

Monday, May 20, 2019

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE
BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held May 20,
2019, at Bridgeport City Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace, Bridgeport,
Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 5:33 p.m. Present were
Chair John Weldon, Vice President Jessica Martinez,
Secretary Joseph Sokolovic, LaMar Kennedy, Joseph
Lombard, Hernan Illingworth, and Maria Pereira.

Supt. Dr. Aresta L. Johnson was present.

The sole agenda item was strategy and possible approval of
the 2019-20 budget gap.

Marlene Siegel, chief financial officer, said she was
requesting the board take action on the proposed actions by
the Finance Committee.

Ms. Siegel said item one is teacher position consolidation
based on registration projections and does not require board
action. She said this is a process that takes place every
year.

Ms. Siegel said the second item is redeploying \$400,000 in
funds committed to curriculum renewal. If the budget
condition improves during the school year, the funds can be
restored. She said this strategy has been used in multiple
years.

Ms. Siegel described deficit prevention mode, the
consolidation in district office which was recommended by

Finance Committee and a reduction of two school administrators.

She said if all the items were implemented there would be a balance of about \$3.4 million in the budget gap. She said the goal is to close the gap within a range of \$1 million to \$1.5 million.

Ms. Siegel suggested considering the items one by one.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the K to 3 literacy program is funded and the materials are being delivered to schools. The math K to 2 initiative will be funded with Title IV-A in 2019-20, assuming that funding continues. She said the funds listed in the gap plan pertain to funds which would be set aside in the 2019-20 budget in order to fund the next phase of literacy curriculum renewal for Grades 4 to 6. She said the goal is always to pay in the year prior so print materials can be delivered in May before the start of the school year and any online services can be prepared during the summer.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the director of literacy has an alternate plan when online licenses expire.

Mr. Sokolovic said this cut is utterly disgusting, although he will be voting for it. He noted his son's school's online licenses for math have expired and the students are writing down questions for homework instead of using workbooks or online access. He said this put us behind surrounding districts.

Mr. Illingworth said we're stuck with some tough choices and we don't have to take recommendations, but it means if we don't we have to find alternatives.

Mr. Lombard asked if there were any other areas we could address.

Dr. Johnson said she agreed with Ms. Siegel that the board should have further discussions to close the budget gap beyond the projected level.

Mr. Illingworth said he trusted Ms. Siegel one hundred percent, but he was not comfortable in just getting the gap to about \$1 million with a new administration coming in. He suggested getting the gap to zero and things can always be added back in.

Ms. Siegel said there is very little left to cut without jeopardizing the core structures of our educational services and the overall integrity of school operations.

Mr. Kennedy noted the cut will not really affect services for 2019-20 school year.

Ms. Pereira said we've always created a list of what we would bring back if we got more money, but we've never gotten the money.

Mr. Sokolovic said it would behoove the board to have a menu of disgusting options for the needed cuts.

Ms. Siegel said we've reached a crossroads, which she said was reinforced, along with the board members, when she presented at the City Council Budget & Appropriations meeting. Teachers cannot be cut without increasing class size, which would violate the contract; nor would anyone favor increasing class sizes.

In response to a question. Dr. Johnson said redeployment of funds won't directly impact next year's school year. She said the \$400,000 is just a component of the larger amount that will be needed.

Ms. Pereira moved to *"redeploy the funds for curriculum renewal to close the 2019-20 budget gap with the understanding that if there are savings found throughout the school year the savings will go right to this particular budget gap item."*

The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez and unanimously approved.

Regarding Item 4, Ms. Siegel said the district had been in deficit prevention mode for the last several years. The cessation of new teacher hires would be effective March 1st as it was in the current year.

Ms. Pereira said Ms. Siegel originally proposed January for the start date, but was very amicable when the committee voted for March 1st.

Ms. Siegel said in the past the projected savings from deficit prevention mode ranges between \$1 million and \$1.5 million. She noted it also includes stringent controls on non-personnel expenses, including the monitoring of legal services expenditures.

Ms. Pereira said believed Ms. Siegel was low-balling the savings so she has a cushion someplace else.

Ms. Martinez moved *"to continue in deficit prevention mode for the years 2019-2020 as stated on this proposed action*

plan to close the budget gap.” The motion was seconded by Mr. Illingworth.

Ms. Pereira move *“to amend the motion to approve the deficit prevention mode, specifically a hiring freeze of school positions, except in shortage areas, to take effect, March 1, 2020.”* The amendment was seconded by Ms. Martinez and unanimously approved.

The motion was restated as *“approval of deficit prevention mode, including hiring freezes of school positions, specifically cessation of new teacher hires effective 3/1/2020, except in shortage areas.”*

The motion was unanimously approved.

Ms. Siegel requested action on Item 5. Ms. Martinez said a contract was expiring and we have hired an executive director for special education.

Ms. Siegel said the new position is in Group 1 in BCAS, which is replacing a Group 2 because the new position includes supervisory responsibilities for all areas of special education, including social work, psychology and speech.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the district is saving about \$160,000 because the consultant and executive directors positions were originally included in the budget plan.

Mr. Illingworth said he could go either way on this one. He said he wanted to understand that the consultant was not just a special education director, but he had other duties, and he is very good at what he does. He said we don't know how the new person is going to make out. He said he was

worried about pulling the trigger on someone who is an asset to the district; if we mess up, we can pay for it dearly as we did years ago.

Ms. Pereira said the reality is there is continued growth in special education. She said the role of the director is to make sure the students are being properly identified because we don't want to violate state and federal laws. She said 403 out-of-district students cost \$27 million of our budget. She said it was disturbing that we continue to see exponential growth and it should be looked at by school, which has not been done. She said she believed somebody filed a Teachers Retirement Board complaint against the consultant because he is receiving a pension. She said the Board of Education did not advertise to fill this position.

Dr. Johnson said she had written documentation from state that we are in compliance because he is a consultant. In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said vacation days and persona days are part of his contract.

Mr. Sokolovic said the board should talk about a position, not a person. He said growth in special education is nationwide. He said he was getting the sense that we want someone who will bring the numbers down, which could be done in an irresponsible fashion. Ms. Siegel said she would expect the executive director, who has extensive experience, to work within the rules and regulations.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said she was comfortable with the selection of the new director, which was spearheaded by Mr. DiDonato and he was part of the interviewing.

Ms. Martinez said a full audit of schools was needed to determine the type of training needed.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said the three special education supervisor positions were eliminated previously. She said the coaches in the department are stationed at the central office. Ms. Siegel said there were unionized supervisors as director of speech, director of psychology and director of social work.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said due to the loss of two assistant superintendent positions last year she asked the consultant to pick some of those responsibilities, including some supervision of the assistant superintendents.

Ms. Martinez said she did not see what other positions could be reduced in district office.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the position was on the district payroll because he does not meet the criteria of the IRS for an independent contractor.

Mr. Illingworth noted if we take no action the contract expires.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *“to approve number 5, district office, to remove the consultant position, chief of specialized education reform, effective at the end of 6/30/2019.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Pereira and unanimously approved.

Ms. Siegel said Item 6 was a proposal to remove two assistant principals at a savings of approximately \$300,000.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said she was not prepared to say which schools would be affected.

Mr. Sokolovic asked if it was possible to find a few more assistant principals to cut. He noted there were several schools of over 500 students without assistant principals. He said some schools would be easier to manage without an assistant principal than other schools.

Dr. Johnson said last year the assistant principals at Madison and Hooker were eliminated. Ms. Siegel said generally K-8 schools have assistant principals. Mr. Sokolovic said he believed eliminating assistant principals would hurt less than deferring curriculum renewal.

Dr. Johnson said she did want to recommend removing more than two assistant principals due to a domino effect from reduction in staff and increased special education referrals. She urged the board to proceed gingerly.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said there are assistant principal vacancies due to impending retirements, so cutting two positions will lead to savings.

In response to a question, Ms Siegel said turnover savings are projected every year at \$1.5 million and are already in the budget. She said sometimes we achieve the amount and sometimes we fall short.

Ms. Pereira moved *“to eliminate two assistant principals.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez.

The motion was approved by a 5-2 vote. Voting in favor were members Pereira, Sokolovic, Martinez, Illingworth and Lombard. Mr. Weldon and Mr. Kennedy were opposed.

Ms. Siegel said Item 7 was the Fairchild Wheeler campus suggestion to maintain three principals, but to remove two assistant principals (one 12-month and one 10-month) and one clerical person.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the federal grant was \$11 million over four years and it ended in September 2017. She said the magnet grant funded supplemental services such as professional development, supplies and services only and did not fund fulltime staff. She said John Curtis was employed on a per-diem basis until the grant ended.

Mr. Illingworth said it seemed like the administration was reluctant to push this item. He said he shares the concerns about losing the suburban students. He said the surrounding towns don't want to send students here anyway, but the students are making the choices on their own. He said the suburban families look at it like, why fix something that is not broken. He asked if the state would say losing the suburban students would not be a problem.

Ms. Siegel said we have to maintain the residency standard, which is 25 percent suburban students. If the standard is not maintained, the state will remove the funding and Bridgeport will not be allowed to maintain those schools, based on \$3,000 for each Bridgeport student and \$7,085 for suburban students. She said it was critical to maintain vibrant programs to attract suburban students as well as provide a strong program for Bridgeport students.

Mr. Illingworth said there is a way we have to communicate such a decision. He said two board members and the superintendent were able to communicate with the school's

parents in the past. Mr. Weldon said this seemed like an area we have to tread gingerly.

Mr. Sokolovic said agreed to a point, but he disagreed that we have to seek their permission first or consult them beforehand. He said we did not consult the Bridgeport parents before we took away two assistant principals. He said he was hearing we were having trouble keeping suburban students around Bridgeport students. He said removing a vice principal is not a death warrant to magnet programs.

Ms. Pereira said she recommended this cut last year. She said there were meetings with Fairchild Wheeler parents and Dr. Johnson. She said the parents wanted three schools and raised valid points because each principal had content knowledge and because consolidating the schools would lose four UConn scholarships and student rankings.

Ms. Pereira said each of the three pathways at Fairchild Wheeler has less than 500 students. She noted Bridgeport Military Academy and Central Magnet have directors, not principals. She said we are struggling with enrollment because the four towns that owe us tuition are illegally interfering with recruiting. She said the schools significantly under serve ELL, special education students and children in poverty. She said we should put more money where we have greater needs. She said many of the parents agreed it was fair to cut the assistant principals.

Mr. Illingworth said he agreed with Ms. Pereira and Mr. Sokolovic, however, 75 percent of the students in Fairchild Wheeler are Bridgeport students. He said he was concerned that if we lose the 25 percent it affects the 75 percent and a valuable magnet plan in the high schools. He

said after the experience with his daughter he believed Central Magnet was watered down. He said he was concerned about what we would lose.

Mr. Weldon said we were teetering on the edge of 25 percent enrollment. Ms. Martinez said she graduated from Central Magnet in 2000 and it was not comparable to a themed school.

Mr. Sokolovic said he believed the programs will not be watered down simply by losing an assistant principal. He said everything is risky, but we are bleeding to death with the \$10 million deficit. He said we're taking risks with walking distances and deferring curriculum renewal. He said we have to step away from scare tactics of what could happen.

Dr. Johnson said she believed Central Magnet, where the valedictorian went on to Yale University, is actually a great program. She said the concern is parents will pull their children from the program because they will see this as a threat of what could come next year or down the road. She said she also sees the lens of Bridgeport and need for equity. She said she agreed all of these are disgusting cuts.

Mr. Kennedy said his son graduated from Fairchild Wheeler, where he had a great experience, and he has friends in Stratford and Trumbull. He didn't think parents would pull their children out because there is no similar program in the area.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said she did not believe students currently enrolled would be pulled out.

Ms. Pereira said the challenge with recruiting is because of the towns that owe us \$1.6 million right now.

Mr. Kennedy said as a special ed teacher most special education students are not trying to go to Fairchild Wheeler

Mr. Sokolovic moved *“to approve item number 7, eliminating two APs and one clerical from the new Fairchild Wheeler administrative structures.”*

The motion was seconded by Ms. Pereira and approved by a 4 to 3 vote.

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

The next agenda item was on transportation.

Mr. Sokolovic said these budget decision should not be handled in a rapid fashion; he said the City Council spent hours on its budget.

Ms. Siegel said the recommendations have been with the board since January

Ms. Pereira moved *“to approve transportation, number 3, Grades 5 through 8, increasing the walking distance from 1 to 1.5 miles.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez.

Mr. Weldon said we kept saying these are the kinds of things that would happen and here we are. Mr. Illingworth said he can't believe he's saying it, but we could get more savings out of this item.

Ms. Pereira said the 1.5 mile distance was a recommendation of the Connecticut State Department of Education.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested the discussions be postponed for a longer conversation since it had been suggested to adjourn the meeting.

Ms. Siegel said the guidelines recommended from the state are up to 1.5 miles in Grades 5 to 8 and up to 2 miles in high school. Mr. Weldon noted nothing was mandated.

Ms. Sokolovic moved to amend to approve the change in transportation limits from 1 mile to a minimum of 1.5 miles pending further discussion of the board at a later meeting. Mr. Kennedy seconded the amendment. Mr. Sokolovic said this would allow the board to revisit the issue.

Following further discussion, Mr. Sokolovic moved to withdraw the amendment. The motion was seconded by Mr. Kennedy and unanimously approved.

The original motion was approved by a 6-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Pereira, Sokolovic, Kennedy, Weldon, Martinez and Lombard. Mr. Illingworth was opposed.

Mr. Sokolovic said he was totally opposed to this action although he voted yes, due to the position the City Council has put the board in by shortchanging us.

Mr. Weldon asked that Ms. Siegel prepare an updated budget plan for further discussion.

Ms. Martinez moved that the meeting be adjourned. The motion was seconded by Ms. Pereira and approved by a 6-1 vote.

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

Ms. Pereira asked that there not be time limits on the meetings.

Mr. Sokolovic said we need more than 90 minutes to make all these budget cuts. He added when we are rushing we are going to make mistakes. He said the board makes mistakes over and over when we have a compact timeline.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:08 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Approved by the board on June 10, 2019