

Thursday, June 13, 2019

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE
BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held June 13,
2019, at Bridgeport City Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace, Bridgeport,
Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 5:34 p.m. Present were Secretary Joseph Sokolovic, Hernan Illingworth, Maria Pereira, Sybil Allen, Chris Taylor, and Joseph Lombard. Chair John Weldon, LaMar Kennedy, and Vice Chair Jessica Martinez arrived subsequently as noted.

Supt. Dr. Aresta L. Johnson was present.

The one agenda item was consideration and possible approval of a strategy to close the 2019-20 budget gap.

Marlene Siegel, chief financial officer, said the documents distributed are labeled v.15. She said the document have been updated to reflect the board's most recent actions on Fairchild Wheeler. She said this evening she was focused on Group B, including Item 9 on school administrators. The proposal is to increase the reduction from two positions to six, separate and apart from Fairchild Wheeler. She also requested review of potential items regarding athletics, central office and parent involvement.

Ms. Siegel said she received information that five additional special education classes are going to be opened, increasing the number to 65 self-contained classes. She said she did not know if positions would be released from resource rooms to help offset these costs.

Ms. Martinez arrived at the meeting.

Ms. Siegel said she has indicated repeatedly that in the summer there would be a reassessment of the fiscal condition and it could result in a positive outcome or a negative outcome or remain stable. She said based on historical trends experience has demonstrated that usually we are able to reduce the original projections. She requested the board come within \$1 million or \$1.5 million of closing the gap.

Ms. Siegel said she remains concerned about the uncontrolled growth in special education expenses in this district.

Mr. Kennedy arrived at the meeting.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the current budget deficit is about \$5.8 million.

Mr. Taylor said as a point of personal privilege there are not many people here in the audience when the board was dealing with the most crucial thing, the budget. He said the board has the option to leave the meeting, eliminate the quorum, and run at a deficit. He said the city singlehandedly elected Ned Lamont, who made promise after promise he has not fulfilled to the city. He said he would not stay for the votes, but would be voting no on every item if he had stayed. He said the state should come down and address the financial crisis. He said we should not assassinate our own students.

Ms. Martinez said there were already rumors and she did not want the state to even consider taking the district over. Mr.

Taylor said he cannot do any further damage to the students or the faculty.

Mr. Taylor left the meeting.

Mr. Sokolovic moved to cut in line number 9 beyond two in Group A and further reduce by four for a grand total of six positions.

Ms. Allen said she would not vote to cut services to our students. She said we have a skeleton crew and our students don't get enough support because there aren't enough people to go around. She said she supported letting the budget go into deficit instead of trying to plug the dike with a finger.

Ms. Martinez said she believed asking for the necessary cuts was doable. She asked what should we cut.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said when the budgetary need was first presented in January it was clearly stated in budget documents that the district has been operating with a minimal operating structure after years of being under-resourced and after successive budget reductions. She said this was communicated to everyone, including the City Council, and unfortunately the request for adequate funding has not been met.

Ms. Siegel said the board is expected to operate with a structurally balanced budget.

Dr. Johnson said when the cut of two assistant principals was discussed she cautioned the board at that time. She said she would not recommend going beyond two. She said at some point the board, the city and the delegation, should

formulate a plan to go to the state, but we are now at June 13th and we are six months beyond the budget request. She said we had not gone to the state board of education as a collective unit over the past six months.

Mr. Weldon arrived at the meeting.

Dr. Johnson noted we are only receiving the bare minimum for our students.

Mr. Sokolovic said the board is legally required to balance the budget. He said he wanted legal advice if the board was considering running at a deficit as to his personal risk.

Ms. Siegel said that was a valid question to ask. She said this is the eighth consecutive year that we expect to balance the budget. She said if the budget was not balanced the shortfall would be carried forward to the next year and would be deducted by the city from the new allocation.

Mr. Sokolovic said he was concerned in such a situation that the district would run out of money at some point in the next year and the staff would not be paid.

Mr. Weldon said he believed the legal liability applied if the board did something particularly fiscally irresponsible.

Mr. Illingworth said in the trainings he received from CABA years ago it was specifically said that we can be held accountable if we do not balance the budget. He said he would not feel comfortable approaching that, even though Mr. Taylor may be correct in principle.

Ms. Pereira said when she hears a school board member who didn't attend a single public hearing or a single Budget

& Appropriations meeting making statements about not voting for anything else it's pretty outrageous. She said not one word was said about a mayor and a City Council that has been here longer than a governor who has been in office for six months.

Ms. Pereira said the strategy was developed to educate people and get them to understand the budget, and the board voted to cancel that.

Ms. Pereira said before the illegal takeover there was an \$11 million deficit and the superintendent, Dr. Ramos, said he was drawing a line in the sand to take a stand. She said that one of the assertions used to take over the school board was that they didn't balance their budget. She said any takeover would end up in the Supreme Court and they would lose again.

Ms. Pereira said under state statute we, the board, are the fiduciary of the taxpayer dollars; not the superintendent or Ms. Siegel. She said we have a responsibility to taxpayers to present a balanced budget and Ms. Siegel has even presented leeway to get within \$1 million. Ms. Siegel said one to two million would be sufficient.

Ms. Pereira said no one was going to defend this, but we have to balance our budget. She said people have to understand you can't play nice with these people. She said we have to do our job and to get up and walk out is irresponsible behavior.

Dr. Johnson said this is a difficult situation, but it creates strain when the board votes to reduce the deficit and items are added back on in another meeting.

Ms. Pereira said she wanted to know which assistant principals were proposed to be cut. Mr. Sokolovic said he didn't know which assistant principals should be cut.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said elementary schools with an enrollment over 500 have an allocation of one assistant principal, and at around 850 or 900 students there is a second assistant principal. She said Johnson, Batalla, Blackham, Read and Marin Schools have two assistant principals.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said Dunbar has an assistant principal even though it is under 500 students based on need and approval by the superintendent.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said she was considering cutting the assistant principal at Black Rock and was considering looking at the Barnum/Waltersville campus and possibly splitting an assistant principal. She said she did not recommend eliminating the second assistant principal at large elementary schools.

Mr. Illingworth said he didn't see how we could cut an additional four assistant principals. He asked if an opportunity had been lost in bargaining with the union to make assistant principals ten-month employees. He said it was discussed in a strategy meeting.

Ms. Siegel said we agreed after collective bargaining that the transition would be achieved through attrition. As vacancies have occurred, assistant principal positions have been converted to ten-month positions. She said that is the most cost-efficient way of accomplishing the goal because of the three-year demotion cycle in the BCAS contract.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said currently in the elementary schools there are 14 12-month assistant principals and 8 10-month assistant principals.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the schools with an enrollment under 500 that have assistant principals are Black Rock, Claytor, Cross, and Dunbar.

Dr. Johnson said it was because they were K-8 schools. She noted it was not just about a number, but the qualitative piece of the community and the environment. Ms. Pereira said some of those schools were in impoverished areas.

Ms. Martinez said she would not support removing assistant principals beyond the current two.

Ms. Pereira moved "*to table number 9.*" The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez and unanimously approved.

Ms. Pereira noted there was a significant increase in transportation savings in the document.

The next item considered was number 11, merging the math and science director.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said she has found a way where there would be a literacy director and a coordinator for the early childhood department. She said the coordinator position would be posted, with Dr. Jenkins being the director of literacy.

Ms. Siegel said there is a coordinator of the school readiness program. She said the PDG grant, which is terminated, previously funded a pre-K coordinator. She said the state is allowing classes to continue with school

readiness funding and a continuation of the coordinator position. She said this will allow the individual in this role to continue through January. A new position would be created that will go beyond current responsibilities.

Ms. Siegel said the funding of the balance of the position for January through June would be done through a pre-K account generated through fees parents pay in the state-funded pre-K program.

Ms. Pereira noted the item includes eliminating two clerical assistants in the district office. Dr. Johnson said the two positions to be eliminated had not been solidified yet.

Ms. Pereira noted another option was to merge the math and science director. She said there were no sacred cows at this point.

Mr. Sokolovic said information from the Pew Research Center indicated blacks and Hispanics make up around a quarter of the U.S. workforce as of 2016, but accounted for only 16 percent of those employed in STEM occupations. He said studies have indicated one reason for this underrepresentation is the lack of racially and ethnically diverse mentors to attract more blacks and Hispanics to the jobs. He said limited access to advanced science courses also plays a role.

Mr. Sokolovic said director positions had been combined before. He said one director that was operating in a combined director position is no longer supervising both departments. Mr. Weldon noted Dr. Jenkins declined to enter into a new MOU.

Mr. Sokolovic said the directors implement instructional programs in the district, they evaluate classroom instruction, design and evaluate curriculum and instruction. He noted there were new math and science textbooks, and a new science curriculum that has to be aligned to the Next Generation Science Standards. He said principals need help in evaluating classroom instruction because most do not have a science background. He said the directors provide professional development, which might have to be provided by paid contractors. He said the science director oversees the talented and gifted program and gardens for the schools. The math director also oversees engineering and computer science.

Mr. Sokolovic said our kids would definitely suffer by combining the two positions. He said we're already behind every other district in science and math. He said our core mission is to get our children employable and ready for college.

Mr. Kennedy said there's also data that children who participate in sports are more likely to go to college.

Ms. Pereira said literacy is more important than math and science. She said early childhood education is equally important as literacy. She said if you can't read, you can forget about science and math.

Ms. Pereira said Mr. Sokolovic voted last year to combine literacy and early childhood. She said Dr. Johnson, who is a scientist, recommended the merging of science and math.

Mr. Sokolovic said literacy had been embedded into the curriculum and received the focus for the last hundred-odd years in education.

Ms. Siegel said the proposal was suggested by a board member, which does not mean it has the endorsement of the administration.

Mr. Illingworth said he struggled with the administration's refusal to come up with viable options and pinning the decisions on the board. He said the administration has to take responsibility at some point. He said the board can't vet it all. He said he was the stupid one who suggested the 25 percent cut in athletics. He said he just threw it out, but in no way would he support it. He said this should be a team effort.

Mr. Weldon said it was a little unfair because the administration did bring things to the board.

Mr. Illingworth said in his opinion the administration could have done a better job. He said they are creating this division among us. Mr. Weldon said the administration brought some options such as merging two schools which was taken and reversed.

Mr. Weldon said we go through this every year and it gets tighter and tighter.

Ms. Pereira said it is easy to criticize what people suggest, especially when you can't offer an option to replace them. Mr. Illingworth asked, who are we to create the viable options? He said we don't every know single detail of what goes on in the budget.

Ms. Pereira said just because we debate it doesn't mean it's bad; the purpose of debate is to hear different points of view.

Mr. Illingworth said he takes issue when the administration says that board members came up with the ideas, not the administration. He said Ms. Pereira was defending and just criticizing everyone else. He said that's all she does, and we get nothing done.

Mr. Weldon said we do this every year and we're at the bone now. Mr. Illingworth asked if we're sure we're at the bone. Mr. Weldon said this is what our people are telling us.

Mr. Illingworth said he did not understand why last year it was said we needed \$16 million and this year another \$11 million. He said we only had the BCAS union and NAGE this year. He said he doesn't know where the \$11 million goes. He said an audit would be nice.

Ms. Siegel said Mr. Illingworth should read the budget request document that was given to him. He said he does read it. He said Ms. Siegel should do her job.

Ms. Siegel left the meeting.

Ms. Pereira said there are nine unions.

Mr. Illingworth said it was crazy to take the position that it was the board members who did it. He said they're pinning this all on us.

Mr. Weldon said the city pinned this on us by balancing their budget on our back.

Ms. Pereira moved "to approve number 11, eliminate two clerical positions in the district office, and eliminate one curriculum director position by consolidating math and science." The motion was not seconded.

Ms. Martinez moved “*to eliminate the two clerical positions on Item number 11.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Pereira and unanimously approved.

Ms. Martinez said if one director can handle the job of both positions she would be in favor of combining the positions.

Dr. Johnson said both directors have equally challenging work. She noted last year she recommended the consolidation and it was not approved by the board. She said there should be a back-up plan to have expertise in math and science if the positions are combined.

Ms. Pereira asked who suggested the option. Mr. Weldon said Ms. Siegel said it was submitted by a board member. Mr. Illingworth asked why it mattered what board member presented it. He asked if Ms. Pereira wanted to attack that person and ridicule them. He said that was all that Ms. Pereira did.

There was much crosstalk among the members at this point.

Mr. Kennedy moved to recess the meeting. The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez and unanimously approved.

The meeting was recessed at 6:38 p.m.

The meeting was reconvened at 6:42 p.m.

Mr. Sokolovic moved “*to table consolidating the math and science positions.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez.

The motion was approved by a 6-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Martinez, Illingworth, Kennedy, Sokolovic and Allen. Ms. Pereira was opposed. Mr. Lombard was not present for the vote.

Mr. Lombard returned to the meeting.

Ms. Martinez said Mr. Illingworth suggested a cut to athletics out of frustration. She moved "*to remove that line item all together.*" The motion was seconded by Mr. Illingworth.

Dr. Johnson said like last year she was not in favor of any reduction to the athletic budget.

Ms. Pereira asked if Dr. Johnson would favor students paying \$20 or \$25 to participate in a sport. Dr. Johnson said she had mixed feelings because athletics helps to keep children in school and provides a safe haven after school. The only way she would be in favor would be to give notice far in advance of the imposition of the fee.

Ms. Martinez said she was heavily involved in athletics at the schools and a lot of the teams do fundraising for themselves. She said the expenditure was deserved. She said she would never charge a child \$20.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said she could not provide an estimate at this time of what such a charge would mean financially.

Mr. Sokolovic said we should look at sponsorships for our sports team going forward. He said the board would have to look at policy in this area.

Ms. Pereira said we can't give money for our athletic programs to outside organizations. Ms. Martinez said it wasn't told to us that that's where it was coming from.

The motion was unanimously approved.

The next items were on parent allocation expenditures. Mr. Illingworth said the Title I allocations talk about an annual meeting, and the district has historically used the Parent Convention for that purpose.

Ms. Pereira said she recommended the item. She said under Title I you have to set aside a minimum of one percent. She said she wanted to know if the Parent Convention money was part of the one percent.

Dr. Johnson said she did not believe the expenditure for the Parent Convention was part of the parent allocation. She said reducing the per-pupil expenditure to one percent would save \$16,494.

Mr. Sokolovic said he did not need any more information on this one.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *"to eliminate item number 15 from consideration."* He said parents are key. The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said each school received parent engagement dollars based on the per-pupil enrollment. A plan is created by the PTSO in collaboration with the principal for spending the dollars. She said this was the sole source of parent involvement funding.

Ms. Pereira said if the amount per pupil was reduced to the mandated one percent it would be a reduction of 81 cents per pupil.

Ms. Martinez said the programming at the Parent Convention is incredible. She said it includes breakout sessions for parents and a large venue where parents can be recognized.

In response to a question, Ms. Martinez said the typical attendance at the convention is two hundred to five hundred.

Ms. Pereira said she was fine with tabling the Parent Convention issue because Ms. Clarke was not present.

Mr. Sokolovic said parent involvement has been a struggle for years in the district, but we are now on an upward trajectory. He said to remove one dollar from parent involvement will have impacts far and wide. He said every parent we cannot engage is one parent we cannot educate on advocating for the children. He said the money spent helps gets parents out.

Ms. Martinez said the schools used to get more for parent engagement. She said she believed 81 cents was a huge deal. She said it might mean one less event at a school throughout the school year.

Mr. Kennedy said it sounded like 2.5 percent of our parent population attended the convention over the last several years. He said he was sure the convention was great, but we do have to make some decisions and more could be done at the building level.

Ms. Pereira said the expenditure of parent engagement funds this year was driven by the board, not by parents. She said the amount of expenditures doesn't mean it was used wisely. She said in a school of 500 students it would be a reduction of \$405.

Mr. Lombard moved to divide the question. The motion was seconded by Ms. Pereira and approved by a 6-2 vote.

Voting in favor were members Pereira, Martinez, Weldon, Lombard, Kennedy and Allen. Voting in opposition were members Sokolovic and Illingworth.

Ms. Martinez spoke in opposition to eliminating the expenditure for the Parent Convention. She said she was here today because she began as a parent leader at the school level. She said the district has lost the Parent Center and the district positions that coordinated the parents. She said more cuts would mean less parent involvement. She said the Parent Convention is an end-of-the-year thank you and celebration where awards are given in front of the district .

Ms. Martinez said if there had to be a compromise it should be at the school level, not the Parent Convention.

Ms. Pereira said the teachers get a budget of \$20 for their entire classroom, which has been reduced from \$30. She said teachers spend a lot out of their own pockets for classrooms. She said she didn't believe the 81 cents was devastating when the teachers have taken such cuts.

Mr. Sokolovic said he believed everyone has tightened their belts, but we took away the parents' belts a long time ago.

Mr. Lombard moved “*to remove eliminating the Parent Convention held annually in May from consideration.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Martinez.

Mr. Kennedy amended the motion “*to remove \$4,500 from the Parent Convention.*” The amendment was seconded by Ms. Pereira.

Ms. Pereira said there was an opportunity to raise funds for the Parent Convention. Ms. Martinez said donations are received for the convention, including the giveaways to parents. Ms. Pereira said she did not understand why the money is spent on a goody bag.

The amendment was approved by a 5-3 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Allen, Lombard, Pereira and Kennedy. Members Illingworth, Martinez, and Sokolovic voted no.

Mr. Lombard said he thought the \$4,500 was worth it for the difference that could be made in the Parent Convention.

Ms. Martinez said the Parent Convention had greatly reduced expenses in areas like the venue and the keynote speaker.

The motion to reduce the Parent Convention’s expenditure by \$4,500 was defeated by a 5-2 vote. Voting in opposition were members Illingworth, Weldon, Sokolovic, Martinez and Lombard. Voting in favored were members Kennedy and Pereira. Ms. Allen abstained.

The motion to remove the Parent Convention item completely from the budget gap plan failed by a 4-4 vote. Voting in favor were members Illingworth, Lombard,

Martinez, and Sokolovic. Members Weldon, Kennedy, Allen, and Pereira were opposed.

Ms. Pereira suggested further information be gathered from Ms. Clarke.

Ms. Pereira moved *“to reduce the parent allocation funds to the one percent required under the Title I funds from \$7.00 per pupil to approximately \$6.19.”* Mr. Lombard seconded the motion.

Mr., Sokolovic moved *“to amend Item 15 for the per-school allocation to remove the dollar amounts and leave it at one percent mandated.”* The amendment was seconded by Ms. Pereira and unanimously approved.

The motion was now to reduce the parent involvement allocation to the Title I mandate of one percent.

Mr. Sokolovic said 19 cents in a school with a thousand students would equal \$190, which could go a long way and every little bit helps. He said printing a flyer and giving it to a parent to give them information that they wouldn't otherwise have helps. He said it was an infinitesimal amount with possibly a big impact.

Ms. Pereira said everything combined adds up to reducing the deficit. She said for years we have had to struggle with schools to have them create their action plans and spend their funds.

The motion was approved by a 5-2 vote.

Voting in favor were members Allen, Kennedy, Lombard, Pereira, and Weldon. Voting in opposition were members Illingworth and Sokolovic. Ms. Martinez abstained

Mr. Weldon moved that the meeting be adjourned. The motion was seconded by Mr. Kennedy and unanimously approved

The meeting was adjourned at 7:17 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod