

Wednesday June 30, 2020

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE  
BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held June 30,  
2021, at Central High School, 1 Lincoln Boulevard,  
Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:06 p.m. Present were members Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Bobbi Brown, Secretary Joseph Lombard, Joseph Sokolovic, Sybil Allen, and Sosimo Fabian. Albert Benejan arrived subsequently as noted.

Supt. Michael J. Testani was present

The sole agenda item was the 2020-21 performance review/evaluation of Michael J. Testani as superintendent of schools.

Mr. Weldon noted the board members had been given packages by the superintendent.

Supt. Testani said included in the package were the goals presented, a self-reflection of the year by himself, material on the board-superintendent relations, and a copy of the PowerPoint presentation. He said he also presented a sampling of things that should be included and given to the board.

Mr. Weldon suggested the board hear the presentation, study the materials, and fill out evaluation forms prior to the next meeting. The individual evaluations could be discussed at the next meeting. He said he would prepare a table of the individual board members' scores. The superintendent

suggested July 20th as the date to reconvene. Board members said they agreed.

The superintendent said on 10/1/20 the district's enrollment was 19,356, with 10,500 students reporting to school for in-person learning. The final enrolment at the end of the year was 18,407, with in-person learners increasing to 12,662. There are 3,650 students with IEPs and 3,973 English learners.

Supt. Testani said, despite Covid, the average daily attendance took a slight dip this year, to 89.2 percent compared to 92 percent last year. He said this is a testament to how well we worked as a team to engage students.

The superintendent said this year was unlike any other year due to Covid. He noted there was no guide available on how to operate through a pandemic. He summarized the work done with reopening schools and ensuring the health and safety of 19,000 students and 3,000 staff members.

Supt. Testani said the districtwide reopening committees drove the reopening plan last summer. He said a lot of time was spent on statewide calls with the Department of Public Health, local health officials, and the state Department of Education. He said there was a challenge by a switch in the local health director midway through the pandemic.

The superintendent said developing health and safety protocols was crucial to opening schools. A lot of outreach was done to parents, including video presentations and surveys. Guidelines for contact tracing and quarantining were developed.

Supt. Testani said teaching and learning was reimagined to support continuous instruction for in-person and distance learners. He said the model was developed and supported by the academic support team, along with the IT team, to support students, families and staff. School calendars had to be redesigned to ensure health and safety. Over 19,000 devices were secured through the CARES Act, city funding, or philanthropy.

The superintendent said professional development was provided to staff for success in a blended learning model. He said this was the most challenging component of the school year early on. Mental health resources were provided to students and staff. Interventions, special education and ELL services had to be delivered both remotely and with in-person instruction.

Supt. Testani said the financial impact had to be monitored closely due to the loss of revenue through food and nutrition services. The facilities department had to provide a safe working environment, including the provision of 2.5 million masks, face shields, 100,000 bottles of sanitizers, gowns, 300 Plexiglas shields, and other equipment. He said the transportation plan had to be adjusted to safely transport students.

The superintendent said there were personnel challenges due to absent teachers and the lack of substitute coverage.

Supt. Testani said the district was open to in-person learning for the entire school year except for 19 school days due to the rising number of Covid cases in the Bridgeport community.

The superintendent said among the goals addressed were to respond to districtwide initiatives were implement and support the new math program; complete the rollout of world language instruction in Grades 1 to 12; create a technology team to support the IT department; increase family engagement; foster culturally responsive classrooms; integrate the restorative practices program; create a district plan to increase the racial, ethnic and linguistic diversity of staff; and promote a variety of strategic planning initiatives to promote a district culture of equity and social consciousness.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the supplies of protective equipment are adequate for reopening in the fall.

In response to a question, the superintendent said in the last count over 300 students have been put back on the rolls. He said it was discovered that a lot of students who left the district were found at Catholic or private schools because they were open fulltime from the beginning of school. He said a larger number of students went to home schooling this year, but many of them are coming back to the district for next year.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said it is anticipated the number of special education students may rise in the fall, but things like Effective School Solutions are being put in place.

Supt. Testani then discussed board relations. He said he believed we've established a positive and productive work relationship. He said he strives to maintain open and transparent communication with the board and to make each board member feel welcomed and valued. He commended

the board for its admirable work as it navigated through a contentious and difficult reopening last August.

The superintendent discussed relationships with staff. He said this year was difficult, but a great experience working closely with the collective bargaining units to create the reopening plan.

Supt. Testani said he communicated throughout the year about positive Covid cases that occurred. He said he met weekly with the teachers' union and collaborated on two MOUs. There were regular meetings also with the BCAS union.

The superintendent said he held about 14 roundtable discussions with teachers and staff at the BEA office, which he said was a great experience.

Mr. Benejan arrived at the meeting.

Supt. Testani said there was coordination with the state and local health departments to vaccinate staff at Central in March and April.

The superintendent said a healthy school climate is crucial. He said staff and teachers who do not feel connected to their jobs and schools will be less likely to be productive. He said he believed we did a great job, even more so this year despite the pandemic.

Supt. Testani said a priority was on hiring procedures and practices to improve the diversity of staff. He said the district exceeds statewide percentages in the area of diversity. In the past two summers nine of the eleven assistant principals hired have been people of color. He said a priority was

placed on leadership stability so schools can continue to work forward. He said a support system was built for new administrators, with meetings with mentors twice a month. Professional development was given to all administration through Kim Marshall's observation model.

The superintendent said extensive diversity, equity and inclusion work was done with Dr. Derrick Gay. There was a districtwide professional development, which resulted in positive survey results. He said work with Dr. Gay would continue throughout the year.

Supt. Testani said there was professional development aimed at the Harding High bilingual department this year, which resulted in staff earning micro-credentials.

The superintendent said the groundwork has been laid to create the first teacher residency program in Connecticut with Sacred Heart University. The goal is to recruit high school seniors to go into the teaching profession. The residency includes a yearlong internship with a teacher and tuition discounts.

The academic support team with the IT department, consisting of certified teachers, was established to assist students and staff with remote teaching and learning.

In response to a question about staff morale, the superintendent said from feedback he has received there was a lot of anxiety initially about reopening schools, but coming out of the Christmas break people felt better about the processes and procedures in place. He said he believed the roundtable sessions were helpful in this regard. He said the level of comfort increased, but so did the level of

exhaustion. He said the year was a struggle and difficult, but the staff rallied around the kids.

Supt. Testani said he gets a lot of e-mails from teachers which include suggestions, which indicates they have a comfort level to be able to do so. He said he responds to staff e-mails and does not push them off to their administrators.

Mr. Sokolovic said it was great that we were ahead of most of the state on diversity, but our thinking should be that we have to do better than ourselves, not better than surrounding districts. He said it was challenging because everyone is after the same pool of applicants. He noted the large cliff in Hispanic staff.

Supt. Testani discussed the Today's Students, Tomorrow's Teachers program. He said until the state relaxes certification requirements we're going to struggle. He described the certification requirements as among the most stringent in the country.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said a priority was put on hiring candidates as soon as vacancies occurred in shortage areas. Work continues with Teach for America as a partner.

Supt. Testani discussed staff development. He said ten of the largest schools completed workshops with UConn on PBIS and multitiered systems of support, including classroom management and literacy intervention. He said 90 percent of teachers in Grades 4 to 8 completed professional development on the DIBELS assessment. He described other professional development for teachers such as Reading Wonders and the new core ELA program.

Preschool administrators participated in two workshops this year. He said the district will have a large emphasis on preschool education over the next few years.

In response to a question about succession planning, the superintendent said a key component for next year will be work with the Center for School Change on developing instructional leaders. For new teachers professional development and support is now being spread over the first three years, not just the first year.

Supt. Testani said increasing family engagement has always been a priority. Initiatives includes returning a staff person to coordinate parent engagement efforts. There were Facebook Live sessions for parents and parent leader roundtable events. There were monthly attendance support for families, including through social media. He said despite the pandemic the chronic absentee rate only went up by five percent

The superintendent said a new website was created to support attendance in multiple different languages. The district worked closely with the state Department of Education to support students' attendance and engagement. The district was asked to present in a national peer-to-peer network regarding the work being done to support attendance and engagement. A focus in the fall will be to reduce chronic absenteeism.

Supt. Testani said funds were provided to the district to implement a home visiting model as part of the attendance work. Quarterly community resource events were held this year, distributing coats, meal kits, clothes, PPE, and toys. Parent Square, a communication platform being purchased, will revolutionize parent communication. He noted Ms.

Rocha-Reaes was the point of contact for the Students & Families Committee to help support action plans and Title I expenditures.

Mr. Benejan said more work was needed to support parent leaders. He noted the parent leaders are donating to their time. He added the District PAC needed to be reestablished.

The superintendent said it is planned to get principals more involved with the parent engagement component next year.

Mr. Sokolovic said he believed due to its importance family engagement should be set as a goal of the board and the superintendent. He said pressure was brought on principals to spend parent engagement money. He suggested parent engagement should become part of the principal evaluation process. He said the School Governance Councils also needed to be looked at.

The superintendent said family engagement and chronic absenteeism would be two priorities for principals' evaluation for 2021-22. He said without those components teaching and learning will not be able to grow at the level that it should.

Ms. Brown said she was excited about the communication plan. She asked that parent surveys continue to learn where parents are at. Supt. Testani said Parent Square will allow more school, building, and districtwide surveys. He said parent roundtables will continue, with the option of live streaming, along with student roundtables.

In response to a question, the superintendent said there will be parent workshops throughout the year on topics they need help with. Ms. Brown noted the challenges of home

school students if parents can't assist them with the curriculum.

Supt. Testani discussed community resources that support students and families. He said this will be even more prevalent in 2021-22 due to intensified student needs. Wraparound services and a range of programs will be available. He said parents will be exempt from paying for Lighthouse this summer, which doubled participation to 1,100 in the summer reading program.

There is an MOU with Bridgeport Education Fund to provide mentors and tutors to students. Two hundred students participated in the MAACS program, which has been enhanced by Faith Villegas.

Twenty mentors and tutors from eight colleges and universities worked with students this year.

The superintendent said there was collaboration with RYASAP to connect 2020 graduates with postsecondary goals and objectives. That work will continue for the next year or two.

Supt. Testani said BCAC is involved in the district's SEL initiative and co-presented trainings on restorative practices, emotional intelligence skill-building and other areas.

The superintendent said other partners provided training and resources to students and staff.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said there was more outreach to college and universities this year due to a shift in the HR department. Mr. Sokolovic urged the amount of tutoring and mentoring be increased.

The superintendent discussed educational leadership. He said the focus is no longer on a minimal level of proficiency, but continuous improvement from students at all levels of achievement. He said this shift began pre-Covid, but it will now continue. He said this will require a change in the mindset of some staff members.

The superintendent said there are weekly meetings of the core team, consisting of the four executive directors and the senior leadership team. A new technology team meets weekly.

Supt. Testani said he believed the district successfully navigated to a fully remote learning model last spring, and provided all students with a meaningful educational experience and continued meal services. The reopening task force included over 30 individuals and led to the creation of a learning model. He said the big highlight of the year was being recognized by Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona for the district's great work in supporting students and families during the pandemic in a meeting of large school districts in the state.

He said work will continue with Dr. Gay on diversity and the hiring of high quality staff. Reports on curriculum renewal have been given to the board and its committees.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani described the future expansion of the social studies curriculum to middle school and elementary school.

The superintendent said the academic high points included 78 percent of 12th grade students participating in the fall SAT school day and taking the test in person. He said 79

percent of 11th grade students participated in the SAT. He said even remote learners came in to take the test.

Supt. Testani said 11th grade results showed five of the seven schools increased their math scores and three out of seven increased ELA scores. He said given the pandemic it shows how much work the students put in.

The superintendent said math scores increased due to the use of Khan Academy as an intervention. He said that work will continue and will trickle down to the middle school next year.

Supt. Testani said the district tested 89 percent of students in Grades 3 to 8 on Smarter Balance in person, which shows the high level of engagement.

The superintendent said over 90 percent of students participated in fall, winter and spring DIBELS assessments. He said engaging young learners is a highlight of 2021. He said the percentage of kindergarten students meeting or exceeding basic literacy skills increased by seven percent from January to April 2021.

Supt. Testani displayed the usage of the Lexia web-based intervention.

The superintendent said the percentage of 2nd grade students with basic literacy skills increased by 8 percent from January to April. He said this demonstrates there was growth during the pandemic even at the youngest level, which was the most challenging level for teachers and students.

Supt. Testani said 90 percent of ELL students successfully took the assessment, which he described as an impressive number even under non-pandemic circumstances. He said 129 ELL students exited the program as a result of language acquisition skills. He said this was a huge lift by Ana Sousa-Martins and her department.

In response to a question, the superintendent said students who do not take the SAT can take it after graduation, while others may not be interested in post-secondary education.

Supt. Testani discussed summer programming. This year there was a four-week ELL Summer Academy for the first time for students in Grades 4 to 8. There is an 8th to 9th grade transition program, which includes academics and enrichment. The enrichment is in STEM and includes drones, robots and rockets.

The superintendent said the model for extended school year for special education students was changed this year to multiple locations, which reduced chaos at the beginning of the session.

Supt. Testani noted the challenges in operations and finance. An action plan was implemented to minimize deficits such as in food and nutrition. Multiple challenges remain from the lack of funding. He said funds were optimally allocated in PPE, eliminating the digital divide, and curriculum renewal.

Mr. Weldon said he would send the board members a Word version of the superintendent's evaluation in preparation of the July 20th follow-up meeting.

Ms. Allen moved that the meeting be adjourned. The notion 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 August 23, 2021*