

Monday, March 11, 2019

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held March 11, 2019, at Bridgeport Regional Aquaculture Science & Technology Education Center, 60 St. Stephens Road, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 4:11 p.m.

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

Mr. Weldon said the purpose of the meeting was to conduct interviews of candidates to fill the board vacancy created by the February 15th, 2019, resignation of Dennis Bradley. He said there are six candidates to be interviewed and each board member would ask one question.

Ms. Pereira asked all the candidates a question indicating 13 percent of the student population in the district are white, 34 percent are black and 48 percent Hispanic. The 2010 census shows that Bridgeport's total population was only 22 percent white, 35 percent black and 38 percent Hispanic. Yet the current makeup of the school board is only 13 percent black, 25 percent Hispanic, while disproportionately white at 63 percent. She said 13.4 percent of the male student population is white, yet 50 percent of the school board is made up of white males; 34 percent of our male student population is black, yet we have zero black male school board members; 48 percent of our male student population

is Hispanic, yet we only have one Hispanic BOE member, equating to 13 percent of our current school board members.

Based on the student population, the city of Bridgeport's population, and the current makeup of the school board, what is your position on the importance of the school board reflecting the diversity of the very students, parents and residents we serve, and based on whatever position you take, why are you then the best candidate to serve on the school board?

Mr. Walker asked the candidates: The board has been scheduled to meet 21 times for Regular Meetings, 39 times for Special Meetings, and each member was obligated to participate in two committees that were scheduled ten times or more during the year, which works out to about a hundred meetings per year, with an estimated meeting length of three hours. There are often hundreds of pages of documents to read in preparation for the meetings. He said attendance had been an issue with some members, causing problems in meeting a quorum. He asked, if selected to join the board, would the applicant commit to attending all meetings assigned and to come to the meetings with adequate preparation and documents.

Mr. Sokolovic asked the candidates if they have been rejected for employment with Bridgeport Public Schools and, if so, why did they think they were turned down. He asked if they can remain unbiased when considering Dr. Johnson's contract renewal or evaluation.

Mr. Weldon asked, what do you think is the most crucial issue facing the Bridgeport public school system and how do you think it should be addressed.

Ms. Martinez asked, why you would want the position and what value would you add or what area of passion do you have in terms of the board

Mr. Illingworth asked, if selected to serve on the board and there was one thing the candidate could accomplish what would that be.

Ms. Allen asked how the candidates see student education and policies, and what they will bring to the board to help a chaotic situation here.

John Marshall Lee was the first candidate. He said his résumé should give the board enough material to go by.

Mr. Lee said the best candidate to serve effectively is someone who is willing to consider color and cultural heritage in attempting to deliver good decisions that come before the board. He said he thought a white male can serve a young man of color or a young Hispanic man. He said he worked with Jose Lopez in the district for six and a half years and he made a connection with Mr. Lopez. He said he has mentored another former student at Batalla. He said he serves as the NAACP's communications director and is sensitive to systemic racism. He said he can't change his color, but he did not need to change his attitude, his abilities or his pursuit of trying to help. He said he had been telling the City Council for the last four or five years that money was needed.

Mr. Lee said he believed one gets most of one's success in life from showing up on time dressed to play. He said he was prepared to commit to the thirty-plus meetings that he anticipated in the next eight months.

Mr. Lee said he had never applied to the city or the board for work. He said he could be fair-minded regarding issues regarding the superintendent's contract.

Ms. Martinez arrived at the meeting.

Mr. Lee said the district had to be ready to serve more students if the parochial system shut down or something else happened. He noted in a good election year only about 20,000 voters out 70,000 in the city come to the polls, which means a lot of parents are not supporting the system with a vote. He said voting was a way of defeating hate. He said regarding money that the city, with the cooperation of accountants, has included bonding amounts in the educational expenditure, which gives a silly picture.

Mr. Lee said he was a hopeful individual and ends his writings with, "Time will tell." He said his passion is the hope that some of the stuff he says to the public will stick. He said he was referred to as a fiscal watchdog, but they do not let him talk to the Budget & Appropriations Committee.

Mr. Lee said he would like to see the city and the board agree on the number of dollars that are expended for education. He said accurate numbers were needed to compare Bridgeport to other cities.

Mr. Lee said the state indicates kids are due an education locally, and then it lets the district down in terms of money. He said he was happy the board's finance department found several million dollars of healthcare savings. He said he had been working on a foreclosure project regarding the WPCA with the NAACP. He said he can be one of nine people and help come to a good judgment and be an adult in the room.

Michael Giannotti was the next candidate.

Mr. Giannotti said he believed he was going to come and have the board members be open-minded and would base their decision on the most qualified person. He said he had been reading comments about board members not wanting to appoint another white man to the board. He said in 2019 that is a disservice. He said he was a gay man who's had to deal with a lot of prejudice over the years and found the statement to be outrageous. He added today that his phone was ringing and he understood that Mr. Lombard has the votes on the board and has already met with the administration.

Mr. Giannotti said he was withdrawing his name from consideration.

Ms. Pereira said she knew Mr. Giannotti and Mr. Lee. Ms. Martinez said she only knew Mr. Lee. Ms. Pereira said she posted the statistics on the racial makeup on the district on OIB. She said she had no knowledge of Mr. Lombard. Ms. Martinez said just because Ms. Pereira made the statement it doesn't mean the board is looking for a particular race.

Ms. Allen said he only knew Mr. Giannotti. She said Mr. Giannotti remembered her from the City Council and things like that.

The next candidate was John Rodriguez.

Mr. Rodriguez said he was here for the children. He said he had been involved for eight years with Bridge Academy. He said his four kids were college graduates and he knew the importance of education. He said he believed he could make a difference on the board.

Mr. Rodriguez said he was a black Hispanic and totally believed in diversity. He said he understood the challenges faced by blacks and Hispanics, and that the board should reflect the community, although he goes more by what the person brings to the table. He said he had been living on the East End for ten years, where the majority of his neighbors are Hispanic or black.

Ms. Pereira apologized for suggesting Mr. Rodriguez was late for his interview.

Mr. Rodriguez said he was prepared to commit to attending meetings. He said at Bridge Academy he had only missed two meetings in eight years.

Mr. Rodriguez said he had never applied to work for the Board of Education. He said he could be unbiased in regards to Dr. Johnson's contract.

Mr. Rodriguez said the most crucial issue is the need for a partnership with parents. He said the board must listen to the parents and their needs. He said parents should have a vital say in what happens to their children.

Mr. Rodriguez said he was a blessed man and his kids are doing great. He noted his daughter teaches biology and science. He said he grew up in the projects and saw what the lack of education and hope did to people. He said he had been proactive on the job, including with the union and with Hispanic workers. He said he was injured and is pretty much not going back to work, and he figured it would be a time to join the board, particularly after what he learned at Bridge Academy, in Hartford, and working with business and community leaders.

Mr. Rodriguez said one thing he would like to establish would be accountability, He said he knows what it's like to put four kids through college and he wanted to be held accountable.

Mr. Rodriguez said he believed students were getting an adequate education, but not excelling due to the allocation of funds. He said his school had 25 percent of students in special education, which has to be addressed. He said the board had to address the challenges in Bridgeport, which are different than a community like Darien. He said at Bridge Academy 7th graders are coming into the school at 3rd or 4th grade reading and math levels. He said he would like to zoom in on what can be done to raise those levels.

In response to a question from Mr. Rodriguez, Mr. Weldon said he believed the top priorities of the board are increased municipal funding. Mr. Sokolovic said trying to increase community and parental involvement in the schools was another priority. Mr. Rodriguez said he had been fighting for a long time for parental involvement.

Ms. Martinez said our children need a leader who is focused on them and focused on solutions and advocating on their behalf and who is not going to take things personal and lead with personal vendettas and agendas. She said it hurts the children when the board can't remain focused on what we should be doing. She said she hoped one day we are all held accountable for what we're supposed to be doing for our children.

Mr. Rodriguez said he did not do his due diligence on Bridgeport's finances. He thanked the board for their time and patience.

Joseph Lombard was the next candidate.

Mr. Lombard said the reason he was here was for service. He said he had been looking for the right place for the last year to share his talents and abilities and love for Bridgeport. He said he moved to Bridgeport sixteen years ago. He said his agenda was to serve in the best capacity he can.

Mr. Lombard said in he taught in East Palo Alto, California, where most of his students were Pacific Islanders, African-American and Hispanic, while he was the only white person in the room. He said it was important for the board to be representative of the community and qualified members who want to serve. He said he would not begrudge the board for selecting someone over him for the position if they were equally qualified to help the demographic on the board.

Mr. Lombard said he was prepared to come to all the meetings he was assigned to and prepared to come and engage in intelligent debate. He said his goal would be to fulfill his duties. He said he does not take sick days at work and often loses them.

Mr. Lombard said he did not recall being rejected for employment in Bridgeport Public Schools. He said when he left his teaching job in Menlo Park, California, he has not been in the classroom since and has been working with the post-secondary population. He said he did know enough about Dr. Johnson's contract and looked forward to the opportunity to learn from board members and be a team player.

Mr. Lombard said the underfunding was the biggest problem the district faced. He said he did not know what was at the



root of the discord between the school district and the funding source. He said he did not know enough about the situation right now, but he was prepared to read the documents presented as described in Mr. Walker's question.

Mr. Lombard said it seemed the board was the kind of area where he should be putting his volunteer energies. He said he considered things like the Bridgeport Rescue Mission, but nothing clicked. He said he was pursuing his doctorate in educational leadership with a concentration in international education. He said he has worked at Fairfield University, Housatonic Community College, a massage therapy school in Westport, and since in 2009 at the Porter & Chester Institute. He said he had really come to appreciate the trades and the role they can play in students' lives.

Mr. Lombard said if he could accomplish one thing it would be harmony within the board. He said as the youngest of seven kids he had to find a way to make things work. He said his passion lies with interpersonal connections and working with people. He said he thought presenting himself as who he is would be beneficial to the board.

Mr. Lombard said he brought the perspective of student choice. He said standardization and fundamental skills are necessary, but coming from a vocational school background it is important that students have learning opportunities that they have more choice in. He said he did not know if financial or manpower resources allowed for that.

John Scianna, the next candidate, was not present.

Ms. Pereira moved to recess the meeting for five minutes. The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez and unanimously approved.

The meeting was recessed at 5:25 p.m. and reconvened at 5:38 p.m.

LaMar Kennedy was the next candidate.

Mr. Kennedy provided the board members an updated and more comprehensive resume.

Mr. Kennedy said he was born in Bridgeport and has lived here for over forty years. He said he was a High Horizons Magnet School and Central High graduate. He attended Southern Connecticut University and graduated from Sacred Heart University. He received his K-12 certification in special education in 2009. He added he raised a child who graduated from Fairchild Wheeler last year.

Mr. Kennedy said he believed school boards should reflect the community they are serving and noted an African-American recently resigned from the board. He said he was looking to step in based on his work to develop the resume the board members have, not as a black person or a white person. He said his grandfather taught at Central High and is at Housatonic Community College right now. He said he had white people and black people in his family.

Mr. Kennedy said he would be able to attend all meetings. He said until a recent car accident he had been in the Waterbury public school system for ten years, with a 90 percent attendance rate. He said as a head football coach he is responsible for a program and cannot be absent. He added he keeps himself in good physical shape to remain healthy.

Mr. Kennedy said he was rejected for the position of head

coach of the boys' basketball team at Harding High. He said had he known John Bagley was applying, he would have taken his name out of the running. He said he also turned down a position at Harding High because the principal asked him to leave his position during the middle of a basketball season that he had made a commitment to. He said his special education students also relied on him.

Mr. Kennedy said he had no connection to the superintendent or anyone else here and he would look at things with an open mind.

Mr. Kennedy said he did not know what was the most pressing issue the school district was facing right now. He said nationwide there is a lack of minority teacher recruitment. He said he knew money was an issue, in part due to the Educational Cost Share formula that is not being funded by Hartford. He said we need to recruit capable teachers from the community, if possible, or those who are from similar backgrounds as the students they will serve.

Mr. Kennedy noted the appointment was a short-term appointment. He said he was very qualified for the position because he is an educator by trade and is passionate about special education. He said he is also passionate about sports, which is why he coaches football and basketball. He said he was passionate about students turning their lives around and being able to reach their post-secondary needs or wants. He said he felt serving on the board was his civic duty. He said his value includes being a teacher in an urban district, forty years-plus of living in Bridgeport, graduating from district schools, and interacting with students on a daily basis. He said he taught for three years at Bridgeport Learning Center and before that he was a long-term sub. Prior to that he worked as a paraprofessional at Wilbur

Cross School. He said he entered a cohort for paraprofessionals to become special education teachers in Bridgeport, but was never offered a position.

Mr. Kennedy said he did not come here with any preconceived notions and was not sure what the board members would like him to do. He said he had attended some board meetings previously and believed his perspective can be valuable wherever it is needed. He said if appointed he would accomplish something.

Mr. Kennedy said he can bring his perspective as a special education teacher and also his work as a mainstream teacher. He said he works with servicing communities such as DCF and has a unique perspective. He said the students he sees at the high school level come in ill-equipped and lacking in basic skills. He said there needs to be a push at the primary level and greater collaboration with parents to sharpen STEM and ELA skills. He said the achievement gap needed to be narrowed.

Mr. Weldon said the last candidate, John Scianna, had not appeared.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 5:59 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod