

Monday, March 8, 2021

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held March 8, 2021, by video conference call, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:31 p.m. Present were members Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Bobbi Brown, Albert Benejan, Sosimo Fabian, Chris Taylor, Sybil Allen, and Joseph Sokolovic.

Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

**PUBLIC COMMENT:**

Ms. Rita Valle-Shastri reported no one signed up for public comment.

**APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:**

Ms. Allen moved to approve the minutes of the Regular Meeting of February 22, 2021. The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown and approved by a 6-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Brown, Sokolovic, Fabian, Allen, and Benejan. Mr. Taylor abstained.

Mr. Benejan requested the board observe a moment of silence for Tiffany Mellers, a former PAC president at Classical Studies and serving soldier in the Army, who passed away.

**CHAIR REPORT**

Mr. Weldon said he visited the vaccination center for Bridgeport school employees and it was an impressive operation. He thanked Ms. Papa and the staff at the health department, along with the district employees, for helping to make it successful.

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

Ms. Brown said the Ad Hoc Committee on the Districtwide Branding Initiative held a successful first meeting. There was discussion of uniform responses by the board to public inquiries, revisiting the schools' logo, a branding strategy, unified communications for parents, and the generational divide among parents.

Mr. Weldon said the Facilities Committee met on March 1st. There was an update on COVID-19 cleaning in the buildings.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Finance Committee will meet this Wednesday.

Mr. Weldon said the Governance Committee met on March 1st. There was a discussion on remote board participation in meetings and a draft policy was discussed. There was also a review of district magnet school policies, with the staff to prepare a draft for the committee's review.

Mr. Benejan said the Students & Families Committee is working with Ms. Rocha-Reaes and the parents to spend parent engagement funds before April 1st. The next meeting will be on March 18th.

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

## **SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT:**

Supt. Testani said the vaccination site for board employees began last week. He said over 400 staff members had been vaccinated at the district's site, which does not include those who received theirs elsewhere. Over 600 staff members are scheduled to be vaccinated this Friday. He thanked all the school nurses and Ms. Papa and the Department of Public Health, along with firefighters and volunteers from Sacred Heart University.

The superintendent said he had been considering resuming full in-person instruction on April 5th, but it will be pushed back to April 19th, right after spring break, when all employees will have received their second dose. He said Wednesday remote days will continue.

Supt. Testani said it has been a challenging year and Friday marks one year since the doors were closed due to the pandemic. He said there had been immeasurable impact on students, staff, and families. He said he really wanted to encourage the families of remote learners to have their children come into the buildings when schools are reopened.

The superintendent said programs will be expanded in the summer into grade levels where they are normally not offered and the number of students will be expanded. There will be a program for ELL students that is usually not done in the summer. Planning for return in the fall may include extended day and Saturday site programs, along with programs with social-emotional support.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said he was not aware of any staff members that had severe side effects

after being vaccinated. He noted those reactions are more common after the second dose.

In response to a question, the superintendent said he did not believe the vaccination of staff would interfere with spring break. He noted the governor lifted the travel mandate.

Mr. Taylor left the meeting.

### **NEW BUSINESS:**

The next agenda item was on the RFP for non-certified services, which came out of the Contracts Committee. Marlene Siegel, chief financial officer, said the RFP is an invitation to bids for temporary staff such as clerical assistant or data analysts or a computer technician. She said the district has been utilized Merritt Staff Services for about the past ten years, but the city notified the district that it was necessary to request an RFP according to the latest procurement guidelines. It is intended to have a contract in place by July 1st.

Dr. Fabian asked about priorities for Bridgeport residents in such employment to keep resources in the city. Ms. Siegel said she could add a sentence to the RFP that the contractor will give Bridgeport residents a preference in the recruitment of candidates.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said she did not have an exact figure on the expenditures in this area, but it could be between \$60,000 to \$120,000 per year, depending on the extent of coverage covered.

Ms. Brown moved *"to issue the RFP for noncertified staff services with the modification as made to it by Dr. Fabian*

*that staffing be prioritized with Bridgeport residents.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

Ms. Siegel said the RFP may be posted by the end of this week. It is hoped to get a draft contract to the Contracts Committee in the second half of May.

Mr. Weldon asked Ms. Siegel to send the modified RFP to the board.

Dr. Fabian asked if the board had programs targeting minority or woman-owned businesses. Mr. Weldon said the City of Bridgeport's purchasing office has an office of minority contracting, which awards to points to companies with minority ownerships.

The next agenda item was on a contract with Delta-T Group of Hartford, Incorporated, for specialized staff placement. Mr. Weldon said the item came out of the Contracts Committee.

Ms. Siegel said an RFP was issued for specialized substitute staff services and there was only one bidder, the Delta-T Group, the same company that currently holds a contract with the district that expires on May 17th.

Ms. Siegal said, in response to a question at the Contracts Committee, that the RFP was viewed by 38 firms and four downloaded it.

Ms. Siegel said the RFP included a provision that asked for a nonexclusive provider. The contract will run from May 18, 2018 for three years, with a provision for an extension for one or two years.

Ms. Siegel said the rates are established for three years. The primary position type is paraprofessionals in special education. She said the plan is to use Kelly Educational Staffing for pre-K paraprofessionals in general education and one-to-one paraprofessionals.

Ms. Siegel said Delta would be used for the special ed paraprofessionals in long-term absence situations.

Ms. Siegel said she wanted to emphasize the hourly rate was kept fixed in Years 1 and 2, and rises by one dollar an hour in Year 3 for paraprofessionals.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said Delta currently has about 58 paras in the district. She noted there have been vacancies that have been difficult to fill in the pandemic. She said a survey of principals at the end of the school year was generally favorable. She said there were issues at one school with a one-to-one para and a new process was designed by working with Kelly. She said one major issue out of the 58 paras is favorable, given the challenges in recruiting in the pandemic.

Ms. Allen moved “to approve entering into a contact with Delta-T Group of Hartford, Incorporated, for specialized staff placement.” The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on a resolution to implement SEL in both in person and virtual environments and to conduct ongoing training of staff to ensure SEL implementation is culturally responsive and equitably meets the needs of all students.

Carrie Ramanauskas, SEL district coordinator, said she submitted a potential resolution of the board members which reads as follows

“To promote the student wellbeing and academic engagement during this time of the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond by prioritizing social and emotional learning(SEL); whereas students cannot learn effectively unless schools are safe with an equitable environment where all students feel a sense of belonging; whereas students face increasing anxiety as the COVID-19 pandemic continues as a result of social distancing requirements and increasing social isolation, fear of illness for themselves, parents, family and friends, uncertainty of their future in school and life, and financial insecurity that may result in hunger or stress at home; whereas, young people with strong social-emotional skills are better able to cope with challenges, build protective factors or mental wellness, challenges and resiliency from trauma, engage academically and experience long-term social, professional and academic benefits; whereas, social-emotional learning is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships and make responsible and caring decisions; whereas, social-emotional learning can effectively be integrated into schools and to youth-serving organizations through classroom instruction, both in person and virtually, and other schoolwide activities; whereas, educators with strong social-emotional skills can navigate stressors, foster positive learning environment at a distance or in person, and implement SEL with greater fidelity; whereas, social-emotional skills are both teachable and measurable, and evidence-based SEL programming is successful in schools,

within our city and across the country, for students in preschool through high school; therefore, be it resolved that the Bridgeport Board of Education encourages all schools to implement SEL, both in person and virtual environments, and to conduct ongoing training of staff to ensure SEL implementation is culturally responsive and equitably meets the needs of all students.”

Ms. Brown said she was glad this included many of things our students are facing.

Mr. Sokolovic said he would like to suggest an amendment to add, “Whereas, the Bridgeport Board of Education recognizes the added importance of meeting students’ psychological and social needs brought on by the pandemic; whereas, the board recognizing that there is currently a severe shortage of social workers and social counselors employed by the Bridgeport Public Schools.” He also suggested amending the last paragraph, “Therefore, be it resolved that the Bridgeport Board of Education will support the implementation of additional psychological and social-emotional learning, both in person and virtual environment, and Bridgeport Public Schools will also conduct ongoing training of staff to ensure psychological and social-emotional learning implementation is culturally responsive and equitably meets the needs of all students. To further support the implementation of this resolution, the board directs and authorizes the superintendent to utilize a portion of ESSER-2 funding to temporarily increase social workers and/or school counselors by a minimum of twenty fulltime equivalent positions. Said positions to be utilized in areas most needed at the direction of the superintendent and his staff.”

Mr. Sokolovic said it was learned at the last Teaching & Learning Committee the district has about half of the



recommended staff to address these issues. He said this would amount to be about \$1.65 million, which would be about four percent of the ESSER funding.

Supt. Testani said he was opposed to putting a number on the proposal considering the proposed budget for ECS funding, which would cost the district over \$7 million. He said there are plans to add social workers and school counselors and would be glad to add twenty employees, but could not guarantee being able to fund that many. If the funding could not be sustained beyond one year, people would be out of a job.

Mr. Sokolovic said he agreed with earlier comments that students' other needs could not be met without meeting psychological needs. He said this was a very worthy investment.

The superintendent said school counselors are certified staff and could not be filled with temporary staff. He said some school counselors are teachers who came out of the classroom and would be making the higher end of the pay scale.

Ms. Ramanauskas said she would request flexibility as well because there are other avenues to address social-emotional needs such as SEAL coaches that also work in academic areas. She said she agreed the district was in desperate need of school counselors and social workers.

Dr. Fabian noted a great deal of social-emotional learning happens at home with caregivers. Ms. Ramanauskas said all learning with students involves parents and the current initiatives includes parent training and cultural competency

events. Dr. Fabian said he would like to see the home component indicated.

Mr. Sokolovic said he was willing to strike out the minimum of twenty positions, but to include increasing the capacity of social-emotional learning initiatives.

Ms. Brown moved *“to adopt the resolution implanting SEL in both in-person and virtual environments and conducting ongoing training of staff to ensure SEL implementation is culturally responsive and equitably meets the needs of all student as read into the record by Ms. Ramanauskas and as modified by Mr. Sokolovic and Dr. Fabian.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

Mr. Weldon asked Ms. Ramanauskas to send the board a copy of the final resolution.

The next agenda item was on the 2021-22 academic year calendar. Supt. Testani noted there will be 182 days for students because Good Friday falls during the spring break. Teachers return back on August 23rd for a week of professional development and planning time. The administrative staff reports on August 16th. The first day for students will be a full day on August 30th.

The superintendent said more Wednesdays half days were added for professional development and there will be Lighthouse child care on those afternoons. There will be no professional development on election day and staff will have that day off.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *“to adopt to the 2021-22 academic calendar.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown and unanimously approved.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 7:52 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

DRAFT