

Tuesday, October 29, 2018

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held October 29, 2018, at Bridgeport City Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:00 p.m.

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

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

The first agenda item was the superintendent's evaluation. Dr. Johnson said she completed her discussions with all board members except Mr. Bradley. She noted Mr. Taylor did not participate in the evaluation.

Dr. Johnson thanked the board for the evaluation process. She said she welcomed the feedback, especially from the educators on the boards, Ms. Allen and Mr. Walker.

Dr. Johnson said from her appointment as superintendent in spring 2017 she has made a concerted effort to improve outcomes for all children and enhance her relationship with all stakeholders. She said the district had made gains by an increased graduation rate, increase in math and literacy standardized assessment, decline in disciplinary infractions, increase in the number of minority hires, increased access to college credit-bearing courses, and the development of a

district strategic plan.

Dr. Johnson noted she and the board agreed to use the Connecticut Leadership Competence Framework for the 2017-18 year, which included eight domains. She said she wanted to use the rubric to establish a true baseline for her work. She said several issues surfaced prohibiting the establishment of an authentic baseline for Year One.

Dr. Johnson said she had four major areas of concern. She said much to her dismay she was informed that the delay in the timeline of the evaluation was intentional to allow to a timeline of political events such as the primary to occur. She said the extension of the timeline was designed to allow negative comments and reduction of scores to enter into the evaluation. She said she heard this from several board members directly. She said there was correspondence in August indicating Mr. Weldon had changed his rating on five of the eight domains, including two scores of 1 that had previously not existed.

Dr. Johnson said all scores of 1, 2 or 4 were supposed to be substantiated with data points by the board members issuing those ratings, however, they were not provided by all board members. She said the data points are utilized to provide an objective lens without bias of any kind. She said this did not occur during her evaluation.

Dr. Johnson said she had concerns about input from prior board members. She said in the evaluation summary it was noted there were conversations with a previous board chair regarding communication with the superintendent. She said she did not agree to having input from former board members as part of the evaluation process.

Dr. Jonson said her fourth area of concern was lack of clarity regarding the domains. She said in reviewing the feedback and in dialogue with board members there is an overlap of understanding between domain five and domain eight; five is related to the board and eight is related to the personal leadership of the superintendent, not board relationships. She said she was told by a board member that they based domain eight on superintendent and board relationships and provided the same rating in domain five, rather than viewing them as two distinct domains.

Dr. Johnson said on page 22 the evaluation indicated the board voted to engage in the after-school program. She said her qualifying statement was "The after-school grant, which contains my signature, is done under duress and only because I was directed by the board to do so. In addition, the after-school grant contains several untruths and inaccuracies, as I shared with the author of the application on July 17, 2017, as well as with the Bridgeport Board of Education on August 28, 2017."

Dr. Johnson said when the Lighthouse was submitting their application there were some inaccuracies and untruths in the document and she put this disclaimer on the document before she signed it.

Dr. Johnson said the board chair indicated this was borderline insubordination. She said she signed the document and there was no evidence of insubordination. She also objected to a suggestion on page 22 that she had secretly assembled a grant application to allow the district to run its own after-school program. She said this was false as there was a meeting with the city's chief of staff in her office and a second meeting with other city officials. She added board policy does not indicate that the superintendent must

disclose the submission of grant applications prior to application. She said the board chair chose to portray her attempt to provide our children with high-quality programming as borderline insubordination.

Dr. Johnson said during the current after-school program a child was left behind at Hooker School until 7:00 p.m. and the principal had to return from home to assist. She said at Bryant School a guardian has entered the school during the after-school program with firearms on his person twice.

Dr. Johnson said page 24 of the evaluation indicates it is not uncommon for the board chair to send a text or email to the superintendent and receive no response at all. She said this is completely inaccurate as one of her strengths is the ability to be nimble and be very responsive to all stakeholders. She asked that the reduction of staff, which results in a reduction of her time, be considered when seeking a return communication. She said she frequently receives over two hundred to three hundred emails on a daily basis.

Dr. Johnson said going forward she will keep log entries of communications. She said she has shared with the chair that her workweek is extremely busy and frequent calls throughout the day create challenging work conditions.

Dr. Johnson noted the three next-step goals are highlighted as relationship with the board, increase in parental engagement and strategies to improve anti-bullying. She said those are the things she captured from the meetings to focus on for 2018-19.

Dr. Johnsons said she learned lessons from the four concerns she listed. She said she should have stuck to the timeline on her evaluation, but she was unaware there was a

conspiracy regarding the timing. She said she it is only fair for her to receive a data point for a 1, 2 or 4 score, which is what the board agreed to. She said she had been asked to do more and more than any other superintendent, with less staff and less dollars. She said she was asking for a level of respect and fairness that she did not see over the 2017-18 school year. She asked the board to trust her that she had the best interests of the kids at heart. She said she didn't think she was on the same page with the board in the past school year, but she wanted to move forward as a team without the divisiveness.

Ms. Pereira said delaying the evaluation was because the Ganim administration didn't want it done before Mayor Ganim's primary. She said members of his administration called Mr. Weldon and several other board members asking that the evaluation not be completed before the August 14th primary.

Ms. Pereira said the board had never hindered a superintendent from applying for a competitive grant. She said the 21st Century Grant used by Lighthouse is a competitive grant.

Ms. Pereira said Dr. Johnson informed her earlier about the great amount of e-mails she receives. She added that standard practice in professional entities gives at least 48 hours of business days to respond to inquiries. She said if board members had urgent inquiries that they be designated as such.

Dr. Johnson said she makes every effort to be available to all board members, even on weekends. She said if a board member does not hear from her, she suggested they call her back, and it does not need to show up in her evaluation. She

said she was unaware of any time she missed a return call.

Mr. Sokolovic said since he has been on the board he has sent about eight specific e-mails to the superintendent. He said most things he encounters do not rise to the level of superintendent intervention.

Mr. Walker said he also practices a hands-off policy unless it is an urgent matter, which is more typically informational. He said he viewed his job as a board member to have a three-thousand-foot view.

Dr. Johnson noted she returned Mr. Weldon's call twice today and both times it went to voicemail. She said that is a lot for her during the workday, and she is even more sensitive about it because it is in her evaluation. She said, to be quite honest, she didn't see the matter today as that urgent.

Dr. Johnson said she tries to respond by the end of the day to every board member phone call and she usually goes through all her e-mails before the end of the day. She said she found it very offensive and insulting to have in her evaluation that she is not very responsive.

Ms. Pereira said she avoids contacting Dr. Johnson on Mondays because it is a very challenging day. She said board policy indicates board members cannot contact the superintendent's staff without her approval.

Ms. Allen said she may be the board member who contacts Dr. Johnson least of all. She said Dr. Johnson had been very responsive to the few things she has spoken to her about.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said she believed the

public already had the evaluation table produced by board members. Mr. Weldon said Dr. Johnson's response should be public also. Dr. Johnson said she would like to give some thought to providing her written response. Mr. Weldon noted if one of the responses is FOI-able it's all FOI-able. Ms. Pereira said a lot of large districts do put such evaluations and responses on their websites. Mr. Weldon said he would leave it up to Dr. Johnson.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said she believed the evaluation rubric was very fair, but the interpretation of domain eight is an issue.

Ms. Pereira said it is common practice when you rate somebody with a bad score in one place you don't ding them again on the exact same thing in another category.

Mr. Walker said he viewed his role as understanding the evaluation rubric and if there is something he doesn't understand he will ask. He said he believed people who gave scores of 1 or 2 without citing data had preconceived scores and they shoehorned the ratings in after pulling them out of the air. He said data points for every score should be provided.

Mr. Walker said, directing his comment to Mr. Weldon, the board does not hold to timelines. He said the evaluation was supposed to be done in June and we are now almost in November. He said Mr. Weldon had to take responsibility for this.

Ms. Allen said she apologized if she did something unfair to the superintendent on the evaluation. She said it was her first time she had done this for a superintendent.

Ms. Pereira said there were four board members who met the timelines and came to every meeting completely prepared. She said three of the people who gave scores of 1 or 2 missed every deadline, didn't write a comprehensive evaluation and aren't here tonight. She noted Dr. Johnson was a professional with a doctorate, but there are people on the board who can't understand a rubric when writing her evaluation.

Ms. Pereira said Mr. Weldon had no authority to extend the timeline and still let Ms. Martinez turn in her evaluation after the final deadline. She said he did this because Ms. Martinez and Mr. Bradley were out on the campaign trail. Ms. Pereira noted she worked on a campaign just as hard, but she met the timelines and guidelines. She said if we're not treating the superintendent with dignity and respect, what does that say to everybody else in this district.

Mr. Sokolovic said the lack of reporting on bullying was the major problem in regard to bullying. He said if the number of bullying reports go up that would be a positive for the evaluation.

Mr. Walker said the areas in the superintendent's evaluation that are listed as areas of needing improvement should be worked into the board's goals. He said the board's goals could be measured based on the superintendent's evaluation. He said it's possible the board needs to set down some criteria regarding Dr. Johnson's relations with the board.

Dr. Johnson said it was noted in her evaluation that she was causing the board to fracture. She said she would like to know what the board expects from her to mend those fences.



Ms. Pereira said she emphasized in her evaluation that it was critical the superintendent follow state statutes, board policy and Robert's Rules. She said if Dr. Johnson is following what the bylaws say govern the board then she didn't see how Dr. Johnson could lose. She said the superintendent could only take direction from the full board at a duly called meeting. She said Dr. Johnson should stand up to board members requesting her to do something prohibited by board policy.

Dr. Johnson said her three bullet points she had in summary were improve relationships with the board, increase parental engagement and developing strategies for bullying prevention.

Dr. Johnsons said she wanted to know what the improving relationships looked like for every board member because they have different expectations.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said she feels a heightened sense of urgency when a parent calls her directly because they have gone through other channels previously. She said she did not feel extra pressure if it comes from a board member.

Dr. Johnson said she believed there needed to be mutual trust and respect between the superintendent and the board. She said the board has to consider the political ramifications to their actions as well that cloud the decision-making oftentimes. She said her decisions on based on student-first.

Dr. Johnson said the board members were uniquely different and it was like dating nine different people with nine different

sets of sets of needs and different personalities. She noted she doesn't hear from some board members until the meetings. She said she can be timely in communication, but asked for trust and respect. She said she was working down the line of children first and not the line of politics. She said she was at the end of her career and did not have a secret or hidden agenda.

Dr. Johnson said there have been times when she's turned around and felt the board was not behind her.

Mr. Illingworth joined the meeting.

Mr. Walker said he agreed with Ms. Pereira that Dr. Johnson should simply follow the board policies in dealing with individual board members.

Ms. Pereira said the thing she loved the most about Dr. Johnson was that she was apolitical and oriented towards children first. She said that could not be said about Dr. Ramos, Paul Vallas or Ms. Rabinowitz. She said she had major disagreements at times with Dr. Johnson and in the end she respected the fact that Dr. Johnson stood her ground.

Mr. Weldon said he viewed the current evaluation of the superintendent complete after having her response. He said the next step was working on the three items that have risen to the top. He said the question was what things the board is going to measure to see how well Dr. Johnson is achieving these things.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said she didn't want to use all eight domains because that is not typically done. Mr. Sokolovic said the board could focus in on the areas and

it would go smoother with four domains.

Dr. Johnson said she did not believe she had a true and authentic baseline based on what she stated earlier.

Mr. Illingworth said since his meeting with the superintendent the communication in both directions has improved.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said to know that the city administration can call and weigh in on her scoring is concerning to her. She noted she had not made a decision yet on whether to submit a written response to her evaluation.

There was a discussion of how to phrase a goal involving timely communications. Ms. Pereira suggested a response within 48 hours of urgent communications. Mr. Weldon suggested 48 or 72 hours of any communications. Ms. Pereira suggested the use of the phrase “business day” and the requirement to acknowledge a communication within 48 hours. She said board members must notify the superintendent if the matter is urgent, which should be responded to within 24 hours.

Mr. Weldon said the requirements were getting too specific. Dr. Johnson said she worried about a day potentially when she was sick.

Ms. Pereira suggested the wording: acknowledgement of board member communication within two business days. Board members will notify the superintendent if a matter is urgent and requires same-day response.

Mr. Weldon said this is sounding more like a procedure than metrics that can be measured.

Ms. Pereira said board members who had an issue with communications are the ones who should set the metrics.

Mr. Illingworth said the one-on-one meetings with the superintendent led to the clarification of a lot of things.

There was a discussion of how to phrase the goals about communication. Wording was suggested to the effect of, “continue to develop meaningful work relationships with the board by consistently applying policy to all board members; regularly communicates school district updates; communicates emergency situations on a timely basis.”

Mr. Weldon suggested all board members should receive responses by the superintendent to individual board members. Dr. Johnson said if a board member wanted all board members on a response to an inquiry they could include all board members on the initial inquiry.

The next discussion was on parent engagement. Ms. Pereira suggested goals calling for conducting neighborhood forums on the strategic plan and budget; and (2) ensuring PAC and PTSO parent engagement funds are being used in a timely and meaningful manner to effectively engage parents.

Mr. Illingworth questioned how much the superintendent could control parent engagement. Ms. Pereira said the monitoring of parent engagement funds was taking place this year would be effective in getting the message out.

Mr. Sokolovic left the meeting.

For the goal around bullying, Ms. Pereira suggested “continue

to develop strategies around accurate reporting of bullying incidents and substantiation of bullying incidents; and (2) the continued development of strategies around educating students, staff and parents on bullying prevention.

Dr. Johnson said she was fine with those as goals.

Mr. Illingworth said his biggest concern was some of the falsifying of reports and numbers. Ms. Pereira noted last year there were around 60 incidents of bullying and only 19 were substantiated. She said Dr. Johnson has been doing amazing reporting on anti-bullying efforts in the schools this month.

Mr. Illingworth said he did not want to micromanage the superintendent and noted people underneath her are responsible for many aspects of the bullying situation.

Mr. Weldon said he saw the same thing two years in a row, which meant there is a disconnect. Ms. Pereira said the problem went back four years. Mr. Weldon said there is something wrong if the superintendent and her predecessors had the same thing happening. Mr. Walker said this had to be seen as a long-term project.

Ms. Pereira said the efforts to prevent bullying from happening in the first place have to be a major part of the effort.

There was a discussion of which domains to place the goals for this year under.

Mr. Walker said he believed the bullying goal should be under domain three. Ms. Pereira said the discussion so far indicated domains one, three and five should be retained for

this year.

Dr. Johnson said the bullying issue could also come under domain one because it is more than just reporting.

Ms. Pereira said in evaluation writing you should not put something in two boxes because you can rate positively or negatively twice on the same thing. She noted Dr. Johnson said that took place in her evaluation in domains five and eight.

Dr. Johnson said it was important to get the three bullet items into the document.

Ms. Pereira said she would send a draft of the discussion points for review by board members and Dr. Johnson.

Mr. Walker thanked Dr. Johnson for her candor. Dr. Johnson said it was not personal, just business.

Mr. Walker noted the superintendent does a big report about once a year on the strategic plan. Last year, she compared 2016-17 and 2017-18 and showed where the growth was. This was presented at a Teaching & Learning Committee by the directors.

Ms. Pereira said the committees could report out to the full board periodically on where we are on the domains.

Mr. Illingworth said when Ms. Baraka was chair each committee set its goals for the year.

Ms. Pereira suggested committees report out on the goals.

Ms. Allen moved the meeting be adjourned. The motion was

seconded by Ms. Pereira and unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:21 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

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