

Thursday, June 30, 2022

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held June 30, 2022, at Central High School, 1 Lincoln Boulevard, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:30 p.m. Present were members Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Bobbi Brown\*, Secretary Joseph Lombard, Christine Baptiste-Perez, Joe Sokolovic, and Erika Castillo. Albert Benejan\*\* and Michael Maccarone\* joined the meeting subsequently as noted. (\*remote participation) (\*\*remote and in-person participation)

Mr. Weldon said Mr. Sokolovic, Mr. Benejan, Ms. Brown, and Ms. Baptiste-Perez requested the special meeting. The first item agenda was on the performance of Mr. Sokolovic, which qualifies for executive session, unless Mr. Sokolovic required it be held in the open meeting.

Mr. Sokolovic asked that we have a temporary chair to run the meeting. He suggested Mr. Lombard could maintain neutrality on the issue. Mr. Weldon said such an item would have to have been noticed as agenda item.

Mr. Benejan\* joined the meeting.

Mr. Sokolovic said he would like to make his presentation without being interrupted. He said Mr. Weldon said on June 16th, in an illegal action, in violation of Freedom of Information, added an action item to the special meeting to level accusations against himself. He said this was based on an internal e-mail and he was then removed from all

committee assignments. He said he held nearly every meeting required as a committee chair and has a hundred percent attendance record for regular meetings and his own committee meetings over five years.

Mr. Sokolovic said the action was disproportionate to the inaction Mr. Weldon has taken towards board members in the past and present who fail to hold committee meetings, continue to have poor attendance, are under investigation or arrested for trespassing, kidnapping, stabbing, living out of district, election infractions, and those who post racist and homophobic material on social media.

Mr. Sokolovic read an e-mail he sent to Mr. Weldon about timely posting of agendas and committees, along with Mr. Weldon's response. Mr. Sokolovic read further e-mails that were exchanged.

Mr. Sokolovic said his e-mail was factual and contained no name-calling. He said there was no misconduct in the e-mail, much less anything to remove him from committees. He cited statements by Mr. Weldon and his posts on social media about racial and sexual issues, his vote on adding on Eid al-Fitr to the calendar, and action in forming a Calendar Committee.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Policy 9280 is silent on removing a committee member for cause. He said the chair does not have the power to remove a member for cause as stated by Mr. Weldon.

Mr. Sokolovic moved to "keep Mr. Sokolovic in place on all committees he was legally appointed to in accordance to Bylaw 9280." The motion was seconded by Ms. Baptiste-Perez.

In response to a question, Mr. Sokolovic said the misconduct he cited by other board members are far worse than any e-mail. He said he was called out publicly by the chair in violation of the law.

Mr. Maccarone\* joined the meeting.

Mr. Weldon said he and Mr. Sokolovic had a nasty back and forth on Facebook three years ago. He said his wife is of African descent and during a subsequent conversation his wife told him that she did not consider herself black. He said he later apologized to Mr. Sokolovic and considered that to be the end of it.

Mr. Benejan arrived at the meeting in person.

Mr. Weldon said he posted an item about spoof bad toys made by a company in Chicago, which he said he found humorous. He said Mr. Sokolovic manipulated an image to indicate he was a homophobe, which is not true. He said Mr. Sokolovic is a manipulative and conniver.

In response to a question, Mr. Weldon said the motion was invalid because it was not noted on the agenda.

Mr. Weldon said he has the authority to make the committee appointments.

Mr. Castillo asked why we were discussing an incident that took place three years ago. Mr. Weldon said the item was manipulated to assassinate his character.

Mr. Sokolovic said the person who failed to hold committee meetings for eight months was the chair of the Diversity,

Equity & Inclusion Committee, which stalled the committee for one year.

Ms. Castillo said this certainly hasn't been the case since she was sworn in in December.

There was a discussion of whether the agenda item allowed the motion.

Mr. Sokolovic said we have board members who have not showed up at committee meetings and others who aren't even assigned to committees. He said the chair was publicly called corrupt by Christopher Taylor and no action was taken.

Mr. Sokolovic said people behaved like the chair is behaving now, screaming and yelling over people who have the floor.

Ms. Castillo read Policy 9280 concerning committees. Mr. Sokolovic said the chair's action to remove him from committees is not referenced in the policy. He said Mr. Weldon's statement that he is removing me from committees because of conduct is invalid because he does not have that authority.

Mr. Weldon said he could have acted and remained silent but provided a brief explanation for his action. He said under Connecticut FOIA any action was not possible at tonight's meeting due to lack of notice. He said he could consult the board's counsel on the matter.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said she believed Mr. Weldon's comments while he was a board member were totally relevant. He said a board member in Naugatuck was asked to resign for comments in 2014. She said the chair could

have removed Mr. Sokolovic from the committees in silence, but Mr. Weldon made public allegations, without board members being notified and proper notice. She said she believed this action was in violation of the law. She said she would like to see any correspondence that is sent to the board's attorney.

Mr. Weldon said whether bringing up the subject of Mr. Sokolovic's conduct was a violation of FOIA, could be verified with Freedom of Information Commission. He said, even if it was a violation of FOI, that doesn't suddenly make his removal of Mr. Sokolovic invalid.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said Mr. Weldon was cherry-picking.

In response to a question, Mr. Weldon said the chairman's report was placed on the agenda four days before the meeting.

Mr. Sokolovic said it only satisfies half the law regarding posting meetings.

Mr. Weldon said the most appropriate action in response to an alleged FOIA violation is to file a complaint with the Freedom of Information Commission. He said they will conduct a finding and issue a finding and a proposed remedy.

Ms. Brown said she did not recall seeing the chair report as part of the initial agenda. Mr. Weldon said the initial agenda was prepared on either June 9th or 10th, and it was subsequently modified on Monday, June 13th.

Mr. Sokolovic said that meets one leg of the test, but the board members need to be informed. He said the board

members were not informed of the change. Mr. Weldon said the updated agenda is posted to the internal portal. He said he did not look in the portal so does not know who saw it.

In response to a question, Mr. Weldon said it was true that board members failed to hold committee meetings for eight months and only one meeting for the entire year. He said they are not required to hold meetings because it is within their discretion.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said the overwhelming number of district students are Latino and black, and she noted the lack of black males in the top two positions in the graduating classes at high schools. She said she found it highly doubtful there was no business to be conducted on diversity in the largest district in the state.

In response to question, Mr. Weldon said he spoke to members who had poor attendance at regular meetings. He said these members were not on a committee.

In response to a question, Mr. Weldon said the board members who were being investigated or were arrested or were claimed to be living out of the district or committing election infractions, were not on any committees. He said this was two years ago and involved people who are long gone. He said we can't reprimand people for what they do in their personal lives.

In response to a question, Mr. Weldon said how we conduct ourselves in public is in part interpreted as a reflection of the board itself.

In response to a question, Mr. Weldon said his posts were being interpreted as racist and homophobic.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said a lot of students have grown up in households with one or less parent figures. She said laughing at the death of parents is not funny. She said joking about choking hazards is not funny.

In response to a question, Mr. Weldon said he was a member of the board at the time he laughed at items shared by a Facebook friend.

Mr. Weldon said none of this has anything to do with his performance as the chair.

Mr. Weldon said this has turned more into an orchestrated hit job on him personally. He said he did not come here to be publicly berated or be shown in a light that is not true. He said we were on the agenda item of Mr. Sokolovic.

Mr. Weldon said all of this was precipitated by the e-mail exchange. He said most people would have called him and let him know about the problem with the notice. Mr. Sokolovic said he did not violate any rule.

Mr. Weldon said he was not answering what part of the e-mail he found rude and disrespectful because it was obvious.

Ms. Castillo said she was under the impression the meeting was on the e-mail exchange and she hoped it would be a more productive conversation about the behavior of board members. She said she was not interested in speculating about years and years of events that occurred before she was a member of the board. She said she found this to be beyond what is necessary.

Ms. Castillo moved to adjourn the meeting. Mr. Maccarone seconded the motion.

Mr. Sokolovic said there was a motion on the floor. Mr. Weldon said the motion was not debatable. Ms. Baptiste-Perez said Mr. Maccarone resigned.

Ms. Castillo said she did not feel comfortable voting on a motion that was potentially illegal. She suggested the board receive legal advice.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said the committee assignments were never changed on the website and Mr. Weldon illegally made causation accusations against Mr. Sokolovic.

Ms. Brown left the meeting.

The motion to adjourn the meeting was approved by a 4-3 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Maccarone, Lombard, and Castillo. Voting in opposition were members Benejan, Sokolovic, and Baptiste-Perez

The meeting was adjourned at 7:11p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod