

Monday, June 10, 2019

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held June 10, 2019, at Bridgeport Regional Aquaculture Science & Technology Education Center, 60 St. Stephens Road, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:32 p.m.

Present were Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Jessica Martinez, Secretary Joseph Sokolovic, Hernan Illingworth, Sybil Allen, Maria Pereira, Chris Taylor, LaMar Kennedy, and Joseph Lombard.

Supt. Dr. Aresta Johnson was present.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *"to suspend the rules to allow for additional public speaking."* The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez and approved by an 8-1 vote.

Voting in favor were members Pereira, Martinez, Sokolovic, Illingworth, Weldon, Taylor, Allen and Lombard. Mr. Kennedy was opposed.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Maria Pereira said the board decided not to require an 093 certification for the position of interim superintendent. She said she knew this was a pathway to ensure someone unqualified would receive the position. She said Mike Testani has never served as a classroom teacher, principal or assistant superintendent, and does not possess an 093

certification. She said Mr. Testani has the backing of the very corrupt mayor, his chief of staff, former Mayor Fabrizi and the corrupt town committee chair, Mario Testa. She said a state audit caught Mayor Fabrizi stealing \$13 million from our children over a three-year period. She added four corrupt white men are driving the effort to make another white man the interim superintendent of a school district that is 88 percent minority. She said Denise Clemons was either the most or second most qualified applicant, but four white board members voted to deny her an interview. She said the finalists chosen for the position reek of both racism and sexism.

Eric Carlson, a Fairchild Wheeler(FCW) parent, said it was a myth that FCW places a financial burden on Bridgeport. He said the district receives \$16,000 for each out-of-district student in FCW. He said Bridgeport spends \$10,200 per student at FCW, leaving a net gain. He said Bridgeport would lose a tremendous school by cutting there.

Maria Ramos, parent of an 11th grader at Fairchild Wheeler, said she was part of the Make The Road Foundation. She said she had fought for eleven years for a better education for her children. She said she was involved in the fight for more funding for the Board of Education. She requested the board receive public input on how the money is spent and suggested a community forum be held on this subject.

Helen Olga Losak, a Harding graduate and lifelong Bridgeport resident, said the interim superintendent would be paid more than the mayor and serve for a year. She said parents, residents and teachers should hear the finalists' views on public education. She said Supt. Vallas did an incredible amount of damage in a very short time. She said she understood a highly qualified, black, female candidate

was not granted an interview, despite meeting the minimum qualifications. She noted Denise Clemons had served as a teacher, assistant superintendent and a superintendent.

Ms. Martinez said she would like to address the community as a point of privilege. She said as a Puerto Rican woman and a leader in the community who fights for all races and all children that we are all equal and she was tired of people making it a racial thing. She said the board was very diverse.

There was much crosstalk from board members and the audience at this time.

Ms. Martinez said she was tired of the division. She urged uniting and getting things done.

Ms. Pereira said it is against board policy for any board member to comment when the public is commenting.

JoAnn Kennedy quoted scripture and said the board is making life and death decisions for our children. She said it was wrong that certain board members listen to the minority white people from the suburbs instead of the majority people of color in our own community. She objected to a board member stating Fairchild Wheeler is the only valuable magnet school we have. She said it was wrong that a couple of board members think it's okay to push people around physically. She said it was wrong not to consider a homegrown, high qualified person of color for interim superintendent.

Ed Gomes, a former state senator, said Denise Clemons had been a teacher, principal, and superintendent of schools, and she should have been granted an interview. He

said Ms. Clemons is probably more qualified than the five persons that were picked. He said the legislature passed a bill to enhance the recruitment of minorities as teachers and what the board did would not look good in the newspapers. He said, if you say it isn't racist, I don't know what you think it is.

Ralph Ford of Mill Hill Avenue in Bridgeport said he believed his comments would fall on deaf ears on the board. He said a qualified minority was disqualified from being interviewed because the fix is in. He said they've already preselected who's going to get the job. He said even if Ms. Clemons was in the interview process in the end they're going to rule everybody out. He said the board members had been lobbied, talked to, and had made deals. He said the number one thing for politicians is their own self-interest.

Councilman Ernie Newton said Ms. Clemons went to school, became a productive member of society and gave back to the community. He said it was an insult to say she wasn't even worth an interview. He said Ms. Clemons played by the rules, but the rules got changed. He said he hoped that the board would give Ms. Clemons a fair chance. He said he hoped that anyone who voted not to give her chance was not up for reelection.

Councilwoman Eneida Martinez said she was attending her first board meeting in many years because of her dissatisfaction with what the board did with Denise Clemons. She said Ms. Clemons was the principal of Wilbur Cross when her daughter attended, and Ms. Clemons fought for the well being of a child with mental health issues when the superintendent did not want to hear her cries for help. She said it was because of Ms. Clemons that her daughter was able to finish elementary school and high school. She said it

was distasteful that Ms. Clemons, a Bridgeport native, was disqualified. She said Ms. Clemons can relate to the 80 to 85 percent of our students who are black and brown.

Juan Rosario, a resident of Trumbull, said his son is a sophomore at Fairchild Wheeler. He said at a board special meeting parents were exposed to ad hominem attacks, charged with being racists, with exercising white privilege, and for exercising a choice to attend FCW as being a privileged, rich school, which is taking resources away from other Bridgeport schools. He said FCW was not taking funds from other Bridgeport schools. He said the parents and students of FCW currently standing up came from a multitude of backgrounds. He said FCW was 70 percent minority. He said FCW students, who are black, brown, Indian and Asian, are friends of his son and other students. He asked that we be judged on the content of our character, not the color of our skin.

Imani Lopez, a junior from Fairchild Wheeler, said she was concerned about the allegation that everyone at her school was racist and discriminatory, which she said was false. She said we see each other as who we are as people instead of the factors previously stated. She said it was untrue that FCW represented white privilege and is an institution made up of the rich against the poor. She said all people in Bridgeport are not poor and not all people in other towns are rich. She said she did not appreciate being attacked for her character. She said it was horrifying to hear her school lose a beloved vice principal and to be bashed and targeted.

Claire Mastromonaco, a lifelong resident of Bridgeport whose five children have graduated from Central Magnet, said she has worked in fifteen schools in Bridgeport and is a special education teacher at Fairchild Wheeler. She said the

school was amazing, particularly the people inside. She said her students include students from Bridgeport and other towns and most of them rise to the challenge of a difficult curriculum. She said there is not social decay or savage inequalities at Fairchild Wheeler.

Cass Shaw, leader of the Council of Churches of Greater Bridgeport and a member of Faith Acts, said she loved Bridgeport and the passion in this room. She requested the board hold a community forum for selection of the interim superintendent to allow for community input and questions. She said Faith Acts would help in any way to facilitate the community forum.

Jason Ayala, a member of Faith Acts for Education and graduate of Central Magnet High School, said his class at Central Magnet produced lawyers, nurses and business owners like himself. He said he was opposed to the lack of transparency in the process to pick the interim superintendent. He said a community forum was held before Dr. Johnson was selected. He urged the board stop making decisions behind closed doors because the public are the reason why the board members are in their positions.

William McCullough said it was good to see Dr. Johnson. He asked the Faith Acts members present to stand up. He said the school board is designed as a democratic body that represents its local citizens and should listen to parents. He said Faith Acts demands that the board host an open community forum for the public to ask questions of the five finalist candidates for interim superintendent. He said the five days the board allocated to select from the applicants was not adequate. He said Faith Acts turned out over 800 people to the polls in the last election.

Ondrea Moore, a parent of a Fairchild Wheeler student, said racism was defined as prejudice, discrimination, antagonizing against someone of a different race. She said FCW is not a racist school and she was hurt to hear that. She said although there may be more white children than any other race, the students have the option to attending the school. She said when a board member asks for a urine test from a member of the City Council that is antagonizing. She said when the PTSO at Bassick got rid of an administrator that was racism.

Mary Platero, a Bridgeport taxpayer and lifelong resident, said she was glad she missed the last meeting. She said she did not consider it a race issue. She said it was a lie to say money that should go to other Bridgeport schools was being given to FCW, since the school was generating income for Bridgeport. She said 70 percent of FCW students were minorities. She said she was proud to live in Bridgeport and proud of the school. She said her nephews were intimidated at the last meeting and blocked from leaving by an adult man who referenced white privilege.

Patricia Roberts said Fairchild Wheeler parents, teachers and students felt intimidated and bullied at the last meeting. She said she was told that a board member indicated privileged white suburban students are trying to take money away from Bridgeport children. She said the chair lost control of the meeting when an angry mob incited racial hostility, which required the intervention of a police officer. She said when she attempted to leave she was blocked from leaving and was told she should go back to Westport. She objected to the fifteen references to white people at the meeting and references to institutional racism and privilege. She asked the chair to consider removing the two board members that created a sense of distrust and fear.

Maria Aljoburi said board members attacked Fairchild Wheeler at the finance meeting and ignored the parents who were there to fight for resources for their school. She said this was beneath the board's code of ethics. She said everyone deserved respect. She added she called many people in the state to get more money for Bridgeport schools. She said when you resort to hate, division and bias, then you become part of the problem. She said a lot of people will believe the lies that were told.

Carlotta Allen objected to not granting an interview to Denise Clemons. She said Ms. Clemons was educated in Bridgeport and worked her way up from being a teacher. She said it was a disgrace that we don't stand by our people. She added a strong superintendent was needed to fill Dr. Johnson's shoes and to improve the schools. She said if students are not educated they will not be able to get the jobs that will come to Bridgeport.

Madelyn Medina, a Bridgeport resident and an alum of Fairchild Wheeler, said she was appalled when she watched the live stream of last week's meeting and heard how the school was talked about as being all about the white people. She said her friend group consisted of people from diverse ethnic backgrounds who lived in various local towns. She said in the school no one sees your race or what town you're from. She said it was not true that all the awards won by FCW students were by suburban students because she won an award for her Capstone project.

Fernando Echevarri said as Americans we have been through worse and fought wars in various places. He said we should not fight amongst ourselves. He said he stayed in Bridgeport because he wants his children to be color-blind.

He said we should be united and be examples to our kids. He said God created everyone equal. He said we should go to the mayor and City Council and ask for money in a united fashion.

Mr. Sokolovic said we all are family and as the Bridgeport Public Schools we have \$11 million to cut and unfortunately Fairchild Wheeler should share in those cuts.

Mack Bogues said Mr. Sokolovic and Ms. Pereira started inciting racism at the June 5th meeting. He jokingly said he was one of the white privilege that are talked about from suburbia. He said the board should attend the Multicultural Night at Fairchild Wheeler. He said his son could have attended Notre Dame on scholarship, but after a tour with Assistant Principal Furnari he decided to attend FCW. He said there was no such thing as white privilege at FCW.

Victoria Echeverri, a parent of a Fairchild Wheeler student, said we have feelings and emotions that we have to control when kids are involved. She said all we're asking for is more money for our kids from the city and the state. She said she apologized for all the crazy things she's seen tonight. She said a lot of prayer was needed.

Eddie Santiago said he described his coaching as a high-risk coaching because the children are at the age where they could go in two different directions. He said he believed coaches were saving lives from guns and gangs by sports. He said there is a war going on right now in the East End in the streets. He said if \$250,000 is cut from the athletic budget you might as well put the guns in their hands because you're killing them. He said the Harding sports program has earned over \$1 million in scholarship money. He said he had to spend \$220 out of his pocket to cover a

spring practice because there was nothing left in the athletic budget. He said he was told the board authorized spending \$3,500 for the Bridgeport Chargers from Harding's gate receipts. He said he and his coaches had fund-raised to buy football equipment for the Harding team.

Xavier Reid, a Harding student-athlete, said he wakes up every day in adversity with a war outside. He said school and sports keeps him off the streets. He said he thanked God for the coaches and teachers he has.

Jason Poppa said it was heart-breaking to hear about the cuts being discussed and everyone was fighting over crumbs. He said last week Mayor Ganim offered \$100 million in tax money to a casino. He said this kind of money should be given to the schools. He said the budget crisis was manufactured, but the politicians in the city and governor don't factor poor and mostly students of color into their budget calculations. He said schools crumbled while the governor refused to pass additional taxes on the top one percent.

Rob Traber said he was a parent activist in the 1990s and became a teacher in 2001. He said he had fought for fifty years in the state for the children of the cities. He said all children deserve an opportunity to succeed, but they don't get it. He said white privilege was real in our society. There are suburban communities that spend more money and provide higher quality education and our children get less, when our children arguably need more. He said the inequitable distribution has not been fixed. He said he agreed with what Mr. Lombard said last week: Take it back to the City Council and put it on them.

Dasha Spell, a Bridgeport parent and graduate of the

Bridgeport school system, said she was a business owner and a property owner who was invested in Bridgeport. She said she researches things and presents factual information. She said our kids have not been given the opportunity to succeed due to the absence of art, home economics and shop. She said it was time for change and to make decisions that are best for the children of Bridgeport. She urged parents to come out and demand more money at the City Council. She announced she was running for the board in the 2019 election.

Troy Rainey, a football player at Harding, said he had five Division I offers from schools around the nation. He said since playing for Harding he has been through three major budget cuts. He said the coaches and parents have done fund-raising to help the community. He said he puts in work every day at football and homework. He said without football he would not be going to college.

Tammy Bogdanyi said a year ago she stood before the board speaking on behalf of athletics. She said the kids in Bridgeport need the outlet of sports. If sports are cut, she said, you might as well take that money and build another cemetery and more caskets. She added she was the co-chair of the 47th annual Parent Convention. She thanked Mr. Weldon for coming out to the convention, but said she was disappointed that no other board members attended. She said she did a lot of work for the convention behind the scenes previously done by board employees such as Ms. Pavlich and home-school coordinators. She objected to a proposed \$9,000 cut for the Parent Convention.

Marcelin Joseph, a graduate of Wilbur Cross, Central High, and Southern Connecticut State University, said his success was due to Ms. Denise Clemons when she was the principal

of Cross School. He said Ms. Clemons greatly assisted him when he was bullied at school and counseled him on how to deal with difficulties. He said to hear Ms. Clemons was not even getting an interview was wrong.

Ms. Pereira moved *“to add to the agenda a discussion and possible action to add Candidate #4, Denise Graham Clemons, to be interviewed tomorrow night as an interim superintendent candidate.”* Mr. Taylor seconded the motion.

Mr. Taylor said he met with Ms. Clemons and Dr. Ralph Ford for 90 minutes and then had an hour phone conversation with Dr. Carolyn Nah. He said the reason Ms. Clemons did not receive an interview was Gary Peluchette from the teachers’ union distributed negative information about her to board members. Ms. Martinez said Mr. Peluchette didn’t speak to her.

Mr. Taylor said Ms. Clemons deserved an interview. He said Mr. Traber would have never done this as union president. He said they ambushed the community and the board.

Mr. Taylor moved the question. The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez.

The vote on the motion was 5-4 in favor, but failed to gain a two-thirds majority. Voting in favor were members Kennedy, Taylor, Allen, Martinez and Lombard. Voting in opposition were members Illingworth, Pereira, Sokolovic, and Weldon.

Ms. Pereira said Ms. Clemons was born and raised in Bridgeport, graduated from Harding High, and is the only finalist who lives in Bridgeport today and is a taxpayer. She said she is a teacher who understands curriculum, instruction and pedagogy, and has served as an assistant

superintendent, has an 093 certification, and been a superintendent in Connecticut and Massachusetts.

Ms. Pereira said she was troubled that of the five finalists four are men and the individuals who voted not to grant Ms. Clemons an interview were four white men. She said to say she was not worthy of an interview was suspect.

Mr. Sokolovic said when he studied the resumes before the interviews he did not know the race of the candidates and went through them in a colorblind fashion.

Mr. Lombard said he had no idea of the race of any of the candidates. He said it was ridiculous, racist and race-baiting to say that board members voted on the color of the applicants.

The motion to add the item to the agenda was approved by an 8-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Allen, Illingworth, Lombard, Kennedy, Martinez, Weldon, Pereira, and Taylor. Mr. Sokolovic was opposed.

Ms. Pereira moved *“to grant Denise Graham Clemons, Candidate number 4, an opportunity to be interviewed as an interim superintendent candidate.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Lombard.

Mr. Sokolovic said he was troubled that the board was reversing a decision, particularly since other candidates were rejected and it was not fair to reconsider just one.

The motion was approved by a 5-4 vote.

Voting in favor were members Allen, Lombard, Kennedy, Pereira and Taylor. Voting in opposition were members

Illingworth, Martinez, Sokolovic, and Weldon.

Mr. Sokolovic said the motion did not receive a two-thirds motion. Ms. Pereira said a motion to reconsider or a motion to rescind requires a two-thirds majority unless it's advanced on the agenda. She said this was a totally separate vote that was not rescinding any previous action because Mr. Weldon's motion of last week offered an interview to five candidates.

Ms. Pereira moved *"to add to the agenda a discussion and possible action to hold a community forum with the interim superintendent candidates prior to selecting an interim superintendent."* The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic.

Ms. Pereira described the proposed format of the community forum.

The motion to add the item to the agenda was unanimously approved.

There was further discussion of the forum. Ms. Pereira said a neutral party, not the board, should run the event and ask the questions submitted by the public on index cards.

Ms. Pereira said this interim superintendent would be here for an entire school year.

Ms. Martinez said she supported community input, but she also wanted organization, peace and unity. She suggested Faith Acts or the League of Women Voters organize the forum.

Mr. Illingworth said he had no problem with the forum, but

such an event had never been held for an interim superintendent.

Mr. Weldon said we are the only district that solicits interim superintendents and lets people know who the candidates are and keeps the public engaged. He said to imply we're trying to keep people shut out is completely untrue.

Mr. Sokolovic said something had gone a little awry in the process and noted candidates for the position of interim superintendent may not contact any committee member for the job or it is grounds for automatic dismissal.

Mr. Taylor said he met with Ms. Clemons on several occasions a month or so before the position was posted and she was well qualified.

Ms. Pereira asked that public comment be allowed after hearing from the candidates.

Mr. Weldon said the motion was to hold a community forum to allow members of the public to ask questions of the finalist candidates that are being considered.

The motion to hold the public forum was approved by an 8-1 vote.

Voting in favor were members Weldon, Sokolovic, Pereira, Illingworth, Lombard, Kennedy, Martinez, Allen. Voting in opposition was Mr. Taylor.

Mr. Taylor said as a point of personal privilege that we don't need to vote on a budget and do this to the children of Bridgeport. He said we don't have to pass a budget. He said the legal advice given by a member that said the board

members would be fiscally responsible was incorrect. He said the city delivered Ned Lamont to the governor's mansion. He said we should run in a deficit so as not to punish the children.

Mr. Taylor left the meeting.

CHAIR REPORT:

Mr. Weldon said caps and gowns are here for the board members who would like to attend the graduation ceremonies next week.

APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:

Ms. Allen moved to approve the minutes of the Special Meeting of May 20, 2019. The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez and unanimously approved.

COMMITTEE REPORTS/REFERRALS:

Ms. Pereira said the board's goals and objectives of January 2019 called for the committee chairs to report tonight on how their committee's work is tied to the pillars of the strategic plan.

Mr. Weldon said he did not have a year-end report.

Mr. Illingworth reported on the Facilities Committee. He said he was still waiting to hear back from stakeholders on the date for a meeting on the safety plan for Bassick High when they move to their temporary location in the former Harding High.

Ms. Martinez said the lights in the parking at the Aquaculture

School were not working. She asked the committee to look at it.

Ms. Martinez reported on the Finance Committee.

She moved that Item C in New Business be moved up to her finance report. The item was consideration and possible approval of strategies to close the 2019-20 budget gap.

Ms. Martinez said there would not be a meeting this Wednesday, but the board would have a Special Meeting on Thursday.

Ms. Pereira said she was confused by the motion.

Ms. Martinez moved *“to remove the item C in New Business and move that until Thursday night’s budget proposal gap plan meeting.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

Ms. Martinez left the meeting.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Teaching & Learning Committee would meet again on Monday.

Mr. Weldon said the Personnel Committee would meet next week to interview for director of Central Magnet and principal of Barnum School.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Students & Families Committee will meet this Friday due to scheduling conflicts.

Ms. Pereira said the board asked the staff to provide really important information on expulsion and suspensions by race and gender by school and the information has not been

obtained. She said no committee has looked at that critical data. She said the Males of Color meeting should look at the data and flag disproportionate results.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Ad Hoc Committee Great City Schools/Males of Color held a community forum on last Thursday, which was awesome and successful. He said the breakout session he went to was well done. He said he looked forward to taking the information gathered and incorporating it into professional development. He said the committee would meet tomorrow.

Ms. Pereira said the speaker at the forum was amazing and people were fully engaged in the breakout session she participated in. She said she wished other board members had attended.

SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORTS/AGENDA:

Dr. Johnson said the District at a Glance was included in the board members' packets.

Dr. Johnson said the honorees in the bullying prevention contest winners were here earlier, but departed due to the late hour. She said the first place winners received a \$100 gift certificate and the second place winners received a \$50 gift certificate. Contributors to the gift certificates, in addition to herself, were Dee Young, director of social work; Leticia Howard, a BMA guidance counselor; and Assistant Superintendent Janet Brown-Clayton.

Ms. Brown-Clayton said there were 375 entries across the district.

Dr. Johnson said she wanted to clarify an adjustment to the

2018-19 school year calendar. The last day of school will be June 18 except at Thomas Hooker. Hooker was closed earlier this year due to a water leak and they will go until June 21st, with the last three days being half-day sessions.

Ms. Pereira moved *“to approve the extended days at Thomas Hooker School be half days, June 19, June 20 and June 21st.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

Dr. Johnson then addressed the 2019-20 school calendar. She said students return on August 29th for a half day. She asked the board to approve August 30th to also be a half day. She said the recommendation comes from the professional development and evaluation committee.

Ms. Pereira moved *“to make Friday, August 30, 2019, a half day in order to provide professional development.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Kennedy and unanimously approved.

Ms. Brown-Clayton said the first place winner of the anti-bullying poster contest was Gabriella Zint. The poster was displayed on the screen in the room. Second place winner was Tahmina Emu from Central High. The first place elementary winner was Kimberly Jenkins. The second place in this category was Angelina Figueroa from Curiale School.

Dr Johnson said the posters will be part of the bullying prevention work for the 2019-20 school year.

Mr. Illingworth left the meeting.

NEW BUSINESS:

The first item was the price quotation for the SAT testing. Mr. Sokolovic said the College Board is the only provider of the SAT. The proposal is to have the 11th and 12th graders in the district take the exam. He said the \$39,000 price represents a substantial discount to the district. He said giving the students the opportunity to take the test twice will put them on a more even footing with their suburban peers.

Ms. Allen moved *“to accept the quote.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Pereira and unanimously approved.

The next item was consideration and possible action of the Harding High School Early Learning contract extension with Action for Bridgeport Community Development, Inc., inclusive of a summer school program.

Mr. Sokolovic said this came out of the Teaching & Learning Committee. He said it was the same contract we looked at before with the addition of a summer school component. He said the program costs the district nothing and gives school-aged parents access to child care so they don't have to drop out of school.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *“to approve the Harding High School Early Learning contract extension with Action for Bridgeport Community Development, Incorporated, inclusive of a new summer school program.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said the extension was for an additional two years and the dates would be reflected in the contract.

The motion was unanimously approved.

Dr. Johnson said she received a call from Ms. Claire Gold, who wanted to let everyone know she was alive and well. She said Ms. Gold had an instrumental part in creating Fairchild Wheeler and Discovery Magnet School.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 9:16 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod