

Tuesday, August 21, 2018

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE
BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held August 21,
2018, at Bridgeport City Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace, Bridgeport,
Connecticut

The meeting was called to order at 6:30 p.m.

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

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

Mr. Walker said he was recusing himself from the first item on the agenda.

Ms. Allen moved that *“the board meet in executive session for discussion and possible action on BEA grievance number 2670, change in health care plan.”*

Atty. Chris Hodgson of Berchem Moses said it was not a meeting under the FOIA. Mr. Weldon said he heard it both ways.

Mr. Weldon said the board would not be hearing from the BEA representatives because they presented to the board previously and their position is clear. He said the board would now meet in executive session to discuss a decision.

Mr. Weldon said Atty. Hodgson, Dr. Johnson and board members would participate in the executive session.

The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and approved by a 4-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Sokolovic, Pereira and Allen. Mr. Illingworth was opposed.

The executive session began at 6:33 p.m.

The board reconvened in public session at 6:56 p.m.

Ms. Martinez and Mr. Bradley were now present.

Mr. Illingworth moved to deny grievance number 2760. The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez.

The motion was approved by a 6-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Martinez, Bradley, Weldon, Illingworth, Sokolovic and Allen. Ms. Pereira was opposed. (Mr. Walker was recused.)

The next agenda item was the annual performance evaluation of the superintendent.

Mr. Weldon said a performance evaluation had been assembled for the superintendent, with electronic versions transmitted to members previously and hard copies available now. He noted it was an extensive document.

Mr. Weldon asked that the superintendent read the document and feel free to contact individual members for clarification or questions. He said the superintendent was entitled per contract to issue a written response, which will be made a part of the evaluation.

Dr. Johnson said she'd like to have a verbal conversation about the evaluation now, read the document in depth, and then reach out to members if she had questions.

Ms. Pereira said the document should have been sent to Dr. Johnson in advance electronically. Mr. Weldon said he asked the board members what they wanted to do in that regard and only received one response.

Mr. Weldon said this was a subject qualified for executive session unless the superintendent requires that the discussion be held in the open meeting. Dr. Johnson said she was fine with holding the discussion in the open meeting.

Ms. Pereira said Mr. Weldon created a memorandum on board letterhead without our knowledge or permission. She said she wanted to be clear that the cover letter does not represent her in any way, shape or form. She said she wrote her own memorandum in rebuttal to Mr. Weldon's that she would supply to the superintendent.

Mr. Walker said he felt the same way and was off put by the memorandum. Mr. Sokolovic said he agreed with Ms. Pereira and Mr. Walker.

Mr. Weldon said he felt the spreadsheet and focus areas were a good place to start the discussion.

Dr. Johnson said she would like to have an open dialogue with the board and hear the story behind the numbers, which would help in her practice. She said she wanted to be prepared sooner rather than later, with a lot going on with the opening of school.

Mr. Walker said in his evaluation that he wrote he would challenge any board to find a more student-centric candidate as their superintendent. He said this was maybe Dr. Johnson's strongest attribute, which to him as an educator means everything. He said Dr. Johnson had shown an impressive ability to manage the day-to-day running of the state's largest school district.

Mr. Walker said Dr. Johnson's qualities as a person and her genuine concern for the welfare and education of the students is what shines. He said Dr. Johnson does not allow distractions from her mission of educating the children. He said he was convinced Dr. Johnson will continue to grow in her role as superintendent.

Mr. Walker said Dr. Johnson needs to develop a practice of always adhering to the bylaws, policies and directives of the public schools and the Board of Education. He said she needs to ensure that Connecticut state statutes governing boards of education and the operation of public schools are followed each and every time.

Mr. Walker said Dr. Johnson needs to develop strategies to grow parental involvement across the district and create a stronger executive staff. He said the executive staff going into next year has strengths, but often lacks a cohesive team approach. He added a strategic plan was needed to identify, report and correct bullying behavior.

Mr. Illingworth said he believed Dr. Johnson is strong in areas of education and has a great vision for the district. He said there are concerns around board relations and leadership decisions. He said the board members are responsible for one employee, the superintendent. He said the evaluation was designed to give the superintendent

notice of the areas that the board feels improvement is needed. He said we need to support our superintendent, while at the same time be a check and balance.

Mr. Illingworth said board relations are critical, where the working relationship and trust is formed so that the board and superintendent can work together effectively. He said he acknowledged there had been growth as of late in this area, but there is still work to be done. He said the superintendent really shows effort in wanting to work in this area and he is confident that this will improve. He said the board needs to do a better job by not pulling the superintendent in different directions and sending mixed signals.

Mr. Illingworth said he felt it was important to mention aspects related to assistant superintendents because the superintendent expects them to carry out her vision. He said one of the superintendent's strong areas is accountability, however, he did not feel the assistant superintendents represent the superintendent's leadership and vision.

Mr. Illingworth said his rating may be critical, but it is that way to try to benefit the superintendent. He said the board never had goals for the year and it was critical to set common goals with the superintendent. He added he would use the language used by Mr. Walker about the superintendent's cabinet.

Mr. Illingworth said in terms of documenting things and education the superintendent is strong. He said as a first-year superintendent the evaluation should be critical so the superintendent gets a clear understanding of where the areas of growth are. He said every time he spoke to the superintendent she wanted feedback because she wants to grow. He said he was very comfortable in the direction we

are going.

Ms. Pereira said when the board ratified the evaluation process that in order for any board member to give a score of 1, 2 or 4 they had substantiate that rating with specific examples or data points. She said there were four board members who gave 1's or 2's that did not cite a specific example or data point to substantiate that rating. She said the superintendent was owed that.

Ms. Pereira said as a first-year superintendent Dr. Johnson did a tremendous job and it was a testament to her that she got an average of 3. She said Dr. Johnson had dealt with incredibly stressful situations, specifically the budget issues. She said one of her greatest strengths is her ability to remain calm and even when facing high-stress situations. She said Dr. Johnson was completely competent as it relates to meeting the academic and social and emotional well being of our students.

Ms. Pereira said Dr. Johnson set clear standards for central office staff and principals regarding her expectations and was committed to holding administrators accountable. She said Dr. Johnson has worked well with a variety of community organizations.

Ms. Pereira said Dr. Johnson is still growing into her role as the leader of the second largest district in Connecticut. There were repeated occasions when Dr. Johnson found it difficult to take a firm position on a given matter, competently articulate that position, and remain steadfast in her position. She said when faced with opposition from board members, politicians and those politically connected, Dr. Johnson must push back on those who would infringe on her statutory authority to govern the day-to-day operations of the district.

She said Dr. Johnson must stand firm when individual board members attempt to give her direction without a formal directive from the board at a duly noticed meeting. She said board members give her staff directives and contact her staff without contacting Dr. Johnson first, which is required under board policy.

Ms. Pereira said Dr. Johnson must ensure the chain of command is followed by all staff and board members so the staff is operating without undue interference, pressure and chaos. She said when the public or staff members present a concern to her she presents the matter to Dr. Johnson to handle the situation.

Ms. Pereira said she feels confident Dr. Johnson will continue to develop these critical skills, which are understandably complicated and delicate in nature. She said as someone who spent over twenty years in management the most difficult aspect of being a manager is dealing with a lot of different personalities who all have different expectations. She noted Dr. Johnson has about three thousand employees and nine board members with very different expectations and personalities.

Ms. Pereira said organizing advocacy around equitable funding from both the state and the municipality on behalf of the students must be more comprehensive, targeted and well organized. She suggested the effort should start no later than October and be parent and student-led. She said we need to hold a meeting with our delegation and the mayor, as well as a citywide meeting with parents, students, staff, community partners, and organized labor before the legislative session begins. She said a voter registration drive was needed.

Ms. Pereira said Dr. Johnson should develop a comprehensive plan for engaging parents on a regular basis. She said this is challenging because the PACs and PTSOs are not functioning well, there are no home-school coordinators and there is no longer an NNPS facilitator.

Ms. Pereira said a comprehensive plan should be developed around bullying. She said the statistics regarding reported and substantiated bullying incidents have been abysmal for four consecutive years. Assistant superintendents, the director of social work and principals must be held accountable for accurate reporting of all incidents, investigating them and providing supports to victims and their offenders.

Ms. Pereira said the superintendent should ensure that her presentation at events, meetings and parent gatherings are publicly tied back to the pillars, goals and objectives of the strategic plan. She said this is how people will retain the details of the strategic plan.

Dr. Johnson noted she included the four pillars in the convocation.

Mr. Sokolovic said he found Dr. Johnson to be more than capable in most focus areas with some room for improvement, especially in regards to board communication and relations. He said many other areas that lack full excellence are problems that were inherited by previous administrations and boards. He said these areas are showing improvement under Dr. Johnson's short tenure.

Mr. Sokolovic said his focus areas are board communication and relations, the need to continue to improve family involvement and the bullying reporting. He said he not heard

any one thing yet that he disagreed with in any of the summaries.

Ms. Martinez said she wasn't detailed in terms of grades of 1 and 2. She said she was happy to revise the evaluation and send it to the superintendent.

Ms. Martinez said she believes that Dr. Johnson is the sustainable leader needed to move the district forward with her creative structure and her strong leadership skills. She said education, the vision for the district, data and information collecting are Dr. Johnson's strong points. She said there are concerns around board relations and leadership decisions.

Ms. Martinez said she is pleased overall with the direction and leadership of the superintendent. She said issues that have plagued our schools and students did not occur under Dr. Johnson and it takes time to create the change needed.

Ms. Martinez said Dr. Johnson must continue to work on her relationship-building skills, board relations, uniting the board, and on-time communication. She said a lot of times we get things last minute and it seems as if we're scrambling.

Ms. Martinez said Dr. Johnson must continue to work on collaborating with the board. She said the foundation was a huge deal, but as a board in collaboration we can do something huge and make serious money for the district.

Ms. Martinez said it is critical that trust and unity remains with the team as a whole to ensure successful outcomes for the district as well as within our own leadership. She said Dr. Johnson needs support just as she does as a board member. She said it is her hope that in the areas where the

board needs training or growth Dr. Johnson would be comfortable to provide awareness where we lack knowledge or are misinformed.

Ms .Martinez said Dr. Johnson has proven that when tough decisions need to be made she is willing to do what it takes on behalf of her students and staff. She said she pleads with Dr. Johnson to continue on the side of her conscience on behalf of her students and staff rather than feeling pressure by personal or political entities.

Ms. Martinez said the focus areas are board relations, superintendent goals and board goals, on-time communication, and leadership decisions. She said she echoed nearly everything Ms. Pereira and the other board members said.

Mr. Bradley said what he sees is the district needs fixing and said he doesn't feel a sense of urgency in fixing those things. He said Dr. Johnson is a breath of fresh air and at the same time it's an opportunity to really change the direction of the district. He said he gets frustrated as a board member when he hears the same old, same old.

Mr. Bradley said he doesn't feel as though we have a mission statement as a district and a direction in which we're going. He said he wanted to see people who can recite the mission statement and live the mission statement.

Mr. Bradley said the superintendent can bring people together by avoiding the mistakes of the past. He said the two mistakes that generally happen are we become too friendly with people who might have a different desire in how the school district should go or we become too adversarial.

He said being a naysayer for the sake of naysaying is not the right attitude, which he sees with current and past board members. He said the superintendent had an opportunity to her own person.

Mr. Bradley said when we gave a low number score it came from political things that have plagued the board that have nothing do with educational outcomes and that are pure politics. He said he believes Dr. Johnson can rise above that because of her gift of leadership.

Mr. Bradley said the something that is more aggressive and visionary and out of box was needed in negotiating the teachers' contract such as teacher villages.

Mr. Bradley said instead of grandstanding with political type things the goal should be to develop genuine partnerships and looking at people as what they can give the school district. He said Bridgeport had been plagued with personality fights. He said Dr. Johnson did not have the shackles of previous political beefs and was free from that, which would help with funding and working with genuine partners. He said Dr. Johnson should not pick a side, but be her own side.

Ms. Allen said she had five priorities to share: To collaborate with the board to develop Board of Education goals; to work with the board to regularly assess the roles and responsibilities of the board and the superintendent; work with the board to regularly clarify roles and responsibilities of the board and the superintendent; work with the board to regularly assess and clarify roles and responsibilities of the board and the superintendent in the areas of policy, management and collaborative governance; and the superintendent and the board showing evidence with

handbooks that have collectively identified mechanisms to clarify and revisit roles and responsibility and productively address and resolve conflicts.

Ms. Allen said she was sure her items would help Dr. Johnson in some manner to make the district an excellent one. She said she believed Dr. Johnson had the skills and the ability to lead the board and the school system into a new era.

Mr. Weldon said he only had two focus areas. One is related to board relations and what he perceives to be the superintendent at times torn between different groups of the board, factions and individual board members. He said it is an attempt on Dr. Johnson's part to try to please everyone, but it is really hard to make nine people happy at the same time. He said he thinks that works against the superintendent.

Mr. Weldon said he also had a focus area of communication. He said he had seen it happen too many times where the board gets into an argument because the right information wasn't presented in enough time to understand what was going on. He said one example was the University School contract. He said many people were under a gross misunderstanding of what was going on there because they were not given information in advance.

Ms. Pereira said Dr. Johnson had made a significant difference in her year here by moving special education compliance ahead significantly, saving so much money in legal expenses alone. She said the superintendent moved the district from fifth in our DRG to second. She said that was unheard of.

Ms. Pereira said Dr. Johnson had the highest level of minority teacher recruitment in the state, where 48 percent of all teachers hired this year were minorities. She said she had never seen numbers like that in her years on the board.

Ms. Pereira said Dr. Johnson increased both math and literacy test scores and high school graduation rate. She said the superintendent established great partnerships with community organizations and local universities. She said in all years she had never heard of a superintendent and her team of administrators visiting every single school by December.

Ms Pereira said getting a score of 3 on her first-year evaluation is a reflection of her work and she should be very proud.

Dr. Johnson thanked the board members for the verbal feedback. She said will read through the evaluation thoroughly and perhaps reach out to individual board members in the next couple of weeks.

Mr. Weldon said the board needs to start to working on the coming year's evaluation and said he hoped we could meet in the next couple weeks to determine which rubrics should be honed in on. Dr. Johnson said she would like to start with two or three focus areas such as bullying, parental engagement and board communication and relationships. She said to Mr. Bradley's point, she would focus on thinking outside the box, risk-taking and being innovative in discussions with her staff.

Ms. Pereira said the board had not set the superintendent's goals and objectives. Mr. Weldon said he understood Dr. Johnson wanted to continue to use the rubric and just weed

out areas where she is proficient. Dr. Johnson said it's not typical to use all eight, but she wanted that as a baseline and to have two or three domains emerge from that.

Mr. Walker suggested the superintendent schedule a one-on-one meeting with each board member and after that, more like in October, the board could assemble.

Mr. Weldon said he mentioned a couple of weeks from now because the superintendent's contract specifies within the first 90 days of the year that we're in, which would be October 1.

Dr. Johnson suggested the board goals be aligned to the strategic plan.

Mr. Weldon said a retreat could be scheduled to go over the goals and objectives for the coming year and how they're going to align with the superintendent's coming year's performance evaluation and how it's going to dovetail.

Ms. Pereira said the superintendent needs time to plan, meet with her staff and decide how to implement it. She said it was not done by June 30th, the deadline according to board policy and state statute to set goals and objectives. She said the superintendent is driving the *Titanic*, not a motorboat. She said this is why there is a June 30th deadline.

Mr. Weldon asked if Ms. Pereira had a suggestion on how to proceed now.

Mr. Sokolovic said the horse was already out of the barn this year and the board should try to get it done as soon possible and take the lateness into account on next year's evaluation.

Ms Martinez said she didn't understand why we couldn't do things in the time frame that we needed to get them done so we don't look foolish and dysfunctional as a board. She added that she had been requesting a retreat for some time because training is needed. She said Robert's Rules and bylaws are misused.

Dr. Johnson noted the board's goals need to be set by the board. She said she can support the board in that process and guide it towards the strategic plan. She said she believed the existing board's goals go back to 2014 and she encouraged the board to move in that area.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said she agreed that a meeting on her evaluation next year should be in place before October 1st.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 7:53 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Approved by the board on October 22, 2018.

