

Monday, April 30, 2018

MINUTES OF THE PUBLIC HEARING OF THE BRIDGEPORT
BOARD OF EDUCATION, held April 30, 2018, at Geraldine Johnson
School, 475 Lexington Avenue, Bridgeport, Connecticut

The meeting was called to order at 6:05 p.m.

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

Mr. Weldon said the board wanted to hear from the public about the approach the board should take to the budget.

Mr. Weldon asked board employees present to stand. He said sometime ago some very regretful remarks were made at a board meeting. He said people up here think very highly of all of you. He said we're not going to balance our budget on your backs. He urged board employees speak up just as if they were a member of the public. He said the board wanted to thank the employees for the hard work they do with the very limited resources made available.

Mr. Weldon said the 22 public speakers would be limited to three minutes each.

Chris Johnson, director of athletics, said his position was cut. He said he was an adult and he can handle that. He said at the same meeting there was a conversation about cutting athletics for \$1 million. He said there would be a ripple effect from cutting athletics much greater than athletics. He said research has proven if you're active in sports you're going to be much more engaged in school and less likely to use drugs, become pregnant or be involved in gang violence.

Mr. Johnson said he every time he is at Harding he sees the football team in study halls and doing character development. He said the Harding girls' track team comes out to support middle school athletes.

He said the Central cheerleaders last summer served at a camp for elementary school cheerleaders. He said every Saturday the Bassick basketball team is in an SAT prep classroom. He said you can't put a value on those things.

Mr. Johnson said in his three years in his position he was blessed to be surrounded by great student-athletes. He said the district's coaches he worked with are some of the hardest working people in the city, even though they are among the lowest paid coaches in the state. He said sports teaches lifelong lessons of teamwork, perseverance and accountability.

Anthony Anderson said he was speaking on behalf of his children. He said he has been a father for thirty years and he and his wife have raised five children. He said two of his children received academic scholarships to college, while others are honors students. He said he partnered with the educators at Bullard Havens and Dunbar School. He implored the board to consider the damage that would occur by reducing funding for education.

Elena Mayorga, a parent of two students, said this was her twentieth year as a teacher in the district. She said she is a numeracy coach to seven schools. She said if instructional coaches are eliminated new teachers will lose support for strategies and curriculum; there will be a lack of continuity of instruction; long-term subs will lose support; and professional development will be lost. She said the coaches also ensure fidelity of instruction, ensure the curriculum is up to date, help choose resources, plan math nights for parents and use data to plan differentiated, scaffolded lessons.

Josue Mayorga said he is a graduate of Batalla School and currently at student at Notre Dame High School. He described difficulties when Common Core math was introduced in his 5th grade class. He said this was an example of where his mom's work as a coach helps teachers implement curriculum.

Ms. Martinez arrived at the meeting.

Vanessa Maldonado said she was a mom of two kids in the district and also a graduate of High Horizons and Central Magnet. She said

she was not familiar with Twitter, but read Ms. Lambeck's tweets about Friday night's meeting. She said she was disgusted to learn Edison was on the chopping block. She said her son was very successful at Edison after he had difficulties at another school. She said she drives both children to school each day. She added it was curious that Mr. Bradley was proposing cuts but he was not even around, nor did he appear before the City Council. She said if Marlene Siegel's salary was cut in half, a full year at Edison School would be funded

Mr. Weldon noted bilingual translation services were available.

Brianna Almeida said she was speaking on behalf of the Central High cheerleaders. She said the team consists of students from BMA, Central and Fairchild Wheeler. She said the team volunteered at a cheerleading camp as community service and also at the Lighthouse Program in the summer. She said the team had learned leadership and teamwork skills, while also gaining a sisterhood. She said taking away a sports team is like taking away a student's future.

Chris Taylor, an English teacher at Bridgeport Military Academy, said she came back to teaching sixteen years ago after three decades in the private sector. She said she was on the executive board of the teachers' union. She thanked the board for its level-headed discussion and welcoming comments tonight. She said the board was not responsible for us being in this position. She urged grants funding be pursued.

Mary Pat Underhill said she was representing Bridgeport Military Academy. She said BMA should not be moved to Harding High because Principal Soares and the teachers have worked tirelessly to transform the swing space into a permanent location for the school after two previous moves. There are specialized labs that offer unique instruction, including in forensic science, fire science, flight simulation and a 911 simulator. She said there were over 540 applications to the school this year and there was a large waiting list for entrance. Out-of-district students come to the school from nine districts.

Eddie Santiago said he was head football and wrestling coach at Harding and a teacher at Bridge Academy. He said his son received

a football scholarship to Central Connecticut State University. He said there are eight current Harding students with athletic scholarships. He said to cut athletics would kill young men. He said it was hard enough to get our brown and black males up for school, but athletics is something that they are attached to. He said if sports are taken away you might as well put the guns in their hands or put them on the streets. He said we had to teach the students not to quit, but to fight for what they believe and want.

Kevin Bendars, quarterback for Harding High, said he believed athletics had already saved a lot of lives. He said a lot of students are looking forward to college scholarships. He said he viewed all the athletes in Bridgeport as a family.

John Ramos, assistant football and wrestling coach at Harding and a school counselor at Waltersville and Madison, said if sports were taken away he would be absolutely crushed. He said he had a caseload of over a thousand students and many students have mental health issues. He said unfortunately all his work is around attendance and 504 paperwork at Madison due to the workload and not mental health. He said school counselors had been consistently cut. He said when the Harding wrestling program was cut over \$100,000 was raised by grassroots funding.

Kristi Wisse, a Bridgeport resident and counselor at Batalla School, said the ratio of counselors to students should be 1 to 250, but in her school she was one for 1200 students. She said she also coaches cheerleading and flag football. She said football players and cheerleaders who have graduated from Batalla come back and work with the middle school students. She said sports are known to influence academics and attendance. She said an 8th grade student told her if sports were cut that gang violence would go up. She said we have to teach kids accountability, perseverance and grit through sports.

Victor Black said we're in significant trouble. He said he was still hopeful the City Council would do the right thing for the board. He said our business is molding young people into productive adults. He said Bridgeport had the lowest staff to student ratio especially at the administrative level, at about 1 to 230. He said athletics and directors

are resources for the schools. He said arbitrary cuts hurt not only schools, but programs within the schools. He said cutting administrative positions doesn't always amount to a cut because the employee can end up in a teaching position for only \$1,000 less.

Alicia Robinson, director of performing and visual arts, said she was in solidarity with the directors, administrators, teachers, parents and students of the Bridgeport Public Schools. She said she was here to validate the importance of the arts and athletics and the role they play in shaping the lives of our students. She said her job includes raising funds for students involved in the arts. She described the many events she organized featuring arts in the district. She added her child was a student in the district because she believed in our greatness.

Annmary Tavernier, a ten-year old student at High Horizons, said if instructional coaches and assistant principals were cut students would not have their help in learning. She said there should be no cuts from the school system. She said her principal was at the meeting and noted she sacrificed a lot of her time.

Tammy Bogdanyi, a BMA parent, said it was appalling that the board members proposing the cuts could not come out to listen to the people that put them in their seats. She said these board members were cowards. She said she was tired of BMA being treated as a stepchild. She said the school had the highest graduation rate and attendance rate of all the district's high schools. She said the board might as well spend \$1 million that is going to be saved on athletics to buy body bags to bury our kids. She said sports keeps kids off the streets.

Michael Boyle, a BMA senior, said he likes the school where it is. He said the school had been moved three times and he asked what would happen to the murals painted on the walls of the school. He said graduates had gone straight to the military. He said he would go right to the fire academy after graduation.

Albert Benejan, PTSO president at Bassick, said as a community leader he represents 37 schools and 21,789 students. It said it was a shame what was going on. He urged the board stand up and fight for

our kids. He spoke out against cutting sports. He said the cuts were not fair and he would go to the mayor or to Hartford to get the money for our kids. He said charter school transportation should be cut. He urged people from the top be cut, not security, cafeteria workers or coaches or others.

Rebecca Cabrera, principal of Madison School, thanked the board for voting not to cut assistant principals. She said they are an essential part of the effective running of schools, not a luxury. She said content area directors and coaches were extremely valuable. She encouraged the board to look for cuts that do not directly affect schools, students and the staff that services school.

La-Donna Bigelow said she was very upset by the discussion about athletics because a lot of students come from broken homes. She said a lot of the kids call her mom. She urged the board not to cut athletics and take her kids away from her. She said Harding athletes present tonight included softball players, cheerleaders and wrestlers.

A Harding student said sports are a big impact on students' lives. She said for some it is a way out of problems at home. Another student said her track teammates helped her get through a difficult period in her life and acted as her family. She said her coach, Ms. Bigelow, stops her from skipping school.

Danielle Loor said she was a certified Connecticut teacher. She said it was not fair for Bridgeport kids who have to work twice as hard to get half as far as kids in other districts. She said taking money from education would harm students. She said her son was very upset by the possibility his assistant principal would lose her job.

Jorge Loor said the students of Madison School are so important. He said we need Ms. Ramos at our school.

Marjorie Coble, assistant principal at Johnson School, said she had been an educator for 35 years. She said her son went to school in Bridgeport and became an attorney in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. She said if it wasn't for the marching band and special education another son at Central High would not have made it as a musician. She said if the district did not have enough staff they would not be

able to bring out the promise in the students. She said she buried two students when she ran the alternative school, Park City Academy, and another last year at Bassick. She said we need to go to Hartford for greater equity in funding.

Kayla Lewis, a senior at Harding, said sports are not just as pastime or a hobby. The athletes learn lessons that stay with us for the rest of our lives. She said many students are playing sports to get college scholarships. She said young men and women of color are being targeted right now, so sports are keeping them off the streets.

Janazah Davis, a 12th grade honors student-athlete at Harding, said sports is more than going to practice and games. She said the teams becomes families. She asked why the mayor was not here to explain why he gave the board this budget. She said one of her teammates' brothers was killed just the other day, but she used sports to cope and get through it.

James Meszoros said he was a Bassick High alum and former athlete. He said he went to San Diego Junior College because of his Bassick coach, Frank Brown. He said graduates of the public schools had played in the NFL and NBA. He said we have to stick together.

Mr. Weldon thanked everyone for coming. He said last Friday the board looked at some cost-saving measures such as assistant principals and decided not to do that. He said although the director of athletics was eliminated, the board did not eliminate the athletics program. He said the board would keep in mind the comments of the public as it moves forward.

Mr. Weldon said the board does an awful lot in regard to advocacy in Hartford as an ongoing thing. He said Mr. Illingworth and Ms. Martinez had recently done things in this area. He said please don't think it's something we don't pursue.

Ms. Martinez said it was difficult to sit here and listen to this. She said she was a Bridgeport parent of a Marin student and a graduate of Bridgeport public schools. She said the board was united that the cuts that have to be made is not something we want to do. She said the fight is with the City Council and in Hartford. She said she met

with a City Council member today to beg for additional funding. She urged the public not take what is in the *Connecticut Post* as the Bible. She said the material on Twitter is just a dialogue, not votes by the board. She said the athletics cuts were mentioned by one member and the rest of the board shot it down.

Ms. Martinez said it was now about building relationships and linking up and partnering. She said she was here for the teachers and children of the district. She said she would not support political leaders who were not doing right by education. She said she was looking to cut from the top down.

Mr. Illingworth thanked everyone who spoke and came out in support. He said the messages hit home and hit the heart. He said his daughter, who graduated from Central Magnet in 2015, wouldn't be doing as well in her third year of college if it wasn't for the wonderful teachers and support staff of the district.

Mr. Illingworth said the board was always caught in the middle. He said there is a perception painted by the city administration to the City Council that the board is a black hole where money goes in with no idea of where it goes. He said the students get caught in the middle because they want a bright future. He asked for public support.

Mr. Illingworth said we have to cut at the top; the school buildings cannot be cut any further. He urged everyone to call the mayor's office tomorrow and let him know this is unacceptable. He said the mayor wanted to be governor, but he doesn't care about the students. He noted the mayor campaigned on giving more money to the schools.

Mr. Walker thanked the audience for sharing their opinions and coming out. He urged everyone to be cautious about what we say we can do. He said there is a \$13 million deficit. He said the public should not assume that the caustic remarks of some board members represent us all. He said we care about our students, staff and parents and we will never lose sight of that.

Mr. Walker said this was third year on the board and it was always the same. He asked when will we put in a leader in the city that will

take education seriously. He said the school-to-prison pipeline starts at the school; not with hiring more police officers, but hiring more guidance counselors. He said this is where the money from your taxes should go.

Ms. Allen said she had been on both sides of the fence, in the administrators' and teachers' shoes, and knows what they're going through. She said if it were up to her the students would have everything they need to be properly educated. She urged the public call the legislators, the mayor and the governor and tell them how they feel.

Mr. Sokolovic thanked the audience for coming out tonight. He said he was going to be speaking about people who are not here, who are not advocating. He said we need to reach those people. He urged everyone talk to neighbors and friends to send a message to Hartford and the City Council.

Ms. Martinez said the next City Council meeting was May 7th. She urged everyone to rock the house. She named the Budget & Appropriations Committee members and urged the public contact them. She said we do not need to fund the police department any more. She said she hears on the news of people in the city taking advantage of overtime and getting positions.

Ms. Martinez urged the public not attack the City Council members because they are our neighbors and our friends. She said we need to unite with the City Council.

Council member Pete Spain said he cannot believe the City Council was given a budget that was \$19.7 million underfunded. He said \$13 million of that \$19 million is the schools. He described this as non-discretionary spending for basics that every child in America deserves. He said the final public hearing on the budget would be held on May 3rd at City Hall. He urged telling the council members what counts.

Council member Mary McBride-Lee said she represents the 135th District. She said she had worked as a public school teacher for over thirty years. She said we all have to work together. She said parents

make a difference and they need to go to Hartford and make their voices heard.

Mr. Weldon said the hearing was noticed as going until 8:00 o'clock and the board was obligated to keep it open until that time. He said the board members could be spoken to individually for the next fifteen or twenty minutes.

The speaking portion of the meeting was adjourned at 7:46 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

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