

Monday, November 9, 2020

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held November 9, 2020, 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, Jessica Martinez, Albert Benejan, Joseph Sokolovic, and Sybil Allen.

Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Ms. Rita Valle reported no one had signed up to speak.

APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:

Mr. Lombard moved approval of the minutes of the Regular Meeting of October 26, 2020. The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown and unanimously approved.

Ms. Brown moved approval of the minutes of the Special Meeting of October 28, 2020. The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

Ms. Allen moved approval of the minutes of the Special Meeting of October 30, 2020. The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown and unanimously approved.

COMMITTEE REPORTS/REFERRALS:

Mr. Sokolovic said the Educational Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Committee would meet on November 16th.

Mr. Weldon said the chair of the Facilities Committee was no longer on the board.

Mr. Benejan noted he had pending questions to the superintendent regarding facilities. Supt. Testani said he could answer Mr. Benejan's questions either after the meeting tonight or tomorrow.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Finance Committee would meet on November 18th.

Mr. Weldon indicated committees would be reassigned in December. He asked if there was a volunteer to chair the committees previously chaired by Mr. Illingworth. Mr. Sokolovic said if a pressing issue emerged, it could probably be handled in another committee.

Mr. Weldon said he was a member of the Governance and Facilities Committee, so he could chair them. Mr. Lombard and Mr. Sokolovic said they were willing to serve on the committees. Mr. Weldon appointed Mr. Lombard to Governance and Mr. Sokolovic to Facilities. Ms. Allen volunteered to take Mr. Illingworth's slot on the Personnel Committee.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested the board begin the process of evaluating the superintendent. Mr. Weldon said he would send out a poll of board members for a suggested date. Mr. Sokolovic and Mr. Weldon suggested the process be done by the full board, not the Personnel Committee.

Mr. Benejan said the Students & Families Committee would meet on November 19th.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Teaching & Learning Committee would meet on November 17th.

SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT/AGENDA:

Supt. Testani said the district will conduct a community resources drive-through on November 21st to help support students and families. Community partners, including Bridgeport Caribe Youth League, Southwest Community Health, Wakeman Boys & Girls Club, and others, would participate. The event will be held outdoors at Central High School. He said Carli Rocha-Reaes is taking the lead on coordinating this and he invited board members to participate.

The superintendent said the K-8 hybrid schedule began today. Except for pre-K the entire district is running on the hybrid model. He said from conferring with colleagues in similar-sized districts it seems to be a manageable way to go without disrupting students. He said the decision was made in collaboration with the health department. He noted the recent increase in community spread and he thanked the board for its support for the hybrid model.

Supt. Testani said he has reached out for pricing on diversity and equity training, and he would update the board soon.

The superintendent said the Department of Public Health has released guidance on winter sports. He said he believed the CIAC's previous handling of fall sports was a disaster. Moderate risk sports such as basketball will require mitigation strategies such as masks. He said he spoke today

with Dr. Black, the three high school principals and the three athletic directors, and there are major concerns about playing basketball with masks. He noted social distancing was not possible when playing basketball. He said the consensus of the discussion was that we did not want to put ourselves in a position where the season is canceled anyway because one positive case would put the entire program in quarantine for two weeks. The superintendent said there would be a hold on all winter sports. He added that wrestling and competitive cheer are the high-risk category.

Supt. Testani said there was a lot of pushback about canceling football, but ultimately health officials prevailed in their recommendation. He said he anticipated pushback from basketball kids and families. He said he has made an offer to be part of the CIAC decisions going forward. He said he was not willing to sacrifice health and safety when Bridgeport was a red city in COVID cases.

The superintendent said from November 5th to November 8th there were 289 new cases in Bridgeport; 17 of which came from 14 schools and 3 daycare sites. Only 8 of the school cases were public school students. He said he felt confident in the district's mitigation strategies. He noted officials are urging public gatherings be limited. He said he did not believe the governor would order all schools go to remote learning. He said the hybrid model gives our most vulnerable population access to in-person learning four days a week.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said he believed skill-building basketball activities would inevitably lead to pickup games. He added the local health department is against any indoor basketball.

In response to a question, the superintendent said the CIAC has not yet made a decision on basketball and it may possibly move forward with playing. However, the state Department of Public Health said masks must be worn while basketball is played.

Mr. Benejan said he believed from the beginning that schools should not be opened. He noted there were 82 student and 26 staff member cases on the district dashboard. He questioned why the schools are still open. The superintendent said the district would not receive any less money if the district goes fully remote, nor would employees be paid less. He said the district says open because kids need in-person learning, especially primary grade and special education students. He said the health experts had done a lot of contact tracing and transmission of the virus is not happening in schools, but in family events, social events, and youth sports that are not sanctioned by school districts.

Supt. Testani said New Haven has been completely remote from the beginning of school and the virus transmission rate is no better than in Bridgeport.

Mr. Sokolovic said closing schools saves an astronomical amount of money due to savings on transportation, heating costs, electricity, and even personnel, so the claim that keeping schools open saves money is the exact opposite of reality.

The superintendent said the governor ordered the districts' payroll be maintained in the spring, but now we are not under any order to pay employees their full salary and benefits if they are not contributing to remote instruction. He

said being open is a service to the community because many employees live in the community.

Mr. Benejan said most of the staff are very scared; he estimated the number at 80 percent. He said money is very important, but not as much as a family member, staff member or student dying.

NEW BUSINESS:

The next agenda item was on the Over Under Initiative.

Supt. Testani said this came out of the Facilities committee meeting. He said the organization, headed by Kyle Martino, a former pro MLS soccer player, approached the district about a project to install underground soccer goals on basketball courts, which can be easily moved up or down to transform the court. He said the cost of such a project would be about \$20,000. He said locations at Blackham School and Cesar Batalla were discussed, and the group committed to do both locations by the March timeframe. There will be a major kickoff event at that time, which may include NBA player Steve Nash. The eventual goal is to do 13 installations in the city at no cost to the city and the district.

Mr. Weldon recommended any written agreement and insurance requirements be reviewed by the board's counsel.

Ms. Allen moved *"to approve the arrangement with the Over Under Initiative as it's been described by the superintendent for the installation of between two and thirteen locations for goalposts."* The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on the 2020-21 Alliance Building Grant application.

Alan Wallack said the district received the opportunity to apply for a \$2 million Alliance Building Grant. He said in the past ten years there have been three or four successful approvals of these, totaling up to \$8 million, which funds things not funded in the city's capital budget or the district's budget.

Mr. Wallack said the \$2 million approved this year will be used for new boilers in three schools and new front-end equipment for other schools. The remainder will be used for IT phones and communication systems for schools. He said the grant was written in conjunction with the IT department. He said he was asking for retroactive approval by the board of the application.

Mr. Weldon described it as basically free money because there was no match required.

In response to a question, Mr. Wallack said some of the equipment replaced by the grant will be able to be used in other schools. He said the technology put into new schools ten years ago is no longer current technology. He said the equipment being acquired has been recommended by Mr. Postolowski.

In response to a question, Mr. Wallack said the equipment put into Bassick High under the grant could be used in another school when the old Bassick is closed.

In response to a question, Mr. Wallack said air-conditioning of IT closets will take place in new construction.

Ms. Allen moved *"to approve the 2020-21 Alliance Building Grant application."* The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was a review of board and superintendent performance during COVID-19. Mr. Weldon said it qualified for executive session. He said the superintendent wanted to have a roundtable about things he has done well and things that could have been done better, including a discussion of how the board has operated over the past eight or nine months.

Ms. Allen moved *"to go into executive session for that purpose, with the only people being present being board members and the superintendent."* The motion was seconded by Mr. Lombard and unanimously approved.

The executive session began at 7:26 p.m.

The board reconvened in public session at 9:14 p.m.

Ms. Martinez was not present.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 9:15 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod