

Monday, May 10, 2021

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held May 10, 2021, by video conference call, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:32 p.m. Present were members Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Bobbi Brown, Secretary Joseph Lombard, Albert Benejan, Sosimo Fabian, Sybil Allen, and Joseph Sokolovic.

Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

**PUBLIC COMMENT:**

Dasha Spell, a resident of the West End, spoke on the new Bassick High. She asked what the timeline would be for actually opening the building for students. She said she had been to plenty of board meetings where community stakeholders and parents haven't been heard in regards to the project. She asked if there would be an open townhall meeting.

Tammy Boyle said she was a very active parent in the public schools and said she was here to give accurate information about a dismantlement of Bridgeport Military Academy(BMA) and being combined with the new Bassick High. She said she was totally opposed to this. She said she provided accurate numbers about BMA students to Mr. Benejan and other board members. She said the school's graduation rate showed BMA was one of the highest performing schools. She said there was a waiting list to get into the school, but the appropriate staffing was not being provided by the district.

Albert Benejan said he loves Bassick and BMA, but we cannot have this situation. He said he was sad. He asked why parents, student and staff did not know what was going on with the idea of putting BMA into the new Bassick. He said BMA should be in its own building because it has done amazing work. He added his late niece graduated from BMA and was very proud of the school.

### **APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:**

Ms. Brown moved to adopt the board's minutes of the Regular Meeting of April 26, 2021. The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan and unanimously approved.

### **CHAIR REPORT:**

Mr. Weldon said Patricia Garmella, a retired teacher, passed away recently. She graduated from Harding and later obtained her teaching degree with night courses, while working during the day. In 1971, she began teaching in the district. In 1978, she was one of 1200 district teachers who went on strike and she was incarcerated for two weeks. She taught as an elementary teacher, and was a math and reading specialist, finally retiring from McKinley School as a reading specialist in 1992. The

Mr. Weldon moved that *"on May 14th the district's flags be lowered prior to the opening of school and they remain lowered at half-staff until the end of the school day."* The motion was seconded Dr. Fabian and unanimously approved.

There was a moment of silence for Mrs. Garmella.

Mr. Benejan noted the retirement of district security officer Bengy Labrador after 34 years. He asked for a moment of silence for the passing of Richard Pezzella, who did lot for the schools as a PTSO and PAC leader.

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

Ms. Brown said the Ad Hoc Districtwide Branding Initiative Committee will meet on May 19th.

Dr. Fabian said he hoped to schedule a meeting of the Educational Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Committee for May 19th. He said the diversity numbers he received from the district will pleasantly surprise his colleagues. He said he hoped there would be a discussion on how to define diversity in an already diverse district.

Mr. Weldon said the Facilities Committee met on May 3, and the item on the educational specification for Bassick High was pushed to the full board.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Finance Committee will meet on Wednesday. He encouraged all board members to attend, particularly because of the discussion on the CARES Act funding.

Mr. Weldon said the Governance Committee will meet on June 7th to handle items already on its plate.

Mr. Benejan said the Students and Families Committee will meet on May 20th.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Teaching & Learning Committee met and discussed an upcoming agenda item as well as science curriculum and diversity in the curriculum, along with the

Aquaculture School and the underuse of the great program there by Bridgeport students. There was also a special education report. The next meeting will be on May 17th.

### **SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT:**

Supt. Testani said Mr. Henry has been given a charge to increase the recruitment of Bridgeport students into the wonderful program at the Aquaculture School, especially from Bassick and Harding.

The superintendent said the district applied for a partnership between the state Department of Education and the Teach Rock Foundation, led by the musician and actor Steve Van Zandt, to promote arts for young people. Ms. Robinson submitted a competitive application to the state department and the district was notified today it was chosen as a partnership district.

Supt. Testani said Mathias Lemma, a Blackham School second grader in Ms. Rankin's class, won second place in Connecticut's statistical poster competition for the K-3 division, which includes a monetary award. The poster will be submitted to a national competition.

The superintendent noted a custodian, Adolfo Garcia of Madison School, was featured in a recent *Connecticut Post* article. Mr. Garcia was chosen to be a finalist out of 2200 nominations in a national K-12 custodian award. He was nominated by Ms. Tracy Williams, a second-grade teacher at Madison who noted Mr. Garcia's assistance with her medical issues.

Dr. Fabian thanked the members of the public for presenting their views in public comment, which they expressed in a professional manner.

Supt. Testani said we are in the final stretch of an extremely challenging year. He said he believed mitigation and other strategies have been successful. He said he has encouraged schools and principals to include fun activities at the end of the year. He noted the high school graduations will take place on June 16th at Hartford Healthcare Amphitheatre.

The superintendent said the Bassick prom was cancelled due to a lack of student participation, but there will be a replacement event consisting of a senior picnic during graduation practice.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said there have been discussions around which things have worked and not worked during the Covid pandemic. He said this will be valuable in planning the next reopening of school. Dr. Fabian urged lessons be memorialized for future use because this had been a difficult year and full of good and bad experiences.

In response to a question about the reopening, the superintendent said right now the district is looking at providing no remote option for next school year, but there are some online learning platforms that could be available in extreme situations that would place the onus on the students and families. He said the platforms have similarities to those used in adult education. He said live streaming of classes is no longer going to be an option. He said some students will have been out of classroom learning for 15 months.

In response to a question about the Bassick prom, Dr. Raiola, principal of Bassick, said he was in contact with PTSO president Tammy Boyle about this. It was planned to have a joint prom with BMA at Seaside Park. However, the number of students responding would not justify the costs. He said he and Ms. Soares did extensive communications in advance of the prom to reengage the students and urge them to attend. The cost would have been about \$20.

### **NEW BUSINESS:**

The next item was discussion and possible approval of the social studies curriculum renewal with Actively Learn. Chris Johnson, co-chair of the social studies committee, said the main concept was to create a curriculum that was culturally responsive and relevant and engaging for all students. The approach is thematically rather than chronologically.

Mr. Johnson said the key is to get students to think and read and write like historians, and for this they have to be able to access the curriculum. He said Actively Learn was previously to the board by Dr. Jenkins for ELA. He said Actively Learn will be used to supplement the curriculum the teachers are writing right now.

Mr. Johnson said the platform includes interactive videos, news articles, text to speech, and translation into a hundred different languages. He said material can be differentiated down to any student reading level or language. There is extensive information available to teachers on how students are answering questions.

Mr. Johnson said Actively Learn will be a supplement to the curriculum purchase. The goal is to have students engage in academic debates and academic discussions.

Ms. Brown moved “*to approve the social studies curriculum renewal as presented by Chris Johnson with Actively Learn.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Lombard and unanimously approved.

Dr. Fabian said he was wondering as sees advances in technology what the district’s expectation was to involve librarians in education. The superintendent said he could present something at the next board meeting.

In response to a question about the use of sources on Actively Learn, Mr. Johnson said he believed he was told they try to do their best to meld sources and their staff write the majority of the material, trying to be as unbiased as possible. He said there are units specifically aimed at detecting biases in sources, which is also part of the history curriculum.

Supt. Testani said the committee had done a good job on making the digital resources be a producer of work and not just a word processor or place where you look up an answer. He said this would be an important turning point in the social studies curriculum.

In response to a question, the superintendent said teachers can tell if writings have been plagiarized or not. Mr. Weldon noted there is software that can detect plagiarism which is used at the college level. The superintendent said this was something that could be looked at.

The next agenda item was on a revised educational specification for the new Bassick High School.

Supt. Testani said this was discussed at the

Facilities Committee. He noted two years ago the Bassick High project was signed off on. If the project does not begin by July 23, 2021, the funding for it will die on the vine. He said after a meeting with the office of school construction, the state advised that if the deadline will not be met the district should file a backup plan for a new grant application.

The superintendent said the new application would contain the anticipated change in enrollment that will account for the integration of the Bridgeport Military Academy(BMA) within the building. He said BMA students in the new building will have the opportunity to participate in athletics, clubs, and Bassick programs such as advanced manufacturing and other vocational technical programs. He said students at BMA have often expressed the desire to have access to such things as their school is very different from the usual high school experience.

Supt. Testani said the biggest component in the education specification is the change of the site. The original plan called for the new Bassick to be built on the current Bassick site, but it is now proposed for a location on land purchased from the University of Bridgeport. The project will be raised 18 feet by bringing in fill and a sea wall will be incorporated.

In response to a question, the superintendent said advanced manufacturing will be continue to be a focus of Bassick, along with electrical shop, the building of an aircraft, HVAC, carpentry and auto shop.

Larry Schilling of the city's school construction office said in addition to the ed spec, revised enrollment projections need to be provided to the state, along with potential increased costs. If the legislature approves the fallback application next February, the grant would start again.



Mr. Weldon described the revised education specification more as a fail-safe in the event that construction cannot be up and running in the next two months.

Mr. Sokolovic said rolling BMA into Bassick will have a disparate impact on our Hispanic population. He said the Hispanic population of BMA is 63 percent, whereas the Aerospace percentage is 37 percent, which means we're consolidating one school because it's small yet the other school gets to remain separate.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the parent who sent a recent e-mail did not understand that BMA was not being dismantled at the end of the year. He said BMA did not need to be in a standalone building to be an interdistrict program. Right now, only 9 percent of the students at BMA are from out of district. He said the Aerospace enrollment is not increasing because we cannot exceed the 75/25 percent ratio. He said all the schools at Fairchild Wheeler could all be filled with in-district students if the state will waive the 75-25 ratio for magnet schools. He said, in addition, the suburban students have to be white in order to fulfill the prescribed racial balance.

Mr. Sokolovic said there is a waiting list for students wanting to get into BMA. The superintendent said there are families that apply to multiple schools, so the numbers on a waiting list are not necessarily students committing. He said if the waiting list is that large, why aren't we pulling from it as soon as kids leave? Last year, about 40 students graduated from the school while the size of the class entering 9th grade was over 90. He said it's an Open Choice school, not an interdistrict magnet. He added that every year the enrollment figures from October to June indicate the school loses

students. He said there is not a lack of teachers in BMA; class size in the school is lower than in the comprehensive high schools.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the funding from the Navy for Junior ROTC will follow the program into the new Bassick building. BMA will remain an Open Choice building, and with athletics and other programs in the new state-of-art Bassick it is hoped to attract more students.

In response to a question, the superintendent said if we have to wait until February for an approval, no current BMA students will attend the new Bassick due to the length of the project. He said parents and students considering attending BMA will be provided with information about the new location.

Mr. Weldon suggested that the current students and families at BMA be given information on the project in order to combat misinformation that is floating around and make them feel better. The superintendent said a lot of the planning came out of roundtable discussions with students and their voices were heard loud and clear. He said there needed to be presentation to the Bassick and BMA community on what the building is going to look like and the included programs.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani noted BMA does not have sports team or athletic facilities currently. All the programs at Bassick will be available to BMA students. He said this a win-win situation and this is the one-time shot to make the Bassick building larger.

In response to a question, Supt, Testani said busing students from the current BMA to the new Bassick is not realistic.

In response to a question, the superintendent said he is looking to approve the project again mostly because the site has changed and there is a resilience project apparently going on to take place in the South End in the next 18 months.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said there would be a whole floor available to BMA at the new Bassick, including the ambulance, a simulator, and forensic equipment. He said he understood there were memories and history to BMA, but that was also the case at the old Bassick building. He noted BMA started at Fairchild Wheeler and then moved.

In response to a question, the superintendent said the earliest Bassick and BMA could transition to the new building would be three years, but it could be as many as five years.

Dr. Fabian said we need to demonstrate the requisite amount to sensitivity to the alumni and current students and parents in order to get buy-in.

Mr. Weldon said a lot of the history of Harding was preserved when it was moved, and it should be possible to do the same for Bassick and BMA. He said murals can be reproduced if that becomes necessary.

The superintendent said the architects have incorporated the history of Bridgeport, the West Side, the South End, and Bassick into the design of the new Bassick.

Mr. Lombard suggested giving thought to ensuring BMA's order, structure and discipline not get lost when it's housed in Bassick. Supt. Testani said the focus has to be on maintaining programs. He noted the medical magnet program at Harding dissolved when it was not a priority. He said there is now an attempt to build it up again.

The superintendent said he was trying to combat the idea that the only way to success in Bridgeport is athletics. He said he has told staff and coaches that it is our responsibility to change that narrative.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani there was room in the BMA curriculum for the electives that would be available at the new Bassick. He said BMA students told him they did not have access to elective options.

Dr. Raiola said Bassick and BMA switched to a block schedule and the graduation requirements increased, so there will be opportunities for more electives. He said the airplane at Bassick was perfect for BMA students looking into the Air Force and the construction classes at Bassick would tie into students going into the Army Corps of Engineers.

Ms. Brown said she believed in changing the narrative in the district on Bassick and help parents understand that a certain school is not literally the school-to-prison pipeline.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said BMA and Bassick students will have access to all programs at Goodwin College, which will take over at the UB location. He said Goodwin College and the district school security will be collaborating on safety issues, as well as issues resulting

from the age differences between college and high school students.

Supt. Testani said Dr. Raiola fully welcomed the ability to work with BMA from when the concept was first proposed.

Ms. Allen moved “*to approve the revised educational specification for Bassick High School as presented by the staff.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Brown. The motion was approved by 6-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Brown, Lombard, Sokolovic, Allen, and Fabian Mr. Benejan was in opposition.

Mr. Benejan said he was in opposition because parents, staff and the community did not know about the change in BMA. He said the best interests of the parents are that they have choices other than charter schools.

Mr. Weldon said there was a contentious meeting a week ago. He said he reacted poorly to some remarks that were made about himself, the superintendent and the superintendent’s predecessor. He said if he offended anyone with his demeanor last week, he apologized. He said he should not have let unfair things that were said get to him.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod