

Saturday, December 14, 2019

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE
BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held December
14, 2019, at Bridgeport City Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace,
Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 9:15 a.m. Present were Chair Jessica Martinez, Vice President Hernan Illingworth, Secretary Bobbi Brown, John Weldon, Joseph Sokolovic, Sybil Allen, Albert Benejan and Joseph Lombard. Bobbi Brown and Chair Jessica Martinez arrived subsequently as noted.

Acting Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

Don Harris, CABE president; Patrice McCarthy, CABE deputy director and general counsel; and Bob Rader, executive director of CABE were present.

Mr. Harris described his background, which includes serving as chair of the Bloomfield Board of Education. He thanked the board for the request to come down and work with the board. He said CABE wanted to get more involved with Bridgeport with the services CABE can offer. He described the current activities of CABE.

Mr. Testani noted he sat in on a recent session with Atty. McCarthy which included topics that would be covered in the upcoming short session of the legislature. He thanked the CABE for coming down to Bridgeport for this day.

Mr. Rader said he provided the board information on parliamentary procedures, media tips, possible answers to

inquiries from a parent or the press, roles and responsibilities of board members, a board meeting guide, and legislative priorities.

The board members described their reasons for joining the board. Mr. Illingworth said being the parent of a daughter in the district and a parent leader he realized all the challenges all the district's schools face. Mr. Sokolovic said as a parent he started to get involved after an incident at school with his son and the policies of his magnet school.

Mr. Testani said he got into education by accident, attending a session on a master's program in education at the University of Bridgeport and going into education because he enjoyed working with young people while coaching baseball. He said he was happy to serve the kids and families in Bridgeport.

Mr. Lombard said he went into Teach for America despite being pre-med major. He taught for two years in Phoenix, one year in San Francisco, and has been in postsecondary education ever since. He then unexpectedly learned about an opening on the Board of Education and decided to apply.

Ms. Brown arrived at the meeting.

Mr. Weldon said he got involved because he wanted to do what he could to normalize the board after reading in the news about its dysfunction. He said he had experience with another public agency about twenty years ago that was turned around.

Mr. Benejan said he became a PAC president when his son entered Webster School and he continued in the same role

up through high school. He said he decided to run for the board to help parents and students.

Ms. Brown said she served on the superintendent's youth board when Dr. Ramos was superintendent. She said after returning from college she observed some of the same issues as when she was a student in the district. She said she wants to help the students and younger parents. She said she looked forward to making hard decisions and not feeling like we're keeping the community out. She described the mentorship program for young girls she created.

Mr. Rader began the discussion of the agenda items. He said the role of the board consists of three main things: adopting a budget, adopting policy, and the selection, support of and evaluation of the superintendent. He said evaluations have to be done once a year by law.

Mr. Rader said he recommended boards conduct a self-evaluation before evaluating the superintendent.

There was a discussion of the budget process in the city. Mr. Weldon said he did not believe the board should be involved in decisions such as what positions remain or are cut. Mr. Sokolovic said the City Council spent 30 to 40 hours working on the city's budget, while the board barely has seven or eight finance meetings throughout the year.

Mr. Testani said to sit back and wait for the city to create a budget and then complain about it being insufficient has been the board's practice. He urged the board and the superintendent's office go to the city proactively before the budget is established.

Mr. Testani said the city seemed to respond with resistance to requests for specific items, so the better approach is to present a percentage increase that is needed to maintain and enhance services.

Mr. Illingworth urged community input on the board be received through meetings starting in January. He said a lot of people in the community expected the board to view the city as the enemy. He said if there was not a dialogue between the board and the city the students would suffer. He added he would be interesting in hearing about practices around the state around budget seasons.

Mr. Sokolovic said pressure from the board on the city did not work; the pressure is needed from the public and the voters. He noted the city funded \$1.2 million for buses last year and refused to put it into the MBR(minimum budget requirement).

Mr. Benejan said he did not like to see cuts in low-income people such as custodians, security guards and cafeteria workers. He said he believed good communication was possible between the board and the City Council on a consistent basis.

Atty. McCarthy said communication and building relationships is key to the budget process. She said the advocacy role of the board is especially important in the budget area.

Atty. McCarthy noted education in Connecticut is a constitutional right that the state legislature has delegated to local and regional boards of education. She added board members are often approached by the public as if they can solve specific problems. She said it was important to make

the community understand that the board only has power when it comes together as a body in a meeting. She cautioned board members against telling members of the public that they will take action on a complaint about a specific classroom or employee. She said the parent should be guided so they are empowered with the knowledge of whom to contact.

Mr. Sokolovic said he often had to back away from issues with his son's education because he is a board member.

Mr. Testani said he agreed with Mr. Harris that a heads-up call from a board member about a forthcoming parent complaint is much appreciated. He said oftentimes these types of issues are simply a miscommunication.

Atty. McCarthy said board members should recognize that when a board member comes into a building they should be sensitive to their position and perceptions that are created.

Mr. Weldon said he has been approached by staff members in the past indicating they had a fear of board members. He noted the board's policies require the superintendent's approval for board members' interactions with staff.

Ms. Martinez arrived at the meeting.

Mr. Testani said along with the staff he has been trying to establish a culture of collaboration that is positive because it trickles down to our students.

Atty. McCarthy said the board sets a tone for civility as an example for students.

Mr. Harris said he sees the role of the board and its chair being to help the superintendent, who is the board's only employee. He said a self-evaluation by the board is a valuable process. Mr. Rader noted the packet provided included a sample form for boards' self-evaluation.

Mr. Harris said he believed the board chair's responsibility is to run an effective meeting. He said he begins meetings with expectations for decorum and what people can and cannot do.

Mr. Rader said it was the board's chair responsibility to get to know the other people on the board and the issues that drive them. He discussed the theory of interests drives action. He said one-on-one meetings between the chair and board members are productive.

Mr. Harris suggested coordinating communications to the superintendent through the chair so as not to overwhelm the superintendent.

Mr. Sokolovic said often the board extensively vets issues at the committee level and then one or two board members discuss the issue at length at the meeting of the full board. Mr. Illingworth said this was an area where the board had to do a better job.

There was a discussion of the uses of filibustering meetings by board members.

Mr. Testani said the public often had a mistaken belief that the superintendent is involved in every decision that takes place in the district. He said process and policies govern the actions of 3,000 employees. He refers people requesting employment to the HR department.

Ms. Brown said it was sad that people in Bridgeport believe everyone is in everyone's pocket. She said she viewed the role of the board to include making clear this was not the case.

The meeting was recessed between 10:50 a.m. and 11:01 a.m.

There was a discussion of a handout that asked about areas where authority rests between the board and the superintendent. Mr. Rader said the document was from a book put out by the National School Board Association.

Mr. Weldon said he believed the superintendent had the authority to create the central office administrative structure he thinks he needs and to move the money around accordingly. Mr. Sokolovic said he would agree with that concept in the absence of prior board action because the board sets the priorities.

Ms. Martinez said it was ridiculous that a prior superintendent had four assistant superintendents so she voted to make a cut.

Atty. McCarthy said when the board takes action to adopt the budget for the upcoming year the details in the line items drives what would have to come back to the board for action.

In response to a question, Atty. McCarthy said the board's basic responsibility is to adopt a budget and make sure the district does overspend the bottom line. Mr. Lombard said it seemed the board was too involved in the budget balancing process in the past.

Mr. Weldon said he believed the superintendent should be able to read the discussions going on at the board level and act accordingly.

Mr. Sokolovic noted the board was charged to adopt a balanced budget. Mr. Testani said the board's obligation was to have the budget balanced by the end of the fiscal year, not necessarily prior to the fiscal year.

There was a discussion of the concept of the superintendent and the board as a leadership team.

Mr. Sokolovic said he has often expressed displeasure at a vote of the board, but he will support the decisions made by the majority of the board. Mr. Rader said everyone should be given a chance to speak on a decision of the board.

Atty. McCarthy cautioned the board against inadvertent illegal meetings via electronic messaging. She said when board members speak most people in the public view it as the board's thinking about an issue, which can impact the credibility of the board.

Mr. Weldon urged the board members only discuss board-related business in a legally called meeting to avoid what are considered serial meetings.

Mr. Sokolovic said when he posts things on Facebook for public information he will often block board members when other board members have commented to prevent creating a meeting.

Atty. McCarthy noted even though FOIA complaints often fail they go on forever and people tend to only remember the complaint, not the disposition.

Mr. Rader distributed a document from the National School Board Association on goal-setting.

Mr. Rader discussed possible goals for the budget: the budget process; committee structure; better internal communications; and communications with the community.

There was a discussion of the use of social media by board members.

Mr. Testani said he believed it was his responsibility and the board's to speak up for the children who do not have a voice.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said the role of student representatives to the board was being fine-tuned to allow them to make meaningful contributions.

Mr. Weldon said principals in the district have declined to pursue sending student representatives to the board because they are afraid of what the students will be exposed to based on what has occurred in the past.

Mr. Sokolovic said he was disturbed this was the first he was hearing of the matter. He said the policy regarding student representatives was implemented by the board unanimously.

Mr. Testani said he was told by the principals the student representatives that were elected did not want to come to the meetings as they were.

Ms. Martinez said the student representatives might be even more effective at the committees than with the full board. She said it was unfortunate that our behavior has affected the students.

Atty. McCarthy suggested the board members take the high road and let their demeanor and decisions speak for themselves, and keep the focus on the students.

Mr. Rader urged the board stay focused and united.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:13 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod