

Monday, August 27, 2018

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE  
BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held August 27,  
2018, at Bridgeport Regional Aquaculture Science &  
Technology Education Center, 60 St. Stephens Road,  
Bridgeport, Connecticut

The meeting was called to order at 6:31 p.m.

Present were Chair John Weldon, Vice President Hernan Illingworth, Secretary Jessica Martinez, Dennis Bradley, Joseph Sokolovic, Chris Taylor, Sybil Allen, Maria Pereira and Ben Walker.

Supt. Aresta L. Johnson, Ed.D., was present.

Mr. Weldon asked for a moment for the passing of Mr. Planas, the father of Dr. Luis Planas and Dr. Tito Planas.

**PUBLIC COMMENT:**

Gail Janensch, a Bridgeport voter and resident, urged the superintendent and the board to direct more school involvement in the voter registration and education process in September and October. She said we have a unique moment in time. She said the Fairfield County Community Foundation gave a number of organizations such as the League of Women Voters, the Burroughs Center, Bridgeport Generation Now, and Make the Road in Bridgeport a total of \$20,000 to become an army to target low-voter turnout areas of the city. She said people who have been elected pay attention to people that vote.

Robert Halstead urged the board get involved in gardening education for children in schools. He said a lot of immigrants have an agricultural heritage. He said the Green Village Initiative put a lot of gardens in Bridgeport schools, however, it did not work out too well and they are now overgrown. He said in the past the special education students at Bassick would work in their school's garden.

Crystal Aguirre, a 2018 graduate of Harding High, of Make the Road Connecticut said the campaign Walking Towards a Brighter Future is mainly about the sidewalks that students take when they walk to school. She said she has walked to school since 5th grade. She said while walking to school she was harassed every other day and it was very scary in the early morning when it was dark. She said she wanted the experience for the next generation of students to be better.

Morgan Gonzalez, an incoming Central High freshman, of Make the Road said she is fortunate that she has a very short walk to school, but others might have to walk an hour or more. She said students can have anxiety and depression that will slow them down. She said she had days when it was impossible to go to school.

Crystal Mack said she hoped the board listened to the young people tonight. She said she dealt with the exact same situation 28 years ago. She pointed to dangers in the community and the children and adults living in fear. She said we lost a wonderful principal at Bassick High. She added students were going to school on contaminated grounds.

## **APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:**

Ms. Pereira moved approval of the minutes of the Regular Meeting of June 25, 2018, with edits. The motion was seconded by Mr. Bradley. Corrections were noted.

The motion was approved by an 8-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Pereira, Walker, Sokolovic, Allen, Bradley, Weldon, Martinez and Illingworth. Mr. Taylor abstained.

### **CHAIR REPORT:**

Mr. Weldon thanked Dr. Johnson for a beautiful ribbon-cutting ceremony at Harding High. He said he knows there's a lot involved to make it come off smoothly.

### **COMMITTEE REPORTS AND REFERRALS:**

Mr. Taylor reported on the Facilities Committee. He said he liked what Mr. Halstead said about the gardens and what Ms. Janensch said about the voter participation, and he would lend his hand to either one.

Mr. Taylor said the new Harding is absolutely gorgeous but he wondered whether there was an \$750,000 endowment that was needed to have the facilities department maintain it. He said the building would chew up the facilities department.

Mr. Taylor said Dr. Otuwa requested an agenda item for permission to plant a tree at Fairchild Wheeler.

Ms. Pereira said in April of 2018 she referred an agenda item on a permanent location for Classical Studies. She said the board had not accomplished one thing in helping the school get into one building. She noted the board had a high school that will be empty for at least two years.

Ms. Pereira said that at the last board meeting Mr. Sokolovic referred an item on school security and confiscation of food and drinks in security lines.

Ms. Martinez said there was nothing to report on the Finance Committee.

Ms. Pereira referred to the Finance Committee an item regarding the city Labor Department's actions which may force the board to pay money for the five SROs previously eliminated by the board. She noted Dr. Johnson sent the board an e-mail on this item.

Mr. Bradley said he would also refer an item to the Finance Committee around busing concerns.

Ms. Pereira referred an item to the Governance Committee regarding setting the superintendent's evaluation. She said this was needed because the superintendent received her evaluation this year in a tardy fashion.

Mr. Walker reported on the Teaching & Learning Committee. The next meeting will be on September 18th.

Ms. Pereira referred an item to the committee to develop a policies for the early learning center at Harding.

Mr. Illingworth reported on the Personnel Committee. He said the committee will meet tomorrow to interview candidates for Harding High principal.

Ms. Pereira said she hoped the committee would pick up its discussion on hiring policies. Mr. Illingworth said he will talk to Mr. Chester about the proposed changes.

Ms. Pereira asked the board be provided with a comparison between 2016-17 and 2017-18 regarding certified and non-certified staff turnover. She said she was hoping to see there was a decline in turnover.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Students and Families Committee would meet on Thursday.

Mr. Illingworth said he does listen to the concerns expressed by Make the Road. He said he would like to have an open dialogue with the group during a committee meeting. Mr. Sokolovic said it would be a slippery slope to include a group in an agenda item, but he would recognize anyone wishing to speak on an item.

### **SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT AND AGENDA:**

Mr. Weldon said Dr. Johnson requested Item IX be tabled. Ms. Pereira moved to table IX on the superintendent's report. The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen and unanimously approved.

Dr. Johnson said BCAS negotiations are underway with the next meeting scheduled for tomorrow.

Dr. Johnson said the district welcomed about 125 new teachers at Johnson School. She added that teachers returned to school today and the students begin on August 30th.

Dr. Johnson said there was a great ribbon-cutting ceremony for Harding High last week. On Friday there will be a ribbon-cutting at Central High.

Dr. Johnson said there are currently 31 vacancies; 21 of

which are filled by long-term subs, many of whom have pending certifications. There are two science vacancies and only three math vacancies.

Dr. Johnson said the IT department did a great job in streaming the convocation today.

Ms. Pereira moved to approve items IV, V, VI, VII, X and XI on the consent agenda. The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez and unanimously approved.

Ms. Pereira said she wanted to talk about the agenda item on administrative reassignments and Angela Garafalo at the Bridgeport Learning Center(BLC). She said Ms. Garafalo was the interim supervisor for BLC. She said she board interviewed applicants and felt another candidate should be selected.

Ms. Pereira said because of bumping rights as a result of eliminated positions the person the board felt was most qualified to run BLC has been bumped out of the position and the person the board felt should not be selected has taken the position.

Ms. Pereira said this issue should be addressed in the BCAS negotiations. Mr. Taylor said charter schools are looking better and better.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said the personnel in Item I pretty much were due to bumping rights. She said the supervisor of the BLC was the least senior position in the district. She said this was the domino effect from the removal of special education supervisors.

Ms. Pereira moved to approve Item I. The motion was

seconded by Mr. Walker and approved by an 8-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Walker, Sokolovic, Pereira, Allen, Bradley, Illingworth, Martinez and Weldon. Mr. Taylor abstained.

Mr. Taylor addressed Item II. He said the board just solved a budget crisis from April to June. He said he would like to have seen the salary amounts in the item totaled. He added he sees a lot of inequities such as a gym teacher at Bassick making \$75,819, which is more than a special education teacher. He said there are some astronomical salaries such as Rita Doherty, a traveling psychologist, for \$93,000. He said he heard all day long from constituents she is Judge Doherty's wife. He added he did not have any cases pending in front of Judge Doherty. He said he would like to go through each position one by one and come to a different equation.

Mr. Taylor said it is a discredit to the board and its fiscal competency to just blindly approve this.

Mr. Walker said the BEA contract has criteria to determine a teacher's salary; it is not arbitrary and includes what step the teacher is on. He noted the gym teacher was on step 12, pretty close to the top of the salary scale, and has a six-year certificate. He said the agenda includes the education level of the teacher. He said in all essence all teachers make the same amount with variations based on experience and education level.

Mr. Walker noted the positions being filled were positions already in the district that were vacated; when the budget was set the positions were factored in.

Mr. Walker said number 38 is on step 9 and has a sixth-year

degree, but is a part-time teacher only working 6/10ths of a full-time equivalent.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said Ms. Doherty was retired and is paid a full salary, not per diem. She asked Frank Chester, chief talent officer, and John DiDonato, specialized education reform director, to present the matter to the board.

Ms. Allen said the employee would be losing part of her pension unless she is being paid per diem. She said she did not agree with paying per diem.

Mr. Taylor said what's concerning as a fiscally responsible board member is why we would do new hires at higher levels when we're an underfunded district. He questioned whether the most expensive gym teacher was needed at Bassick.

Mr. Taylor said the hiring process is horrible, with none of the jobs being posted on Monster, Indeed or in the paper. He said he did not know what was going on in HR. He said it seems the inner office is saying they're going to hire whoever they want when maybe a teacher at step 1 or 2 could suffice. He said it was disheartening to those bumped or lost their jobs and then, two days before school starts, this gets dropped in our lap with 61 people and a lot of money.

Mr. Chester said it takes money to post jobs on Monster, which the district does not have.

Mr. Chester said regarding the person hired in number 21, the job was posted and there was only one candidate, who was out of state and not interested in the position. He said it was a psychologist position with an additional challenge of being bilingual, and there are very few such candidates



available. He said all of the local university and college psychologist training programs have zero pending candidates in their program. He said we have been battling to keep from losing what we had.

In response to a question, Mr. DiDonato said he was advised by Marlene Siegel that as a Priority school district we may pay her a salary, not per diem. Ms. Siegel said a retiree returning to a Priority district can work for two years at a maximum salary, which she said was a state requirement. She said after two years, if the retiree returns, they can only earn 45 percent of their salary.

In response to a question, Mr. Chester said his number one job is to try and find the best qualified person to fulfill the needs of the district at the lowest cost without sacrificing quality of instruction.

Ms Pereira said she is against hiring retirees, but many people here supported Fran Rabinowitz, who was collecting a pension and ended up being here for two and a half years. She noted the board members received an explanation as to why hires have their salary.

Ms. Pereira said it is not about hiring the cheapest person, but the most qualified person who will deliver the best level of services to our children.

In response to a question, Mr. Chester said psychologists are a shortage area. Ms. Pereira said the law was changed because the Priority or urban districts have the hardest time filling vacancies.

Ms. Pereira said seniority is often correlated to age and she urged the board be careful what we're saying here so as not

to be interpreted as engaging in age discrimination.

Mr. Illingworth said he agreed with the comments being made and if this were a well-funded district the best qualified teachers should be hired. He said we also have to be practical. He asked if the person in position number 38 could fill the position of number 21. Ms. Siegel said the .6 position is part of the districtwide allocation.

Mr. Illingworth said we have to face the reality of our budget constraints and there will have to be talk in the spring about making cuts again. He urged the district to move cautiously.

Mr. Taylor said we just had a debate about a well-qualified person, Angela Garafalo, where the best person got knocked out of the box. He said he loved Mr. Chester to death but he thought Mr. Chester was the weak link in human resources.

Mr. Weldon said we can't be doing this. Mr. Taylor said we have plenty of money and it never makes it to the classroom because they do foolish decisions two days before school starts. He said if they gave us \$500 million, you guys would be broke next year.

Mr. Weldon said we can't be doing this because these people work for us.

Mr. Taylor said jobs are listed on Monster.com or Craigslist. He asked what human resources does.

Mr. Weldon said he appreciates the frustration, but berating our staff is not good. Mr. Taylor said he was not berating him and he loves the guy. Mr. Weldon said this was not the forum for that.

Ms. Pereira said all jobs are posted on AppliTrack and CTREAP. Mr. Taylor asked why Ms. Pereira doesn't run human resources. Ms. Pereira said she was not qualified to run human resources.

Ms. Pereira said we're talking about 1600 certified staff members. She noted she supported the hiring of Dr. Rosa at Black Rock School at an exorbitant salary because it was important that those students have a qualified math teacher.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said Dr. Rosa's employment ended on June 30th.

Ms. Pereira said she was always going to err on the side of what's best for students. She said if this is the only bilingual psychologist who applied and they are needed, the vacancy should be filled.

Mr. Bradley moved to table the hiring of Ms. Doherty. He said she might be the best qualified candidate, but there should be more due diligence to see if the expense was necessary. He noted she represented a heavy tax burden on a state and a city that is strapped.

Mr. Illingworth seconded the motion.

Dr. Johnson said the district is mandated by law regarding support services for students with IEPs. Mr. DiDonato said of the district's 21,000 students about 3,700 students are non-English speaking, which means those students at any time can be referred for an assessment, which is not optional and is covered under both special education legislation and the Office of Civil Rights.

Mr. DiDonato said Bridgeport was in competition with other

school districts. Two bilingual school psychologists were lost to other districts. A current bilingual psychologist is being courted by Norwalk and being offered about \$20,000 more in salary. He said if the position is not filled there will be cases that the district will miss compliance timelines on in the assessment non-English-speaking students.

Mr. Bradley said as a person of Hispanic origin who is bilingual he is oftentimes confronted with communication issues in courts. He said courts hire interpreters and noted Spanish is a common language in the United States. He said we are going to be back here in less than a year with the same story that our district is strapped for cash. He said we need to tighten our belts now and this is a luxury item we can't afford.

Mr. Taylor said he respected Mr. DiDonato, but he has the same tune every time. He said he heard the same tune with Kevin Muhammed and The University School. He said with Mr. DiDonato we always seem to operate from catastrophe to catastrophe. He said he was getting tired of the same story. He said he apologized to Mr. DiDonato and Mr. Chester but Bridgeport will not be a great city until the board is functioning properly.

Ms. Pereira said pensions are not received at the full rate of salaries. She said Mr. Bradley stood up for the fact that Ms. Rabinowitz was getting a salary and a huge pension from the taxpayers.

Ms. Pereira commended Mr. DiDonato for inheriting a disaster in special education, including lawsuits and arbitration, and doing an amazing job. She said Mr. Chester has the worst job in the district, recruiting people while paying significantly less than all neighboring towns.

Ms. Pereira said the psychologist would have to go into Spanish-speaking classrooms and conduct assessments of children. She said it is not just a matter of translation, but the work of a licensed psychologist.

Mr. Illingworth said he agreed with Ms. Pereira's comments about Mr. DiDonato, but this has nothing do with that. Mr. DiDonato said there are seven bilingual school psychologists, who deploy to other schools when needed. He said Ms. Doherty will serve in the Spanish-assessment program.

Mr. Illingworth said he really appreciated Mr. Chester and the mess he inherited. He said he was told Southern Connecticut State University's master's program is full and very competitive due to the number of students. He suggested putting the brakes on this and seeing if we can re-post the position with some extra outreach.

Mr. Chester said there were no bilingual candidates available from universities.

Mr. Walker said the discussion in the Finance Committee over the past three years has always been to keep cuts away from the classroom. He said here we're talking about cutting the classroom. He said people did not understand how important it is to have the absolute best person in front of children.

Mr. Walker said the budget crisis would not be solved by micromanaging on one employee. He said the superintendent is the board's only employee. He said the employee in question supervises some of our most delicate and fragile students.

Mr. Walker said the salaries of teachers are set by contract. He said the state mandates teachers to have a master's degree after a certain number of years in order to stay employed. He said this is absolutely not where to cut the budget.

In response to a question whether Ms. Doherty was hired because her husband is a Superior Court judge, Mr. Chester said he did not know that and it was of no interest to him. Mr. DiDonato said he was not involved in the selection process, but was here to defend the need for a bilingual school psychologist to meet the caseload.

Mr. Illingworth said often the district loses a certified teacher and they are replaced with any old substitute to save money. He asked why it is good to do that, but in this case we have to hire a highly paid teacher.

Ms. Pereira said it is hard to find certified staff in the middle of the school year. She said she can understand the use of long-term subs in April, May and June.

Ms. Pereira said Ms. Siegel watches every penny spent by the board. She asked Ms. Siegel how the new hires have affected the budget.

Ms. Siegel said she works in partnership with the HR department. She said she reviews every request for a salary that is higher than Step 5 out of a 15-step scale. She noted the salaries are determined based on experience and in shortage areas there is latitude to go one or two steps above.

Ms. Siegel said the budget plan includes turnover savings,

which has been discussed in every year she has been in the district. The turnover savings result from replacing a retired teacher at a higher pay rate with a teacher with less experience. She said we are on track to our meet our turnover savings. She said she reviews requests to hire employees at high step rates.

Ms. Siegel said there are many risks in managing the budget and at the moment she is optimistic that we will stay balanced. She said the risk factors include the pending unknown allocations for federal grants.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said she personally reviewed this request to hire and approved it because of all the factors that have been discussed. She said when a retiree is approved at a high step it is expected that future hires will be at the lower end of the salary scale so the average will be within the target range.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said funds are set aside to operate human resources. Mr. Taylor said Ms. Siegel was not providing a straight answer. Mr. Weldon said we can't treat our employees this way.

Ms. Siegel said funds in Title IIA cover recruitment of new staff. She said the HR department prepares a plan for recruitment for the superintendent, which has to be in alignment with the allocated funds. She estimated there was between \$30,000 to \$40,000 available in Title IIA. Mr. Taylor said he would like to get a copy of that.

Ms. Martinez said she refused to take part in disrespecting staff and one another. She urged the item be approved.

Ms. Pereira moved *"to amend the motion to approve all of*

*Roman numeral II.*" The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez.

The motion was approved by a 6 -3 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Martinez, Walker, Sokolovic, Allen and Pereira. Opposed were members Illingworth, Bradley and Taylor.

Ms. Pereira said Item III contained two people who moved from assistant principal to guidance counselor and math teacher positions. Dr. Johnson said that was due to bumping caused by the elimination of positions. She said the two assistant principals were among the least senior members of BCAS.

Ms. Pereira moved to approve Item III. The motion was seconded by Mr. Walker.

The motion was approved by an 8-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Allen, Bradley, Illingworth, Weldon, Martinez, Walker, Pereira and Sokolovic. Mr. Taylor abstained.

Regarding Item VIII, Mr. Illingworth said he was fully aware of the understaffing of the HR department, but he said he was struggling with the \$80,000 figure proposed.

Mr. Chester said he had been in HR for close to 40 years and there is very little in how you go about recruiting that he has not personally experienced. He said posting on Monster and some other places are considered passive recruiting and rarely result in the quality of the person you're looking to hire.

Mr. Chester said he had been in his role for less than a year. He said one position was eliminated and then another



person left. In the middle of the year, another person retired. He said the department was running very lean. He said having an HR department with less than five employees is very challenging in a district with 21,000 students.

Mr. Chester said he talked to a lot of people before bringing forward a candidate. He said the person selected was brought in at a reasonable cost and for a lower salary than she was earning elsewhere.

In response to a question, Mr. Chester said the position handles all the certificated employees, all of the FMLA and the required tracking of data and reports to the state. He said the candidate was attractive because of 14 to 15 years of HR experience and HRIS(human resources information system) experience. He said this would help the department make better decisions predicated on data, which we don't have.

Mr. Walker said a lot of people don't understand that the HR department does more than just interview and hire. He noted the HR department has to keep track of teachers' professional development hours and report to the state.

Mr. Chester said he agreed HR was doing its work with a skeleton crew that was missing several critical bones. Mr. Walker said the department was running with a smaller department than when he joined the board, yet we had an 48 percent minority hiring rate last year.

In response to a question. Mr. Chester said the salary being paid was about \$1,000 more than the person who retired. Ms. Siegel said the person who retired was earning \$77,000, plus longevity, which is roughly equivalent to the expense of the candidate.

Mr. Chester said the candidate was also a certified special education teacher at one time and is somebody who can understand the needs of our teachers. He said she had also been an HRIS supervisor.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said she signed off on this.

Mr. Bradley said it was our duty to make sure the budget is balanced. He said every year he has been on the board Ms Siegel has said cuts were needed. He said he did not know why we're so comfortable by simply continuing to hire people at high salaries, which continues to be a problem in the district. He said we cannot afford it.

In response to a question, Mr. Chester said the position was posted with a range of 65,000 to 75,000.

Ms. Pereira said we've never done this before as a board because we have one employee. Mr. Illingworth said we've never done nutrition bids either.

Mr. Weldon said he had the impression himself that this was a more clerical-type person by virtue of the title, but after hearing the complexity of work that is expected he did not have an issue with it.

Ms. Pereira said under state statute only the superintendent is an employee of the board. She said the HR department has only five employees and handles 3,000 staff members.

Mr. Illingworth told Mr. Chester to hire five more people at \$80,000. Mr. Taylor said to give them \$100,000. Mr. Illingworth said we're being hypocritical every single week.

Mr. Sokolovic moved to approve item VIII. The motion was seconded by Mr. Walker.

The motion was approved by a 6-3 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Martinez, Walker, Pereira, Sokolovic and Allen. Voting in opposition were members Taylor, Illingworth and Bradley.

### **OLD BUSINESS:**

The next item was on the early learning center at Harding High. Dr. Johnson said the early learning center committee met on two dates in June and proposed the following name: ABCD at Warren Harding High School. She requested approval of the name proposed.

Mr. Walker moved *“to call this the ABCD at Warren Harding High School.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said there were about six other names that came up, but this one was chosen. She said the name would be on signage, but not permanently embedded.

The motion was approved by a 7-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Martinez, Illingworth, Walker, Sokolovic, Pereira and Allen. Mr. Bradley and Mr. Taylor abstained.

Ms. Pereira moved the meeting be adjourned. The motion was seconded by Mr. Taylor and unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:10 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Draft