

Wednesday, January 20, 2021

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held January 20, 2021, by video conference call, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:39 p.m. Present were members Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Bobbi Brown, Secretary Joseph Lombard, Sosimo Fabian, and Joseph Sokolovic. Albert Benejan joined the meeting subsequently as noted.

The sole agenda item was on the board's 2021 priorities.

Mr. Weldon said in addition to hearing suggestions from board members, he asked Supt. Testani to get a punch list of items from his staff that they are going to need approved by the board over the course of the year.

Mr. Weldon gave some examples of how the board could use such items and address them throughout the year.

Ms. Brown said she would like to see more personal connection with each other on the board. Mr. Weldon said a webinar last week with CAFE covered relationship-building and was attended by some board members. He noted it was currently difficult for the board to meet or interact in person.

Mr. Lombard said he wanted to ask Supt Testani about providing students with opportunities to contribute service hours. He said he would like to see more structure around the board's lobbying about funding from the city and state.

Mr. Sokolovic said the board needs to be more proactive with its one employee, the superintendent, in bringing to him our own goals and objectives.

Mr. Sokolovic said a goal should be to deliver to our diverse student body a diverse curriculum taught by a diverse staff reflective of the student body's demographics; and to decrease the disparity that currently exists in certified staff to student demographics by increasing minority recruitment, especially male and Hispanic certified staff. He said a possible metric could be to increase the hiring of certified staff by at least 10 percent over the 2020 cohort of new teachers and increasing that number each year until balance is achieved with the student demographics.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested the board and the superintendent's administration should view all existing procedures, policies and programming through an equity lens ensuring that there's a demographic balance with the overall study body and to include in all reports and information gathering race and gender and demographics for easy access.

Dr. Fabian said he would like to think of the board as a package or a product with a brand and work on an initiative to enhance our brand, both the board and the district itself. He said highlighting the positive outcomes could be another area of focus. He suggested BPT be used as a phrase, "Be Proud To....."

Dr. Fabian suggested encouraging the formulation of a strategy and innovation council, to act like a think tank. He added he agreed with Mr. Sokolovic's remarks about the board's ability to assert ourselves with the superintendent, while still being all about collaboration.

Mr. Weldon said the evaluation of a superintendent in Bridgeport is a really new initiative. He said he was not aware of it being done by the board up until a couple of years ago. He said he believed the board was off to a good start on the evaluation and it could be improved as we go along.

Dr. Fabian said the exchange the board is having tonight was diametrically different from the way the board operated three to five years ago according to his knowledge. He said he was deeply impressed with where the board is today. He wondered why the *Connecticut Post* was not here today to see the civility and the hard work of the board.

Mr. Weldon said out of the nine board members he had been on the board the longest and was in his fifth year. He said today is night and day from what took place five years ago.

Mr. Benejan joined the meeting.

Mr. Lombard said a meeting like tonight's should be a regular part of the board's work, perhaps on a regular schedule. Mr. Weldon said he believed it was better to do it as a special meeting rather than mixing it in with the board's regular business.

Ms. Brown said workshops and training would also be valuable. Mr. Weldon said CAFE has the ability to act as a facilitator to boards of education and he would explore something along those lines.

Mr. Lombard said he was recommended a book called *What School Boards Can Do* by Don McAdams. He said the book indicates the biggest function of boards is hiring a superintendent.

Mr. Weldon said he believed the board had been woefully lacking in professional development. He said when he worked for the local public transit agency board members were sent to training sessions focused on their duties.

Mr. Benejan asked why there was not professional development for board members in prior years. Mr. Weldon said he believed personalities and dynamics on the board led to discussion of these kind of things deteriorating into an argument and finding fault.

Mr. Lombard said he belongs to an organization called Leadership in Educational Equity (LEE) and benefitted from a nationwide conference last year. He said he could look into possibilities with LEE.

Mr. Weldon said he sees the board's priorities in two categories: our own board-level development and things that we want the superintendent to help us with. He said the branding initiative could be handled by a board committee because some members have skills in this area. He said a true rebranding involves a lot of work, not just a new logo.

Ms. Brown and Dr. Fabian said they believed a branding committee was a good idea. Mr. Weldon said a council on strategy and innovation might include representatives from the business community and higher education.

Mr. Sokolovic said he had not seen a new *Connecticut Post* reporter assigned to the board after the retirement of the prior reporter, and since almost all the publicity the board received was through the *Post*, we should consider press releases and social media pages. Mr. Weldon said it could be an objective to put out a positive item every week to all of

the media. He said there could be consideration of hiring a company or person that specializes in social media in the branding initiative.

Mr. Lombard said he knows the district is doing amazing things in many areas that the larger community, even outside Bridgeport, does not know. He said the board had an opportunity to partner with the city to showcase positive things such as building an airplane in a school project.

Dr. Fabian said both of his children have gotten a great education from the public schools in Bridgeport. Mr. Weldon noted that the city's communications director, Ms. White, helps the board on occasion and could be pulled into the discussion of a branding initiative.

Mr. Benejan said he liked what Mr. Lombard and Dr. Fabian said. He suggested board members make presentations like Supt. Testani does on Facebook Live so the parents can see the work we're doing.

Mr. Weldon said he would put together the comments and report on them in the Monday meeting, including an agenda item on the establishment of a branding committee and a workplan based on what the staff knows they will need approvals for as they move through the year.

Mr. Benejan referenced negative comments directed at the board. Mr. Weldon said he believed it is best to have an open ear and allow concerns to be voiced, but to be honest if it's not feasible to do something that is being requested. Mr. Benejan said he wanted parents to understand they're not being ignored by the board.

Dr. Fabian said Mr. Benejan made an excellent point and asked if the board could create a template for an e-mail that would be sent to those who contact board members, so persons know the e-mail wasn't just received and not acted on.

Ms. Brown said she had received tons of e-mails and uses the practice of saying they will be forwarded to the appropriate person. She said that practice may not be consistent among all board members.

Mr. Weldon said sometimes individual board members get e-mails that no one else is copied on and different board members may give different responses or respond at different times.

Mr. Weldon suggesting holding another meeting like this on or about March 30th.

Mr. Sokolovic and Mr. Lombard agreed with Mr. Weldon's suggestion that the process be formalized as a bylaw.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 7:46 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

*Approved by the board on January 25, 2021*