

Monday, December 7, 2020

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held December 7, 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, Sosimo Fabian, Chris Taylor, and Sybil Allen.

Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

**PUBLIC COMMENT:**

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

**APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:**

Ms. Allen moved approval of the minutes of the Special Meeting of November 23, 2020. The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown and approved by a 8-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Brown, Sokolovic, Lombard, Benejan, Martinez, Fabian, and Allen. Mr. Taylor abstained.

Ms. Allen moved approval of the minutes of the Regular Meeting of November 23, 2020. The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan and approved by a 8-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Brown, Sokolovic, Lombard, Benejan, Martinez, Fabian and Allen. Mr. Taylor abstained.

**COMMITTEE REPORTS/REFERRALS:**

Mr. Sokolovic said the Educational Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Committee had not met in the interim and there is no scheduled meeting until the chairmanships are decided.

Mr. Benejan referred to the Facilities Committee a matter he e-mailed about. Supt. Testani said the asphalt plant was closed for the season, but the city has indicated it will address the issue as soon as possible. Mr. Benejan said the situation was dangerous for kids.

In response to a question, the superintendent said inventory of COVID and safety supplies was fluid. Items have been sent out to schools in preparation for January.

Mr. Benejan referred to the Finance Committee a report on overtime expenditures.

Mr. Weldon said tonight's Governance Committee was postponed due to time considerations.

Mr. Benejan said the Students & Families Committee would meet on December 17th.

Mr. Sokolovic referred to the Students & Families Committee a more comprehensive bullying report, to include reported incidences, including the numbers of substantiated and unsubstantiated incidents. He also requested a report on the number of assaults or other precursors to bullying.

**SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT/AGENDA:**

Supt. Testani said the district was operating on a fully remote schedule. He said the district is communicating with the city's health department daily to get updates on COVID cases in Bridgeport and Fairfield County, particularly after the Thanksgiving holiday.

The superintendent said the tentative idea is to reopen schools around January 11th at the earliest, January 19th at the latest. He said it was important to reopen especially for the youngest learners and more vulnerable populations.

Supt. Testani said parents who chose remote learning at the beginning of the year will have the opportunity to switch to in-person in January and will have to notify their schools of the choice.

The superintendent said all devices have been distributed. Distribution of hotspots and work with Altice have improved internet connectivity. He said there has been some feedback that the Altice free service is not always fast enough.

Supt. Testani said the district was holding a computer science week, with an event planned through the science department, involving the lieutenant governor and Sacred Heart University.

The superintendent said the first quarter student and staff recognition video by Mr. Grasty will be released soon to the website.

Supt. Testani noted a sign Mr. Taylor was displaying regarding union-busting. He said there were a couple of layoffs that resulted from restricting and reorganization to fill the needs of the district as we've entered into a more technological age. He said unfortunately some tough

decisions had to be made. He noted there were almost 20,000 new devices and an online learning platform now in the district that require support.

In response to a question, the superintendent said some positions were reduced and new positions better aligned to the district's needs were added. He said the persons in the positions eliminated had the option of applying for the new positions and had bumping rights within their union to open positions.

Ms. Allen said she was hoping it was not true that a lot of jobs have been declassified and taken out of union scale. The superintendent said there are currently three nonunion positions and there was a process by which bargaining units could claim them. He said there were four individuals in the three positions. The new positions do not exist in any current bargaining unit and the old job descriptions do not meet the needs of today's technological age.

Mr. Taylor said this sounded like union-busting. He said the board was told in public there would be no layoffs. He said he did not know the qualifications of the individuals who held the three positions. He said he supported the superintendent one hundred percent, but not clear union-busting. He said there is no other way to classify it. He said the contract with 1522 should be honored. He said he suspected it was the department head trying to stack the deck without the superintendent having anything to do with it. He said he will not stand by while it goes on.

Ms. Allen said she agreed it was union-busting.

Supt. Testani said the current jobs are nonunion because they have never been established with the educational and

skill set requirements. He said there are similar jobs on the city side that are not in the union mentioned here, so any of the bargaining units can claim these jobs and follow the process at the State Labor Board. He said in the last five or six years teaching ranks and administrative ranks have been reduced and job held by members of bargaining units have been eliminated.

In response to a question, the superintendent said when administrator positions have been eliminated they have had to bump down to teaching ranks. He said the three individuals impacted have bumping rights. He said he brought the matter up to give the complete story. He said it was not management's decision as to which union these positions go into.

The superintendent said all the district's employees have had their employment maintained even though the governor's order was no longer in effect. He said he respects everyone's contribution to our kids. He said he was told today that one individual involved retired and the other two employees did not apply for the reposted jobs. He said they may have not have had the skill set to qualify for those jobs.

Supt. Testani said it appeared a couple of individuals were upset, which is their right, and reached out to board members to express dissatisfaction.

Mr. Benejan said he would be very honest and he agreed with Mr. Taylor. He said he was shocked by the layoffs because the IT staff was working very hard for us and to go the extra mile.

In response to a question, the superintendent said there were older desktop computers for staff in the district that

have not been replaced. He said without major donations by the state, the city, the CARES Act, and the Dalio Foundation there would not have been sufficient devices for students. He said all staff computers are being updated with new SSD standards to bring them up to Windows 10. He said lack of funding led to the older units being used by staff. Grades 3 through 8 are being focused on now so January interim assessments can be performed, as well as SBAC.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the posting for the new positions was last updated 15 years ago and a higher skill set of labor in the IT department was needed. The requirements have been updated to require at least an associate's degree or something comparable in certifications that people in the industry should have.

Mr. Sokolovic said he had no opinion on the job movements. He said the board should only be involved in employment decisions if it's an arbitration hearing or a settlement offer. He said we are acting prematurely and in place of the union and the bargaining unit. He said it seemed rather than bring the complaint to the union and go through due process, they circumvented the process and found some easy-to-sway board members to fight their battles for them.

Mr. Taylor said Mr. Sokolovic was out of order and was a union-buster. Mr. Sokolovic asked to be allowed to complete his comment and said Mr. Taylor was a lazy ass.

Mr. Sokolovic said the board has no place in personnel decisions except for executive positions. He said we are out of order to pressure the superintendent and this was totally unfair to the superintendent and the department head. Ms. Allen said it was unfair to the employees.

Mr. Taylor said he was not getting involved in day-to-day affairs. He said his constituent base is the working class of Bridgeport and he was concerned about the gutting of 1522. He said it was disappointing because Mr. Sokolovic is a union man. He said he was expressing his concerns as an elected official. He said we should have went to the union and asked if they had anybody to meet the job requirements. He said he found the way it was done was offensive. He said he had a checkered past and was not preaching morality, but we signed a contract with 1522 and it smells bad.

Supt. Testani said Local 1522 has not been always cooperative in the last several months during COVID-19 in trying to accommodate union members from a different bargaining unit. He said we've tried to work with all bargaining units to make sure no one is displaced. He noted at one time BCAS had 120 members and is down to around 80. The superintendent said two individuals had been impacted here. He said the prior job descriptions of PC technicians are duties that can be done by high school students and a broader skill set was needed.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said just like with teachers and others you have to take some responsibility for your own professional growth. He said modern car mechanics have certifications in order to stay in tune with industry standards. He said folks need to take the opportunity and the initiative to grow certifications and skill set.

Mr. Taylor said he disagreed and he believed this could have been handled with some advanced notice. Ms. Allen said it could have been handled with a little more dignity. Mr. Taylor said he was here about the process, not the employees. He said no matter what the superintendent says, it sends a bad

message. He said he was appealing to the superintendent's sense of reason and his union background. He said he receives notices about trade licenses he holds in advance. He said he does support the superintendent and is not trying to micromanage.

Supt. Testani said the board did not negotiate or sign any contact with 1522, it was the city. Mr. Taylor said those are just semantics.

Mr. Benejan said we are not here to attack anybody or tell them what to say. He said Mr. Sokolovic attacking Mr. Taylor was out of line. He said whoever is in charge of that department should be doing training. He said he agreed with Mr. Taylor.

### **NEW BUSINESS:**

The next item was discussion and possible approval to renew the facilities department's lease at 1085 Connecticut Avenue.

Supt. Testani said, as discussed in the Contracts Committee, the lease is coming due. A lot of time was spent to see if the city could accommodate us, but that did not pan out. He said a three-year lease is proposed, so the city has enough notice to develop possible future options. He said Marlene Siegel was available for questions as she worked with the real estate broker to finalize the proposed lease.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said he would begin resuming student roundtable discussions tomorrow to get feedback from high school students on the remote learning. He said Teams usage by staff members is being monitored closely.



Mr. Lombard moved “*to approve to enter into the lease for the property at 1085 Connecticut Avenue as explained by the superintendent.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen. The motion was approved by an 6-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Sokolovic, Brown, Allen, Lombard & Fabian. Mr. Taylor was opposed. Mr. Benejan abstained.

The next agenda item was discussion and possible approval to solicit absence management and substitute staffing services.

Supt, Testani said the current contract with Kelly Services ends sometime in the spring.

Marlene Siegel, chief financial officer, said the RFP is a request for firms interested in providing an absence management system that encompasses daily absence reporting for all teachers, classroom paraprofessionals, and noncertified staff; placement of substitute teaching staff; and placement of substitute pre-K paraprofessionals in general education pre-K classes where only one is assigned.

Ms. Siegel said the current vendor for the first two components is Kelly Educational Services. The contract ends on June 30, 2021 and it was not permitted to allow for extensions beyond three years. She said we want to include the flexibility for the board to extend a three-year agreement by one or two years at its sole discretion in the ultimate agreement.

Ms. Siegel said the placement of substitute pre-K paras would be a new provision. Currently that is covered by the Delta T vendor. She said going forward we would want the

vendor responsible for the absence management system to be responsible for substitute paras to keep things automatic and more efficient.

Ms. Siegel said for long-term absences of a pre-K vendor, if the position is not filled within two days, the district will reserve the right to use other vendors.

Mr. Weldon said it appeared Ms. Martinez and Mr. Taylor were no longer present in the meeting.

Mr. Lombard moved “*to authorize the staff to solicit absence management and substitute staffing services through the RFP that they have just presented.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and approved by a 6-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Brown, Lombard, Sokolovic, Allen, and Fabian. Mr. Benejan abstained.

The next agenda item was on the calendar year 2021 schedule of regular meetings as developed by the superintendent’s office. Mr. Weldon said in April it is proposed to move the first meeting in April to the first Monday to accommodate spring break.

In response to a question, Ms. Rita Valle-Shastri said there were no conflicts discovered with holidays.

Ms. Allen moved “*to adopt the 2021 regular meeting schedule as prepared by the staff.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 7:41 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

DRAFT