

Thursday, June 9, 2022

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held June 9, 2022, at Bridgeport Regional Aquaculture Science & Technology Education Center, 60 Saint Stephens Road, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:07 p.m.

Present were Chair John Weldon, Vice Chair Bobbi Brown*, Secretary Joseph Lombard*, Joseph Sokolovic, Christine Baptiste-Perez, Albert Benejan, and Michael Maccarone. (*remote participation)

Supt. Michael J. Testani was present.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Daniela Aguerro, a 10th grade student at Central Magnet, said in Park City Magnet there has been a recent case of bullying, which has been nonstop, and no action has been taken about it. She said there have been many victims, including her sister. She said she had a whole timeline of the many cases that happened with multiple students.

Tia Conques, a former student at Central School, said her sister is in 7th grade and has been bullied since 4th grade. She said the situation has been brought to the attention of the administrators, including by her parents. She said not enough action has been taken. She said her little sister has been affected by the bullying.

Daniel Aguerro, Daniela's dad, said bullying is a very serious thing. He noted a lot of students commit suicide when they

are bullied. He said as a parent he would like to see action taken.

Mr. Weldon said the telephone numbers of the three speakers had been gathered and he expected Supt. Testani would follow up on the matter.

COMMITTEE REPORTS/REFERRALS:

Ms. Brown said the Ad Hoc Districtwide Branding Initiative Committee will meet on June 15th.

Mr. Lombard said the Ad Hoc Districtwide Calendar Committee had its first meeting and planned dates for subsequent meetings. He said legal counsel and possibly someone from CAFE would be present at the next meeting, which will take place on June 20th.

Mr. Sokolovic asked if it was a wise expenditure to have a lawyer from Berchem & Moses attend the committee meeting. Mr. Weldon said he asked for the attorney to attend at Mr. Lombard's request to provide clarity. Mr. Lombard said guidelines for future secular or nonsecular holiday considerations would be discussed. Mr. Sokolovic said the law was complied with when the Muslim holiday was discussed by the board. Mr. Weldon said he would inform Mr. Sokolovic of the legal costs when they are billed.

In response to a question, Mr. Weldon said counsel is developing a more expansive legal opinion. He said board members could submit questions in advance.

Mr. Weldon said the Contracts Committee met on June 2nd, and advanced five items to tonight's meeting.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Educational Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Committee will meet around the beginning of the school year.

Mr. Weldon said the Facilities Committee will meet on June 13th to discuss issues related to Hall and Edison Schools and receive the stewardship report.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Finance Committee met on May 31st and discussed the upcoming fiscal cliff and ESSER funding. He said the committee came to the conclusion that although elected officials are not taking the fiscal cliff seriously, the board needs to take it seriously and make proactive moves. He said the utilization of district buildings is being looked at. He said looking at RFPs for noncertified staff is being looked at, as the board does not negotiate those contracts.

Mr. Weldon said the Governance Committee will meet on the other side of the summer. Supt. Testani asked if the Governance Committee could meet to finalize the field trip policy before the start of the school year.

Mr. Weldon said the Personnel Comm met on the June 7th and interviews were held for the position of principal of Beardsley School. Supt. Testani said he will interview both candidates tomorrow and a final decision will be made probably on Monday.

Mr. Benejan said the Students and Families Committee will meet on June 16th.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said the Teaching & Learning Committee met on May 16th. Field trips, the Tango Flight, and Footsteps 2 Brilliance were discussed. She said she would make a referral to the own committee on bullying. She said,

in addition to the public comments, she had received text messages concerning an issue at Cesar Batalla School and the gravity seemed to go beyond bullying. She said the bullying policies had not been updated since 2011. She said she would like to speak to the superintendent on the issue.

SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT:

Supt. Testani noted the passing of Ms. Ivy Phillips, a longtime paraprofessional at Central. There was a moment of silence.

The superintendent said the annual Math Meet was held at Sacred Heart University. John Winthrop repeated as champions for the second year. A three-way tie for second place was decided in favor of Blackham School; third place was Multicultural Magnet; followed by Park City Magnet. Johnson School received the award for the most improved team.

Supt. Testani congratulated the hundred students who graduated from Adult Education last week and received a high school diploma or GED.

Supt. Testani said there were two amazing events last Saturday. An event with flag football, track meet, and kickball at Harding High was a collaboration with Don Wilson, with over 400 students from the district competing. Tim Grasty and Mark Karp worked on the event.

He said last week Peace Week kicked off, which will culminate this Saturday at Seaside Park.

Supt. Testani said there was a great multicultural event at Discovery Magnet School, with parents and staff

participating. He thanked Mr. Sokolovic and Mr. Benejan for attending.

The superintendent said June 14th is graduation day at Hartford Healthcare Amphitheater.

In response to a question about parents and LGBTQ issues, Supt. Testani said there aren't any specific personnel for that purpose, but social workers and school counselors are available. He said some schools have organizations and clubs.

In response to a question, the superintendent said he believed any treatment of Pride Month probably varied by building. He noted a lot goes on in schools in June.

The superintendent said the district's bullying policy could be looked at, but it is in line with state law. He said there should be more of an effort at the beginning of the next school year to educate students and families again on the parameters of bullying. He said something could have gotten lost over the last couple of years due to the pandemic.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani in some cases the term bullying is used loosely. There has to be repetitiveness before bullying is categorized. He said there needs to be restorative, not punitive, practices used when it comes to bullying. He said the SEL component is a large focus.

NEW BUSINESS:

The next item was discussion and possible approval to enter into a contract for student transportation services with We Transport, LLC.

Marlene Siegel, chief financial officer, was present. She said We Transport was the only bidder to the RFP issued in March. The proposed contract is for five years, 2022 to 2027, and will incorporate the management and routing services that were added in 2021 to the prior contract.

Ms. Siegel said the five-year period enables the district to secure the best possible pricing structure. She said in view of the supply chain issues we had to increase the age profile of vehicles by three years for school buses and smaller vans. There is a provision to reduce the age profile when and if supply conditions improve.

Ms. Siegel said the new contract calls for progressive electrification of the fleet, which is contingent upon the availability of vehicles, grant funding, and the adequacy of the required infrastructure. The provider is required to replace fifty percent of the existing fleet with brand-new vehicles during the five-year period, along with requirements for hybrid and electric vehicles.

Ms. Siegel said it is projected that inflation will ease, fuel prices will stabilize, and the supply chain will move more quickly. If that does occur, there is a clause for reconsideration of the rate schedule at a time when it is determined that cost savings could be derived.

Ms. Siegel said the rate schedule is higher than anticipated, with the best possible rates negotiated under the conditions, including global economic factors. In the first year, the increase in cost is projected to be \$1.2 million; in the second year, \$800,000; in the third year, close to \$700,000; in year four, \$800,000; and in the fifth year, \$800,000. The total increase over five years would be about \$4.3 million, or 21.97 percent, with a compounded factor of 23.95 percent.

Ms. Siegel said these were the best rates that we could achieved in the current environment.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the finance office would monitor the various economic factors and would work closely with We Transport on replacement and electrification of the fleet, and when cost savings are being realized we would approach We Transport to negotiate in accordance with the clause in the contract. She said the bipartisan infrastructure rebate program allows We Transport and the district to pursue such grant related to buses. She said priority districts such as Bridgeport are given preference.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said if We Transport obtains the grant it must utilize the buses in our district for at least five years. Ms. Baptiste-Perez said in theory We Transport could service another district in five years with a whole fleet of electric buses. Mr. Weldon noted We Transport services other communities in Long Island, but the charging infrastructure would be in Bridgeport. Ms. Siegel said under the grant, the bus company purchases the buses and applies to the district for the rebate, while the district submits the purchase order to the government.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the city attorney reviewed the provisions on the insurance provided by We Transport and it was deemed to be sufficient.

Mr. Lombard left the meeting.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the City Council has not formally voted to allow contracts of five years as of yet. Ms. Siegel said she anticipated approval of

the five-year limitation as the city attorney's office said the district could proceed with the five-year agreement.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the contract could be renegotiated if fuel costs decline significantly.

In response to a question, the superintendent said the city has not given a timeline as to when charging of personal vehicles at schools could occur.

Mr. Weldon moved *"to approve entering into the contract for student transportation services with We Transport, LLC, as presented by the CFO."* The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez expressed concern about leaving the issue of a five-year contract up in the air. Mr. Weldon said the city attorney seemed to be give a blessing to the five years; he noted exemptions had been granted in the past. He said fuel prices are changing. Ms. Siegel said if we agreed to a three-year contract, the price structure would be higher than a five-year contract.

Mr. Weldon suggested entering into the agreement and if the City Council votes down five-year contracts, it could be revisited. Ms. Siegel said it could be written as a three-year contract, with an option to extend for one or two years. She said she would be surprised if the City Council did not approve the change.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said we should always get something in writing from the city attorney.

The motion was approved by a 4-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Maccarone, Brown, and Benejan

Ms. Baptiste-Perez and Mr. Sokolovic abstained.

The next agenda item was on a solicitation for commodity and commercial food and paper/cleaning supply bids for the 2022-23 school year.

John Garrity, director of food and nutrition, was present. Mr. Weldon said the material was provided to the board in their packages. He described it as an annual thing of going out to the marketplace.

Mr. Benejan moved *“to approve issuing the solicitation as presented by the food and nutrition director.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Maccarone.

In response to a question, Mr. Garrity said he anticipated returning with the actual bids and a recommendation to issue contracts in early August.

The motion was unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was discussion and possible approval to entering into a memorandum of understanding with United Illumination Company for various energy conservations projects.

Jorge Garcia, facilities director, was present. He said the MOU includes a 45 percent rebate on any energy projects that we embark on. The goal is to complete the lighting upgrades in the last thirty schools that have not had lighting upgrades. UI is willing to put up \$500,000 for the next three years. It is believed six schools can be done in the first wave, with estimated savings in the area of \$200,000.

Mr. Sokolovic moved “to enter into the memorandum of understanding with United Illuminating for the various energy conservation projects as presented by Mr. Garcia.” The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was discussion and possible approval of entering into a joint contract with the City of Bridgeport for retiree prescription insurance with OptumRx, Inc.

Ulysses Rogers of the payroll and benefits office and Monty Miles of the city were present.

Mr. Rogers said the RFP was for the Medicare prescription benefit manager, which was presented to the Contracts Committee last week. He said the previous carrier was Express Scripts. He said savings of about \$7.1 million were realized, including \$2.1 million for the board, over a three-year period.

Mr. Sokolovic said he believed there were more board retirees than city retirees. Supt. Testani noted city and fire employees have an earlier retirement age. The ratio of employees was requested or the premium payments. Ms. Miles said the savings is based on the enrollment and the usage of medications. She said there are more city retirees in the plan because not all teachers are in the plan, which only covers retirees over 65 on Medicare. She said it includes certified and noncertified board retirees.

Mr. Rogers and Ms. Miles said rebates and subsidies are factored in when calculating the savings.

Ms. Miles said based on the May enrollment, there were 926 board retirees and 1205 city retirees. Mr. Weldon said he

calculated the ratio at 43 percent board retirees. Ms. Miles said the numbers, and the subsidies and rebates, fluctuate from month to month based on utilization by the members in the plan.

Mr. Sokolovic said the numbers should be looked at more closely, including the utilization rate, to make sure we're getting our bang for the buck. He noted this is coming out of education dollars at a time when the city is not funding the district.

Ms. Miles said when the savings are reported monthly to the city and board, they are broken out by city and board. Mr. Weldon said that could be regularly reported to the Finance Committee. Mr. Sokolovic said he would like to see the rationale in black and white.

In response to a question, Mr. Rogers said the board was currently in this contract with OptumRx. Mr. Sokolovic questioned why we were presented with this now; he said people's failure to plan doesn't constitute an emergency.

Mr. Weldon said the underlying question was why we were doing this after the contract was entered into. Ms. Miles said the contract was approved by legal and went back forth between the companies, and savings were realized as of January 1st. Mr. Sokolovic said he had to sign off on and pay for a contract that was never put before us, which was totally unacceptable.

In response to a question, Ms. Miles said the city would move forward with the contract if the board did not participate. Mr. Rogers said the board would lose coverage and would have to find other coverage, which could drive up the cost.

Ms. Brown said this is feeling rushed. Mr. Weldon said it is rushed and he did not like the position we are in, but if we go out to bid separately that would result in a higher cost to the district. He said this should have come to the board last fall.

Ms. Brown said documents should be presented to us in a timely manner. Mr. Weldon said we did not have a whole lot of choice at this point, and this should be dealt with at the staff level.

In response to a question, Mr. Rogers said it was a three-year contract.

Mr. Weldon moved *“to approve this.”*

Mr. Benejan said he wanted to know why it was presented at the last moment. Mr. Weldon said if it is not approved, the board retirees will not have coverage while we go out to bid for a separate policy.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said we should have been prepared for this and there should have been better communication.

Ms. Miles said the city and the board conducted the RFP together. She said the district was with the city on every step. Mr. Weldon said something went wrong at the staff level on our side. Supt. Testani said he would investigate further.

In response to a question, Ms. Miles and Mr. Rogers said the board was being presented with the most advantageous response to the RFP.

Mr. Maccarone seconded the motion.

Mr. Weldon said he didn't like this any more than anyone else, but the board did not have much choice. Mr. Sokolovic said he would like to see how the numbers were arrived at. He said this was not the first time we had a discussion about a joint RFP with the city. He said he had real concerns and he did not know if it was beneficial to us as much as the city.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez moved for a five-minute recess. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The meeting was recessed at 7:31 p.m.

The meeting was reconvened at 7:48 p.m.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said he would have to investigate the situation as to the timing of bringing this forward.

In response to question, Supt. Testani said it was a three-year contract.

During the vote, Mr. Weldon said if the motion failed, we would not be a part of this policy and our retirees would lose coverage while we went out to bid for a separate policy, which would likely be at a greater cost because it is a smaller group of people. Ms. Baptiste-Perez said she would support the motion because it is not fair to the retirees to lose coverage because somebody was at fault. She said the date three years from now is very important because she will still be on the board and the matter should be presented in a timely manner.

The motion was approved by a 3-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, MacCarone, and Baptiste-Perez. Mr.

Sokolovic was opposed. Members Brown and Benejan abstained.

The next agenda item was possible approval for the board to enter into a joint contract with the city for retiree Medicare Advantage insurance with Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield.

Mr. Weldon said he understood the contract was likewise already in place and ratification was being requested.

Supt. Testani said he wanted to make sure this was never repeated again at the staff level. He said outside of the prior notification to the board, the issuance to the RFP, the receiving of the proposals, and selecting the best proposal would have all occurred in the same manner it did.

Mr. Weldon said under normal circumstances the board would approve entering into a joint solicitation with the city, which would result in proposals that would be scored, and it would be brought to the board for approval.

Mr. Rogers said the renewal was chosen because of the savings presented by Anthem.

Mr. Sokolovic said he would like to know the premium payment proportions and employee proportions between the city and the board. Mr. Rogers said the split is the same, 43 percent for the board. The overall savings is \$3.7 million, with \$1.7 million of the savings for the board.

Mr. Sokolovic said because the numbers were not readily available it told him that the decision on proportionality is not well thought out. Mr. Rogers said the data could be provided subsequently.

Mr. Weldon said we were basically in the same boat as the last item.

Mr. Rogers said only Aetna and Anthem went to bid for the RFP. The savings for staying with Anthem were \$3.7 million compared to \$150,000 with Aetna.

Mr. Rogers said there are nine different plan types, and the premium is based on the plan type.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested taking the vote, with the board later receiving the numbers. If there was something with the numbers, we should go back to the city and reallocate the shares if needed.

Mr. Weldon moved "*to approve entering into the joint contract with the City of Bridgeport for retiree Medicare Advantage insurance with Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield.*" The motion was seconded by Mr. Maccarone.

The motion was approved by a 2-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon and Maccarone. Mr. Sokolovic was opposed. Members Brown, Baptiste-Perez and Benejan abstained.

The next agenda item was a district security protocols briefing. Lt. Paul Grech of the police department, who is in general oversight of district security, was present. Mr. Weldon said security matters do not qualify for discussion in executive session. Lt. Grech said he anticipated talking about matters that should only be discussed in executive session.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez moved “*to go into executive session.*” the motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested discussing non-sensitive items in public session. Supt. Testani said a collaborative town hall session would be held with Lt. Grech and Chief Garcia.

Invited to participate in the executive session were the board members, the superintendent, and Lt. Grech.

The motion was unanimously approved.

The executive session began at 8:13 p.m.
The board reconvened in public session at 9:40 p.m.

Supt. Testani gave an overview of the executive session. He thanked Lt. Grech for providing a report on school security processes and procedures. He said that in the advocacy for more SROs it has to be emphasized that these are not police officers in school buildings, which has not been the case in the district for ten years. He said it was an opportunity to secure support for safe passage of children to and from school. He said there is extensive training and unannounced drills throughout the school year for emergencies.

The superintendent said the biggest piece is the professional collaboration between the district and the police department through Lt. Grech. He said the information that is provided is usually time-sensitive and critical in making sure that sound decisions are made to keep children and staff safe. He said the town hall would also give information on the ways parents and families can work collaboratively with the district.

Supt. Testani said support staff would participate in the town hall because often there are signals and things that people could have identified as triggers to an incident.

Mr. Benejan moved to adjourn the meeting. The motion was seconded by Ms. Baptiste-Perez and unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:41 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

DRAFT