

Monday, March 23, 2020

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE
BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held March 23,
2020, by video conference call, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:01 p.m. Present were Vice Chair Hernan Illingworth, Secretary Bobbi Brown, Joseph Sokolovic, Sybil Allen, Albert Benejan, John Weldon, and Joseph Lombard. Jessica Martinez joined the meeting subsequently as noted.

Acting Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

The first agenda item was an update on the current situation with the coronavirus.

Mr. Illingworth said the superintendent and the district's staff had done a tremendous job in an unprecedented situation.

Mr. Testani said it has been extreme effort on everyone's part to try to make sure that students are safe and to provide a continuity of education. He said an amazing job was done implementing a distance learning program districtwide, particularly by the IT department. He said printed materials of the online presentations were available for distribution for today.

Mr. Testani said 30 schools have responded to his e-mail and over 8,000 printed copies have been given out.

Mr. Testani said the meal program was growing and over 4,200 meals were served today. Meals will now be provided from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

Mr. Testani said adjustments would be made for the next learning experiences for students. He noted school has been closed through April break.

Mr. Testani said all information would flow out of his office to make sure there is a uniform message to staff or families. He said there is some inaccurate information on social media posts. He also noted some districts are approaching things differently.

Mr. Testani said he has done some spot-checking of buildings. He said an e-mail has gone out to custodians to ramp up cleaning efforts. He said he was not pleased with a couple of buildings he visited today, which was day seven of the district's closure. He said the board needed to explore other options on how we maintain our buildings in the future.

Mr. Testani said many staff members had gone above and beyond to ensure the safety and education of students.

Mr. Testani said the state has indicated 60,000 devices will be released to Alliance districts for high school students in the next month. He said he told state legislators that a minimum of 5,000 would be needed to cover high schools students.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said the current devices at the high school would trickle down into the middle schools.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested a survey be conducted for students who do not need access to a device to rational them for the best possible use.

Mr. Sokolovic said he was hoping that the instructional packets would be expanded and that future efforts include online lessons by teachers. Mr. Testani said every teacher is available through e-mail during regular school hours beginning today. The superintendent said there is some online instruction at the high school level with the Teams platform. He said principals are reviewing the proposed lessons submitted by teachers and the best ones would be shared districtwide. He said it was important to have continuity across the district.

Mr. Sokolovic said from what he has seen at the 6th grade the materials being provided are not curriculum-aligned. Mr. Testani said the students will turn in their work on April 1st and can then pick up a new printed copy of the new material. He said teachers will grade the submitted material and provide feedback. He said the state Department of Education has not provided guidance yet on grading and whether there will be letter grades or pass/fail.

Ms. Martinez joined the meeting.

Mr. Testani said he did not want to place an unfair burden on parents to teach students over the next four to five weeks.

Mr. Sokolovic said he believed the best possible education should be provided to as many students as possible even if all students were not in equal situations.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said we're doing everything humanly possible for special education students with the guidance of federal and state authorities for services around the IEPs.

The next agenda item was discussion on electing a new chair of the board.

Mr. Illingworth said if a Regular Meeting could have been held today the board would have elected a chair. He said the board was now facing an unprecedented situation. He said he would like the board to develop a procedure on how to elect a chair. He said if the board came to a consensus a special meeting could be called for later this week to elect the next chair.

Mr. Illingworth suggested a meeting be held by video conference with the votes for the chair submitted to Rita Valle by e-mail for tabulation.

Ms. Martinez said Mr. Illingworth as interim chair was fully capable and should remain so until the pandemic is over. She said she did not see how the public could participate and speak on the issue in a virtual meeting to choose the chair.

Mr. Sokolovic said the board should stick with its bylaws and state statutes. He said there had always been a 30-day time limit to choose a chair or a board member. He suggested there be a voice vote in addition to e-mail votes. He said the business had to go on despite the pandemic and a chair should be chosen.

Ms. Martinez said if the community was going to participate a longer period of notice was needed. Mr. Illingworth noted the board had a 30-day time limit and he advocated choosing the chair by April 4th. Mr. Weldon said he believed the deadline was April 1st.

Mr. Benejan said he did not see the need to rush to pick the chair. He said he agreed with Ms. Martinez that Mr. Illingworth was doing an amazing job.

In response to a question, Mr. Illingworth said the board's attorneys and the city attorneys could be asked whether it is possible to extend the 30-day deadline. He said these were uncharted waters.

Ms. Brown said it is important to elect a chair, but she suggested the complications in everyone's lives was taking up a lot of time. She said she would like to hear the legal opinion on whether the chair must be chosen in the next week.

Ms. Allen said she agreed with Ms. Brown.

Mr. Lombard said he agreed with Ms. Brown, Ms. Allen and Ms. Martinez because the board was not in a normal situation. He said he was open to hearing from the attorneys if it was an option to extend the deadline.

Mr. Weldon said the thirty days expires April 1st, which leaves the board very little time. He said if a legal answer can be received in a day or so there is no harm. He urged the board not risk forfeiting its decision-making authority. He said he agreed with the procedure suggested by Mr. Illingworth earlier on how to conduct a meeting to select a chair.

Mr. Weldon said to change any current bylaws of the board would not be an easy process.

Mr. Illingworth said the board could always reconvene on March 30th for a meeting, regardless of the legal opinions received.

Mr. Illingworth asked Mr. Testani to inquire of the board's attorney and the city attorney's office whether it is possible to receive an extension of the 30-day deadline to choose a chair until a public meeting could be held.

Mr. Testani said Mr. Postolowski informed him that public comments can be made on a virtual meeting. He said if there were conflicting legal opinions he would ask the lawyers to speak to come to a consensus. Mr. Illingworth said if the opinion is received in writing he could forward it to all the board members.

Mr. Benejan said it was more important to support Mr. Testani and each other than to choose a chair.

Ms. Allen moved to adjourn the meeting. The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez and unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:02 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod