

Monday, March 9, 2020

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held March 9, 2020, at Bridgeport Regional Aquaculture Science & Technology Education Center, 60 St. Stephens Road, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:30 p.m. Present were Vice Chair Hernan Illingworth, Secretary Bobbi Brown, Joseph Sokolovic, Sybil Allen, Albert Benejan, and John Weldon. Chris Taylor arrived subsequently as noted.

Acting Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

Mr. Weldon moved to *“add to the agenda discussion and possible action of suspending all out-of-state field trips for the remaining school year of 2019-20.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan and unanimously approved.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Felicity Medinger of Shelton said she has been a mentor in the district. The students she mentored are all sophomores now in college and she still meets with them on a regular basis. She said the program was very important.

Joslyn Acevedo, a Central Magnet alumni, said she was in support of the School Volunteer Association(SVA), which is facing the threat of closure. She said she came from a stable household and the program was greatly needed for students who do not have her advantages.

Annie Christy, a tutor with the SVA for six years, said she had worked at Hall and Edison Schools. She said a lot of students need one-to-one tutors. The tutors read to the student and the students read to the tutors. Children are given books to take home

Mr. Taylor arrived at the meeting

Mabel Hoffler-Page, a volunteer reader, described the Reading Pals program that helps 1st grade students every week.

Sara Ice, the Thursday coordinator for the Reading Pals program, said she volunteers in Wilbur Cross School to support students centered on books. She said there has been positive feedback from administrators and teachers, while the students have improved their skills.

Marge Hiller said there are 105 volunteers mentoring students through the School Volunteer Association. She said the tutors follow students in later grades as well. She provided written material on the value of the SVA, which described as a million dollars in direct services to students and materials.

Britt Liota said he was present to speak on behalf of a friend's daughter who was being bullied at John Winthrop School. He said he was asking for help because it had not been handled appropriately.

The 8th grade student, Ms. Harrison, said she had been constantly bullied for several years by another student. She said she did not trust the teachers and she was begging her mom to put her in another school. She said she had been removed from activities like lunch and recess.

Lynn Chanel, a literacy volunteer for the SVA, said after she retired from 41 years in teaching she came to Bridgeport to help struggling readers. She said she only works with students in Tier III, the lowest performing children. She urged SVA funding be restored.

Catalina Acevedo, mom of Joslyn Acevedo, spoke in favor of the mentoring her daughter received from a SVA volunteer.

Mr. Taylor said he wanted the SVA to know that he would not be voting for any budget cuts.

Mr. Benejan said he agreed with Mr. Taylor. He said he would like to discuss the bullying problem at the Students & Families Committee on March 20th. Mr. Taylor said he believed the superintendent and Ms. Morgan have a good handle on the bullying situation and would get good results.

APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:

Ms. Allen moved approval of the minutes of the Regular Meeting of February 10, 2020. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic.

The motion was approved by a 6-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Illingworth, Weldon, Allen, Brown, Sokolovic, and Benejan. Mr. Taylor abstained.

Mr. Sokolovic moved to approve the minutes of the Special Meeting held at 5:30 on February 24, 2020. The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and approved by a 6-0 vote.

Voting in favor were members Illingworth, Weldon, Allen, Brown, Sokolovic, and Benejan. Mr. Taylor abstained.

Mr. Sokolovic moved to approve the minutes of the Special Meeting of 6:00 p.m. on February 24, 2020. The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen.

Mr. Benejan noted it was very clear in the minutes that Mr. Benejan did not vote. He said he wanted to be clear that he voted against removing Ms. Martinez as chair. He noted things went very fast at the time of the vote.

The motion was approved by a 6-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Illingworth, Weldon, Allen, Brown, Sokolovic, and Benejan. Mr. Taylor abstained.

Mr. Sokolovic moved to approve the minutes of the Special Meeting of March 2, 2020. The motion was seconded by Mr. Weldon.

The motion was approved by a 6-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Illingworth, Weldon, Allen, Brown, Sokolovic, and Benejan. Mr. Taylor abstained.

CHAIR REPORT:

Mr. Illingworth welcomed the student representatives to the meeting and invited them to participate.

Mr. Illingworth said he is planning on calling a meeting for the election of a new chair on March 23rd. He said the date was chosen because some board members were not available until that date. He said he would invite the mayor to preside over that meeting.

In response to a question, Mr. Illingworth said the board had a 30-day deadline to choose a new chair or the City Council would do so.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested the board receive a legal opinion on the timing of the deadline to choose a chair, particularly given the wording of the statute. Mr. Taylor said he agreed.

COMMITTEE REPORTS/REFERRALS:

Mr. Illingworth said the Facilities & Security Committee would meet at some point in March.

Mr. Illingworth said the Governance Committee met on March 2nd and took up two matters. He said the committee has the aggressive goal to review and approve half of the board's policies by the end of the year.

Mr. Illingworth moved to handle next on the agenda discussion and possible approval of the first read of revised field trip policy 6201 and 6201a. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic. (There was no vote taken.)

Mr. Testani said Policy 6201 would be changed to indicate that school trips must be linked to academic and social-emotional learning experiences. Another change calls for permission for an overnight field trip must be submitted to the executive director prior to the requested trip.

Mr. Testani said the policy revision calls for required items to be submitted to the executive staff prior to the approval of a trip. The approval process for local field trips requires submission of the form to the principal five days in advance for review and authorization; out-of-state field trips must be submitted by the principal to their executive director ten days

in advance of the trip. For overnight field trips the principal must submit appropriate forms to their executive director 30 days in advance of the field trip for Board of Education review and authorization; and for international trips the principal must submit appropriate trip request forms to the executive director sixty days in advance of the trip for Board of Education review and authorization.

Mr. Testani said if available, trip insurance will be offered to each student's family to voluntarily accept or deny.

Mr. Taylor left the meeting.

Mr. Sokolovic reported on the Teaching & Learning Committee. The committee met on February 25th and discussed field trips, a nutrition survey, and curfew enforcement. He said the next meeting would take place on March 16th.

Mr. Weldon said the Personnel Committee would next meet on March 24th.

Mr. Benejan reported on the Students & Families Committee meeting. He said the School Volunteer Association gave a great report. He said the SVA does an amazing job with students and he hoped they could be restored to the budget. He said there was a great presentation by a teacher, Ms. Brown, on recycling. He said the parent convention and the current status of the PAC/PTSO was also discussed. The next meeting will be held on March 19th.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Males of Color Committee met on February 26th to discuss the white paper, which is progressing nicely, professional development on unconscious bias, and a possible collaboration with the New

Haven Family Alliance program on mentoring. The committee will next meet on March 24th,

SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT:

Mr. Testani thanked everyone for their help in coordinating the student and staff recognition event last Thursday.

Mr. Testani said Senator Chris Murphy visited the Friday Night Live program at Central High School. A second site has been opened at Harding High. He said the programs are open from 6:00 to 10:00 p.m. each Friday.

Mr. Testani said there was a recent Black History event at Boca Oyster Bar and funds were raised for a scholarship fund for district students.

Mr. Testani said Governor Lamont and Commissioner Cardona visited Harding High. Student representative Kevin Frank spoke with them about the school.

Mr. Testani recognized the Bassick girls' basketball team for making the state playoffs. He said Coaches Pierce and Brown had turned the team around.

Mr. Testani congratulated 100 Girls Leading for beginning presentations at schools. He noted Ms. Brown and others are involved in the effort.

Mr. Testani said all high school graduations would be held on June 11th at Webster Bank Arena. He said the cost has been cut significantly and donations of about \$16,000 of the \$25,000 needed have already been received.

Mr. Testani said the district takes reports of bullying very seriously. He said there was a meeting with a parent today and support will be offered to try to resolve the issue.

Mr. Testani said he participated in a call with the governor and all state agencies today on the corona virus. He said according to the state Department of Health of the 56 individuals tested in the state only two have tested positive. He said all events containing crowds of over a hundred have been recommended to be cancelled. He said unfortunately that will affect a lot of after-school programs.

Mr. Testani said he was recommending that out-of-state and international student trips be postponed until we have more information. He said the contract for the Fairchild Wheeler trip will permit the students to receive vouchers for future travel.

Mr. Sokolovic said he wanted to caution the board and superintendent about knee-jerk reactions. He said what works for other school districts may not work for Bridgeport. He added a lot of our students depend on schools for food. He said if trips are cancelled the students may never have a chance to take a similar trip in their lifetime.

Mr. Weldon said his primary concern was the folks who had already paid for trips, but the provision of vouchers would make him more comfortable. He agreed with suspending any out-of-state travel sponsored by the district.

Mr. Testani said if we do not notify the tour company within the next four days the vouchers would not be provided or payments will not be refunded.

In response to a question from a student representative, Mr. Testani said a trip to Texas in July would not be affected by the current action, but would be revisited.

Student representative Kevin Frank said he understood Mr. Sokolovic concerns about students in Bridgeport.

Ms. Allen moved to approve "*postponing all out-of-state field trips for the rest of the school year.*" The motion was seconded by Mr. Illingworth.

Mr. Sokolovic moved to amend "*to add a thirty-day time period and revisit it in another thirty days just in case the situation changes.*" He said he believed the trips should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

Ms. Brown seconded the amendment. The amendment was unanimously approved.

Mr. Sokolovic expressed concerns about students not having the opportunity to travel. He said it should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. He said keeping students in school may not be healthier than traveling.

Mr. Illingworth said it was a difficult situation and he worried about the risk of a student or a chaperone coming into contact with the virus. Mr. Sokolovic said the seasonal flu killed over 13,000 people in the country last year. He said drastic measures were not taken during the H1N outbreak, the swine flu, or the Ebola issue.

Mr. Benejan said the virus was all around the world and we could not risk our children on a trip. He said he worried about the risks of the board being sued. He said he would rather lose the money than the life of a child.

Ms. Allen said she believed the students were more properly protected in their own environment and expressed concern about legal liability to the board.

Mr. Testani said he was concerned because if the board reconsidered the matter in thirty days all the money would be lost for those who paid for the trips. He said the Fairchild Wheeler trip to the United Kingdom was scheduled for April, but the tour company had to be informed by March 16th.

Mr. Testani said if the students choose to accept the voucher they can go on next year's trip, while the seniors can go on their own on any tour offered by the tour company. He said if the virus threat was lifted it was possible the students could go in August as a class again.

Mr. Testani said he did not believe students should travel to Washington, New York or Boston under these circumstances where they are exposed to thousands of people. He said some tourist attractions are closing.

Mr. Sokolovic noted there was a Nature Classroom's trip scheduled for Massachusetts. Mr. Testani said there were no confirmed cases locally so the students were safer at home.

Kevin Frank said he believed it would be probably a good idea to postpone all the trips until the end of the school year.

Mr. Testani said there was another meeting scheduled at Fairchild Wheeler with parents that he will participate in. He said if they received vouchers they may be able to go as a group in August or next year somewhere else.

Mr. Sokolovic noted BuildON had an upcoming trip to Nicaragua. Mr. Testani said he would be very leery in having the district participate in that trip.

The motion was approved by a 4-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Illingworth, Weldon, Brown and Benejan. Mr. Sokolovic was in opposition. Ms. Allen abstained.

Mr. Sokolovic said he was not concerned about money, but students missing out on enrichment opportunities.

Mr. Testani said the Commissioner of Education was clear there needs to be equitable educational access if distance learning is employed during the virus. Mr. Testani said it cannot be guaranteed that all students have access to the proper technology in the home. He said worksheets sent to the home would not be equitable. He said in the event schools are closed, the days will be made up at the end of the school year. He said travel plans had probably been made by people for April break so he was reluctant to eliminate that vacation.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said he spoke to Mr. Hammond about diligently cleaning buildings. He said stronger products that are legally allowed are being used. He said unfortunately the bus company can only clean its vehicle at night, not in between runs.

OLD BUSINESS:

The next agenda item was on the 2020-21 school calendar. He said the calendar had been amended to include September 28th, Yom Kippur, as a day of off and adding two days at the end of the year, so students will be in session for 182 days and teachers for 186.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *“to approve the revised 2020-21 school calendar as presented by Mr. Testani.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown and unanimously approved.

NEW BUSINESS:

The next agenda item was on the nutrition center’s security upgrades.

John Gerrity, nutrition director, said approval was requested for the security upgrade at 113 Federal Street. He said it would modernize cameras and switch over to the city’s monitoring center, which provide the monitoring at no cost. He said the expenditures would come from the food and nutrition budget and pay for itself in about two and a half years.

Mr. Weldon moved *“to approve the nutrition center’s security upgrade as proposed by Mr. Gerrity.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and approved by a 5-0 vote.

Voting in favor were members Illingworth, Weldon, Allen, Sokolovic and Brown. Mr. Benejan abstained.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 7:57 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod