

Monday, April 26, 2021

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held April 26, 2021, by video conference call, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:35 p.m. Present were members Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Bobbi Brown, Secretary Joseph Lombard, Albert Benejan, Sybil Allen, and Joseph Sokolovic.

Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

JoAnn Kennedy asked if there was a written plan for the \$40 million of Covid money Bridgeport was receiving. She said according to the state there are five thousand students in Bridgeport unaccounted for during the pandemic. She said she hoped the \$40 million would be used for the children. She said the board had not handled some things particularly well during Covid period such as winter sports. She said the superintendent has not had an evaluation yet.

Mr. Benejan requested a moment of silence for Veronica, Mr. Sokolovic's mom, who passed away. He said Mr. Sokolovic always fights for our children and is a very good friend of us.

APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:

Ms. Allen moved to adopt the board's minutes of the Regular Meeting of April 5, 2021. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

CHAIR REPORT:

Mr. Benejan asked about the board resuming in-person meetings. He urged this be done since students had returned to in-person learning. Mr. Weldon said there was a technology upgrade going on at the Aquaculture School that would allow broadcasting, which will be completed by July 1st. Mr. Sokolovic said he agreed with Mr. Benejan. He said we should meet in the old ways of doing things, even if it meant no live streaming. Mr. Weldon said there were technical problems when broadcasting was attempted at Harding High.

COMMITTEE REPORTS/REFERRALS:

Ms. Brown said the Ad Hoc Districtwide Branding Initiative Committee met on April 5th. There was discussion of the school logo, with Mr. Testani scheduled to contact professionals in the district for assistance. She said students will still be involved in creating campaigns.

Ms. Brown said the superintendent indicated he would gather information from other districts to better improve the district's messaging with parents. She said there was also discussion of summary sheets for presentation to the board for agenda items.

Ms. Brown said the next meeting will be on May 19th.

Mr. Weldon noted Dr. Fabian was not here to present on the Educational Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee. Mr. Sokolovic said he believed something needed to be drastically done since the committee has not met once since

the current chair was appointed. He said there was a lot of work to do. Mr. Weldon said he would reach out to the chair.

Mr. Weldon said the Facilities Committee would meet on the first Monday in May. Mr. Benejan referred an item, a report from Mr. Garcia on cleaning in the schools, supplies, and custodians.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Finance Committee met on April 21st, and received a breakdown for ESSER expenditures, and plans for ESSER 3. He said the committee made suggestions for ESSER 3 funding. He said ESSER funding is making budget advocacy harder during this budget cycle, with the mayor suggesting a zero dollar increase for this year. He said it is imperative that the entire board get more involved in the budget. He said the board was facing \$40 million in cuts in 2024-25 to existing services.

Mr. Sokolovic said the ESSER spending and plan was spelled out at the last Finance Committee meeting, which is available on YouTube. The next meeting will be on May 12th.

Mr. Weldon said the Governance Committee would next meet on the first Monday in May.

Mr. Sokolovic referred the issue of public comment to the Governance Committee. He said he did not believe public comment on agenda items should be limited to agenda items because we are here to serve the public and the public often brings up important items that the board never even thought of.

Mr. Benejan said the Students & Families Committee met on April 22nd. Ms. Rocha-Reaes updated on the PAC and

PTSO. He noted some schools do not have a PAC or PTSO, and he wondered how they were spending money without a signature by the PAC president. He said Ms. Planas reported on the Bridgeport PLTI. There was also a report on the School Volunteer Association. He said so far the parents at Columbus School agree with retaining the name of the school. The next meeting will be on May 20th.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Teaching & Learning Committee would meet tomorrow.

SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT:

Supt. Testani said last week all students who have chosen in-person learning have been welcomed back. He said feedback has been great and in-person attendance has increased dramatically. Some schools have 80 to 90 percent attendance for in-person learners. He noted some students were meeting their teachers for the first time in person.

The superintendent said there are not five thousand students in the district unaccounted for. He said the district has been recognized by the state for interventions that have been implemented during the pandemic.

Supt. Testani said the ESSER 2 plan is intended to provide what our students need, with data included along with the way to gauge outcomes on students. He said the district is trying to expand summer programs, but has found it very difficult to recruit staff. He said if programs cannot be done properly, they will be scaled back, and planning will begin for the academic year and next summer.

The superintendent said proms and end-of-year activities are being planned.

The superintendent said the graduation date for all high schools at a central location will be June 16th. He said it would be a great event with details still to be finalized.

In response to a question, the superintendent said Secretary of Education Cardona gave accolades to the district's nutrition plan, and summer meal programs are planned to continue at 22 to 25 sites. There will be summer school at high school for credit recovery. There will also be a transition program for 8th graders and for current 9th graders.

Mr. Sokolovic said he believed the 5,000 missing students referenced may include chronic absenteeism. Supt. Testani said the state has been fluid and moved the goalposts on calculating attendance and what is considered present. He said being engaged after-hours and schoolwork after hours can be considered present. He said the chronic absentee rate initially went up in the district, but schools have been able to get it back into a more flat-line number. He said 5,500 may be the accurate number for chronically absent students, which is defined as being absent for ten percent of school days. He noted excused absences for illness count towards chronic absence.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said there are some new developments on the new Bassick High that have brought some uncertainties. He said he could update the situation at the next Facilities Committee meeting.

The superintendent gave his condolences to Mr. Sokolovic.

NEW BUSINESS:

The next agenda item was on a proposed board summary sheet for when staff members present items to the board. Mr. Weldon said there was a sample in the board packets, which he described.

Mr. Lombard said it was a good idea. He suggested adding a proposed timeline when for an action is needed by the board and whether it is a time-sensitive item or not.

Ms. Brown said she would get a copy of the document to Ms. Allen.

Mr. Weldon said the documents would be sent to the superintendent's office first, prior to going to the board. He said the timelines could be discussed separately.

Supt. Testani said if the board adopts this as a standard we'll make it work. He said it would cut down on some discussions at meetings. Mr. Weldon said oftentimes oral presenters forget things that they should have mentioned, so the writing will help present all the information.

Mr. Lombard said it could also spark some discussion by the board members focusing in on the summary provided before the meeting.

Supt. Testani displayed a prior version of a board reporting form. Mr. Sokolovic noted a yellow form was used for bylaw and policy changes. He said the board's agenda items are rarely emergency in nature, so the use of the forms should be relatively easy.

Mr. Benejan said the staff does an amazing job and always has a full job. He expressed concern about the time that would be required to create the forms.

Mr. Weldon said a bigger discussion with the superintendent and the staff could be held about the timeline to be used for submitting the forms.

Ms. Brown moved *“to adopt this form with the modification made by Mr. Lombard, with the understanding that its full implementation is contingent on some further discussion about establishing some timelines.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on a contract for absence management and substitute staffing services with Kelly Services, Inc., d/b/a Kelly Education, for the period of July 1, 2021, to June 30, 2024.

Marlene Siegel, chief financial officer, said the item was presented to the Contracts Committee last week. She said there were four bidders in response to the RFP; Kelly Educational Services was ranked number one, and the contract package was developed with them. She added Kelly was the current provider, so the package represents a renewal.

Ms. Siegel said the contract calls for the company to make good-faith efforts to achieve at least a 90 percent fill rate. If 90 percent is not achieved, there are three up-front concessions. Kelly is retaining the 1.31 markup for occasional and building subs in the next three-year cycle and is retaining the markup rates for long-term subs. Kelly will not charge a fee for any substitutes hired by Bridgeport regardless of the period of time.

Ms. Siegel said the minimum wage will rise to \$13 an hour in the state in 2021-22, and so the pay rates for substitutes are

adjusted accordingly and are intended sustain a competitive position in relation to other districts. The occasional sub pay rate will rise from \$90 a day to \$105 a day, which is equivalent to \$16.15 an hour. Building sub rates are ten dollars higher, or \$115 per day, which is the same differential in the current fiscal year.

Ms. Siegel said there are changes in long-term sub rates to strengthen our capacity to recruit and retain long-term subs with excellent qualifications. There are three tiers, depending on the length of tenure of the long-term subs. The highest rate is \$200 at Day 31 and beyond. She said the current top rate of \$180 has been in place for over ten years. If a position were held by a long-term sub for an entire year the cost would be about \$46,058. She noted this was equivalent to entry-level Step 3, without any benefits.

Ms. Siegel said the contract is financed by the plans in the budget plan that account for escalated costs.

Ms. Siegel said we are introducing for the first time next year automatic substitute coverage for pre-K paras in general education classes. The hourly pay rate is \$13.75 per hour. The markup is 1.32 in order to account for additional training provided by Kelly. She said Kelly will maintain two floater paras daily, which is the same arrangement that existed with Delta-T. The district will only be charged if a para is assigned to cover an absence of a pre-K para.

Ms. Siegel said automatic sub coverage is being introduced for one category of special ed para: individual one-to-one. Currently, we do not provide occasional coverage in any special education para category. The hourly rate for an individual one-to-one para is \$18 per hour with a markup of

1.39 for additional training. She said skill set codes will be used to match candidates to students' needs.

Ms. Siegel said the contract indicates if Kelly is not able to fill a long-term absence, the district will have the right to contact Delta-T to provide coverage. Kelly will be the primary sub-para provider in these two categories; Delta-T will be the secondary provider.

Ms. Siegel said there are currently 39 special education one-to-one paraprofessionals; 21 are payroll allocations and 18 are temporary, supplemental covered by subs.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the contract only covered teacher and paraprofessional absences, not other employees.

Mr. Lombard moved *"to approve the contract as presented by the CFO for absence management and substitute staffing services with Kelly Services, Incorporated, d/b/a Kelly Education, for the period of July 1, 2021, to June 30, 2024."* The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on pursuing disposal of U.S. Coast Guard vessel 102595I, the *Catherine Moore*, which is the floating classroom being replaced by a new vessel for the Aquaculture program.

Mr. Weldon said alternatives were discussed at the Contracts Committee, including selling on the open market or selling it to a comparable program. He said the committee recommended the superintendent reach out to the local program to see if they wanted to buy it.

Supt. Testani said time is of the essence because there is a short window of use for boats in the Northeast. It is hoped that proceeds from a sale could be used for upkeep on the new vessel or other aspects of the Aquaculture program.

Mr. Weldon said the committee expressed a wish to allow the sale within 25 percent of the appraised value.

David Henry, director of the Aquaculture program, said he agreed time was of the essence.

Mr. Sokolovic asked why the item was not handled in executive session as real estate deals are. Mr. Weldon said he was told because it is not real estate – it's a piece of equipment – it does not qualify for executive session.

Mr. Weldon said in order to give the public a sense of an order of magnitude the fair market value is between \$200,000 to \$500,000. Supt. Testani noted that is the appraised value, which is not what something would be willing to pay for it. He added the boat was bought with state funds back in the 1990s.

Supt. Testani said another program in the state may wait for the price to go low because they know if it is not sold it will be available for free eventually. The superintendent suggested we try the open market first at the appraised value while boat buyers are out there.

Mr. Henry said his boat captains have suggested brokerage firms could market the boat in a fashion such as an MLS listing. A fee of ten percent was referenced. This would make it visible to potential buyers up and down the East Coast. Mr. Weldon said that may create complications with the city requirements to put services out to bid.

Mr. Weldon noted any sale would come back to the board for final approval.

Supt. Testani suggested indicating to a buyer if an offer is within 20 percent of the appraised value it would establish pretty much a lock on it and it just requires final approval from the board.

Mr. Weldon suggested the superintendent reach out to three brokers and see who has the most advantageous commission.

Mr. Weldon and Mr. Lombard said an offer within 20 percent should be considered acceptable.

Mr. Weldon said everything could be nailed down at the next meeting in two weeks.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:19 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod