columbus. He said it was up to the board on how to move on.

Mr. Weldon said he agreed with Mr. Benejan about other name changes and wondered about creating a slippery slope. He said there is no provision in the board's policies to change school names. He said this might create a precedent for a push to try to erase the name of a current building if there is no new construction available to be named. He said schools such as Johnson or Batalla could have their names erased in a period when people have forgotten who they were. He said he believed the concept of naming buildings was for the life of the building.

Mr. Sokolovic said he would love to go down a slippery slope to make change in the Eurocentric nature and institutional racism of our schools. He said if we have to correct the curriculum, we have to correct the name of the school. He said names of schools that bring ill repute onto the school should be changed. He added Geraldine Claytor never kidnapped people or decimated a population.

Mr. Taylor called the question. The motion was unanimously approved.

The vote on the motion to establish a committee to consider the renaming of Columbus School was 5-3 in favor.

Voting in favor were members Brown, Allen, Sokolovic, Fabian, and Lombard. Voting in opposition were members Weldon, Taylor, and Benejan.

Mr. Weldon said Supt. Testani would have to form a committee. The superintendent asked for direction on the timeline and composition of the committee.

Mr. Weldon said Policy 7550 specifies what the membership should be comprised of.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested tabling the discussion of the composition of the committee and the deadline.

Supt. Testani said he would need at least four weeks to establish the committee. Dr. Fabian asked that the diversity of our community be reflected in the committee.

Supt. Testani said as a first-generation Italian-American he had no view on this one way or the other.

The next agenda item was on possible establishment of a naming committee for Aquaculture's School floating classroom.

The superintendent said when the boat is completed, it needs to be named. He said he was requesting approval to create a naming committee.

Ms. Brown moved *"to establish a naming committee for the floating classroom that will be based at Aquaculture School."* The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on the 2020-21 performance evaluation that was developed for Supt. Testani.

Mr. Weldon said there had been two executive sessions on the matter and he believed everything anyone wanted had been incorporated.

Mr. Weldon said the changes included that the superintendent having to give backup to illustrate what he has done in the various areas and the board members being

required to give some commentary and not just a numerical rating.

Ms. Brown moved “*to approve the 2020-21 performance evaluation document related to Michael Testani.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

Mr. Weldon said the completed evaluation will be posted on the website. Mr. Sokolovic requested the document prior to the scoring also be posted.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:11 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod