

Wednesday, June 5, 2019

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE
BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held June 5,
2019, at Bridgeport City Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace, Bridgeport,
Connecticut.

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

The first agenda item was discussion and possible action to rescind motion passed at May 20, 2019, Special Meeting to eliminate two assistant principals and one clerical staff from the Fairchild Wheeler(FCW) campus.

Mr. Lombard said he requested the item be placed on the agenda because at the time the item came up for votes there was no information about the specifics of Fairchild Wheeler's administrative needs other than the fact that we had just voted to cut two assistant principal positions at unknown schools.

Ms. Martinez arrived at the meeting.

Mr. Lombard said since then he's learned more from the schools and the principals, as well as the information shared by Ms. Pereira about the staffing of other high schools. He said the vote would reduce FCW from five principals to three, which is less than the other high schools.

Mr. Lombard said he has learned that grant procurement and writing is specific to the magnet schools, which along with recruiting takes man hours, extra time, energy and effort that is not required of other administrators.

Mr. Sokolovic read the definition of institutional discrimination. He said it refers to the unjust and discriminatory mistreatment of an individual or group of individuals by society and its institutions through unequal selection or bias, intention or unintentional. He said the result of the board's action would result in \$385,000 having to be cut from other students who are not performing as well as FCW.

Mr. Sokolovic said principals at other schools had to handle issues related to IEPs, 504s and ESL unlike FCW. He said he will not take from the poor to give to the rich. He said the students at FCW will be okay. He said the educational leader in the district, Dr. Johnson, said the FCW would not suffer. He said white flight was disgusting and discriminatory. He said he had been working on the Males of Color Committee to combat discrimination for two years only to face it right here now on this board.

Ms. Pereira said she was the longest-serving board member. She described the origin of the Fairchild Wheeler as a STEM magnet school, which was largely driven by a now deceased Westport superintendent, Claire Gold. She said Ms. Gold was also instrumental in the STEM focus of Discovery Magnet School. She said FCW was approved by the school board in 2005.

Ms. Pereira said Supt. Vallas saw an opportunity for a federal grant by splitting FCW into three separate schools. The grant expired two years ago. She said the district

receives \$7,085 per student for each suburban student and \$3,000 for each Bridgeport student at FCW.

Ms. Pereira said in 2016 FCW was plagued with issues and claims that Bridgeport and suburban students were required to use separate entrances which led to allegations of racism. She said principals did not address these issues in any meaningful way. She said suburban students displayed signs referring to white power and voting for Donald Trump. She said Bridgeport students were organizing a walkout to challenge racism while principals threatened to expel them. She said the staff has been ordered to undergo sensitivity training.

Ms. Pereira said Mayor Ganim promised in 2015 to fully fund the schools, however, he has now proposed four consecutive budgets without one single dollar for our schools and the board has made \$40 million in devastating cuts.

Ms. Pereira said she suggested restructuring FCW as one school with one principal and three assistant principals. She said three principals come with a significant price tag. She said Dr. Johnson in November met with the FCW community. She said in her tenure on the board no superintendent had ever met with a school community to discuss cuts to their school.

Ms. Pereira said she observed at a later meeting that many FCW parents treated Dr. Johnson in an appalling manner. She said the parents had three major issues with merging the schools: the three principals were experts in their content area, the loss of UConn scholarships, and impacting student rankings. She said she believed the last two points were valid.

Ms. Pereira said she told parents that a reasonable compromise was to have FCW give up two assistant principals and they were offered opportunity to have one principal and three assistants, and many of the parents she spoke with felt it was a fair compromise.

Ms. Pereira said she told parents at the meeting that it was critical that they help lobby legislators at the state level and to lobby Mayor Ganim. Many of the parents committed to helping.

Ms. Pereira said unbeknownst to her and many board members Mr. Weldon sent a letter to every FCW parent indicating the board was not deliberating any cuts for FCW and none would be considered unless they were consulted.

Before and after these comments, there was much crosstalk among the board members and people in the audience.

Ms. Pereira described the failure of Trumbull, Monroe, Shelton and Stratford to pay the tuition fees of \$1.6 million to the district allowed by state law. This number may raise to \$2.5 million by the end of the year.

Ms. Pereira described the work of Bryant principal Victoria Egri, where the literacy test scores were raised significantly despite a school population that is 22 percent special education and 24 percent English language learners. She said Fairchild Wheeler was 21 percent white and only 7 percent special education and 3 percent English language learners. She said resources should be put into the students that are the most expensive and difficult to teach, citing the large percentages of such students at the other high schools.

Ms. Pereira said equity is about allocating resources where they are needed most.

Ms. Pereira said at the last regular board meeting every FCW parent who spoke was a white female from the suburbs that owe us money. She said a black resident from Bridgeport professionally and politely expressed concerns about Principal Watson and an assistant principal. She said Mr. Watson sent the resident a private e-mail after the meeting reprimanding her for publicly addressing concerns. She said this put the board at risk for litigation for violating free speech rights.

Ms. Pereira said as the only white woman on the board she wanted to express her frustration at the predominantly white parents from the suburbs that feel their students are more deserving than every other student in Bridgeport. She said there were no Bridgeport FCW parents en masse objecting to the proposal. She said when she has spoken to FCW parents personally they have been cordial and respectful, with one exception.

Ms. Pereira said at a previous meeting the board voted to cut two principals elsewhere in Bridgeport with no debate or arguments. She said she was fine with Fairchild Wheeler having a principal and three assistant principals.

Ms. Martinez said she did not want to rescind the motion. She said she voted against the removal of two assistant principals because it was a bad idea, however the decision was made and \$11 million has to be cut. She said disrespecting FCW is not acceptable, regardless of your race. She said the cuts that will be made will not be good for

anyone. She added we all need to link up at the City Council and the state legislature.

Ms. Martinez said the cuts are not a surprise. She said people should not be mad at the board members, but at the mayor, the City Council, the governor and the Legislature.

Mr. Illingworth said he did appreciate Ms. Martinez's comments and agrees with them for the most part. He said no matter what we do some people are not going to be happy. He said he would not change his mind. He said it was a sad situation and he did not want to take the risk that the school would be lost due to lack of suburban enrollment, because Fairchild Wheeler is the only valuable magnet high school we have. He said he did not believe FCW was comparable to Central Magnet.

Ms. Pereira said she spoke with an attorney for Connecticut Department of Education. She said the attorney did not recall a magnet school that ever lost its status except for when the district requested to no longer designate them as interdistrict magnet. She said the attorney indicated the right to recruit suburban students being denied was in violation of state law.

Ms. Pereira said we're now wasting money on lawyers' fees because the suburban towns are not paying their rightful tuition. She said it was about equity, not an attack on FCW.

Mr. Weldon moved *"to rescind the motion passed at the May 29th, 2019, Special Meeting to eliminate two assistant principals and one clerical staff member from the Fairchild Wheeler campus."* The motion was seconded by Mr. Illingworth.

Mr. Lombard suggested a compromise that only one assistant principal be lost, which would leave four administrators at FCW like the other high schools.

Mr. Kennedy moved *“to amend the motion to return one assistant principal to Fairchild Wheeler.”* Mr. Lombard seconded the amendment.

Ms. Pereira said she assumed the one clerical was working for the assistant principals. She said she was amiable to the compromise. Ms. Martinez said she agreed. Ms. Pereira moved *“to amend to retain the three principals at Fairchild Wheeler and add back the ten-month assistant principal to the Fairchild Wheeler campus.”*

In respond to a question, Ms. Siegel said there are currently five clerical positions at Fairchild Wheeler.

Mr. Illingworth seconded the amendment.

Mr. Sokolovic said adding back \$135,000 means the cut would have to come from the other schools in the district that need more help and more money.

Ms. Martinez said every school gets something different such as Bassick having advanced manufacturing. She said the most students affected in FCW are Bridgeport students. She said she would support the amendment as a compromise. She said the entire district needs money. She noted her son was in one of the worst high schools academically in Bridgeport. She added that we’re going to face this every single year. She said we have to make these decisions after we’ve been cut by the city and the state.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said she has read about a state magnet school increase, but she has not received information from the state on the allocation methodology. She said it is most likely the per capita will increase and will depend on next year's enrollment. She said she would provide information to the board once she receives definitive information.

Ms. Pereira said she believed the increased magnet funding will provide the majority of the money to cover the assistant principal.

Mr. Kennedy said he supported adding back the assistant principal due to the grant writing and recruiting duties the principals have.

The amendment to add back the ten-month assistant principal was approved by a 6-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Martinez, Illingworth, Pereira, Kennedy, and Lombard. Mr. Sokolovic was opposed.

The amendment to add back an assistant principal was approved by a 6-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Martinez, Illingworth, Pereira, Kennedy, and Lombard. Mr. Sokolovic was opposed.

The main motion as amended was to rescind to the motion passed on the May 20, 2019, special meeting to eliminate two assistant principals and one clerical staff member on the Fairchild Wheeler campus as amended to be eliminating only the 12-month assistant principal and the one staff member.

The amendment was approved by a 6-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Martinez, Illingworth, Pereira, Kennedy, and Lombard. Mr. Sokolovic was opposed.

Mr. Sokolovic said this is a classic example of institutional discrimination, albeit inadvertent. The result will be \$135,000 coming from a low-performing school.

The next agenda item was on strategies to close the 2019-20 budget gap.

Mr. Sokolovic moved for a five-minute recess. The motion was seconded by Ms. Pereira and unanimously approved. The meeting was recessed at 6:22 p.m.

The meeting was resumed at 6:28 p.m.

Ms. Siegel said the updated plan includes recommendations made by board members.

She said there are only two changes. In the revenue section the additional ECS/Alliance funding of about \$100,000 in the state budget is included. The other change is the updated transportation cost analysis is completed and the dollar amounts are now included and accurate.

Ms. Siegel said after incorporation of the last actions by the board the remaining gap was about \$6.6 million, including the earlier votes tonight.

Ms. Siegel asked the board to discuss the proposed actions in Group B, vote on them and rank them in priority order for restoration.

Ms. Allen arrived at the meeting.

Ms. Siegel said the items include 26 library/media specialists positions at \$2.3 million and increasing the cut to school

administrators from two to six. She noted there are currently three vacancies in school administrators due to retirements.

Ms. Siegel said another option is in transportation to change the limit from 1 mile to 1.5 miles for all elementary students rather than Grades 5 to 8 only. The savings would be about \$421,331. The proposal to increase the limit for high school students from 2 miles to 2 1/4 miles would save \$214,698 at Fairchild Wheeler, \$35,000 for Central High and bus pass savings of about \$18,900.

Ms. Siegel said regarding the recommendation to cut the district office five percent she believed it is possible to eliminate two clerical positions and one curriculum director by consolidating math and science.

Ms. Siegel said there is a recommendation to eliminate all consultants, which would include retired supervisors. She said a suggestion to reduce athletics would reduce the budget by 25 percent for \$250,000

Ms. Siegel said an increase in the fee was proposed from \$150 to \$200 per course in the summer credit recovery program. She requested the board act this evening because the summer course is in development and fees will be collected shortly.

Ms. Siegel said a recommendation was made to eliminate the annual Parent Convention, which would save \$9,000 in the Title I budget. She said the parent allocation is \$7 per pupil based on projected registers. She said the exact one percent mandate in the Title I allocation would be \$6.19. Reducing the allocation to that amount would save \$12,000 in elementary schools and \$4,000 in high schools through the Priority Grant.

Ms. Siegel said memberships were explored without a dollar amount. The board was provided with a handout with the current status of memberships.

Ms. Siegel said a recommendation was made to explore savings in security guards. She said due to the importance of school security no recommendation is being put forward.

Ms. Siegel said if everything were done in Group B, the budget gap would be about \$2.7 million.

Ms. Siegel said the items in Group C include negotiating an increase from the city for the Lighthouse Program for an inflationary increase and deferred longevity payments and furlough days.

Mr. Sokolovic said he made the suggestion on the library/media specialists. He said it was a disgusting cut, however, there is no state mandate for library. He said it was imperative that we focus on core missions.

Ms. Martinez said she was an English major and the libraries were important to kids who were struggling. She said she cannot support eliminating 23.6 librarians.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said she can appreciate the recommendation, but in order to meet the requirements for accreditation with NEASC high schools will need to have a library and certified support staff. She said BMA is now going through the accreditation process.

Ms. Pereira said BMA has a library without a staff. She said studies indicate media specialists are critical to a child's development and literacy.

Mr. Lombard said he agreed with everything Ms. Pereira said and noted the importance of media specialists teaching how to use technology. He suggested due to the huge nature of the cuts the onus be put back on the city to tell the board what to cut.

Mr. Sokolovic said there are no good cuts, but kindergarten paras were cut before he joined the board. He said he would love to bring everything back, but hard choices had to be made and he asked where are the cuts to replace not cutting the libraries.

Ms. Martinez asked if there were cuts to science that could be made.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *“to eliminate fifty percent of library/media specialists and use them on a per diem basis as decided by the superintendent.”* In response to a question, he said the number 13 could be used. He said by per diem he meant shared schools.

The motion was seconded by Ms. Allen.

Ms. Pereira said the beautiful libraries in the schools would go unused. She said many of our children don't have neighborhood libraries and parents cannot afford to have books in the home. She said she can't support this right now.

Ms. Siegel said the proposal meant the larger schools would have a reduction from 1.0 to 0.5 librarians. She said some schools have purchased an additional 0.5 coverage in their prep enhancement allocation.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said she would not recommend the librarian coverage be reduced below 2.5 days per week at each school.

The motion failed by 5-1 vote. Voting in favor was Mr. Sokolovic. Voting in opposition were members Illingworth, Pereira, Kennedy, Weldon, and Martinez. Ms. Allen and Mr. Lombard abstained.

Ms. Allen said she abstained because it was ridiculous that we deprive our children of what is necessary for their development and growth. She said as a teacher she had seen how services are not delivered to students in Bridgeport. She said the city was not supportive of our teaching staff. She said sometimes she feels like screaming for our children because they are so neglected.

Several members noted the matter could be revisited if necessary.

Ms. Siegel asked if the board could please address the item on fees for summer credit recovery.

Ms. Pereira moved *“to approve number 14, summer credit recovery, increasing the fee charged of parents for summer high school credit recovery courses from 150 to 200, effective immediately.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Kennedy.

Ms. Martinez said she did not know we were charging for summer school. Ms. Allen said there has always been a charge for summer courses. Ms. Siegel said every district charges, which is supposed to be a partial disincentive to failing a course. Ms. Pereira noted she paid for her own summer school by working in McDonald's.

Mr. Sokolovic said we're back to the most vulnerable of our students, with many parents working two fulltime jobs to get their kids through school. He said part of the reason we're in the budget mess is because Mayor Ganim said people needed a \$50 tax cut.

Ms. Pereira said students in summer school are not just in poverty.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the rate proposed was in line with other districts.

Ms Pereira said we used to let students take two summer school courses at \$100 per course, but the course length was changed from two hours to four hours to provide better instruction.

Mr. Sokolovic said the fiscal impact was miniscule in terms of the budget. Ms. Siegel noted the cost has been \$150 for the last three years.

The motion was approved by a 6-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Pereira, Lombard, Allen, Kennedy, Weldon, Illingworth and Martinez. Voting in opposition was Mr. Sokolovic.

The next item discussed was transportation.

Mr. Illingworth said it was his suggestion. He said the transportation department wanted the board to be aware of the impact of the previous transportation vote on families where siblings will be covered under different policies. He said he understood the proposal was ugly. He suggested raising the transportation limit to 1.5 miles in K-8.

Ms. Pereira said she suggested K to 3 should move from 1 to 1.25 miles, but would support Mr. Illingworth's motion because often older children walk with younger siblings to and from school.

Ms. Martinez moved "*to approve Number 10 as is.*" The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said this would save an additional \$421,000 with the high school included.

Ms. Pereira said she recommended the high school limit be increased from 2.0 miles to 2.25 miles. In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said every school in the district is currently following our transportation policy, including interdistrict schools.

Ms. Pereira said Supt. Vallas made a special dispensation for Fairchild Wheeler and the district is paying for suburban students to be bused to the school.

Ms. Siegel said there is a magnet transportation grant, which covers a substantial portion of the district's costs, but not all. She said transportation is provided for children coming from suburban districts. The reimbursement level is \$1,300 per pupil, which covers about 90 percent of costs.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said she did not know if Bridgeport students attending FCW are transported or have to walk. She said the calculation pertains to children who are currently on buses and would no longer be entitled to bus transportation based on the increase.

Ms. Pereira noted Park City Magnet School and Discovery Magnet Schools do not have sidewalks.

Mr. Kennedy said his son rode the bus to FCW even though he lived on Soundview Avenue. Ms. Pereira said that was not equitable with other high school students.

Mr. Lombard noted we were now talking about bumping K-4 to 1.5, which is beyond the state's recommendation. He said he would oppose this. He suggested dividing the question.

Mr. Lombard moved *"to separate the elementary provisions from the high school part."* Ms. Pereira seconded the motion, which was unanimously approved.

Ms. Martinez moved *"to approve the K-8 walking distance from 1 mile to 1.5 miles."* The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic.

The motion was approved by a 6-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Allen, Illingworth, Martinez, Pereira, Sokolovic and Weldon. Mr. Lombard was opposed. Mr. Kennedy abstained.

Ms. Martinez moved *"to increase the high school transportation limits from 2 miles to 2.25 miles."* Ms. Pereira seconded the motion.

Ms. Pereira moved *"to amend the motion to increase the walking distance for high school students from 2 to 2.25 miles to ensure that it's equitable for every Bridgeport Public School student at the high school level."* Ms. Martinez seconded the amendment.

The amendment was unanimously approved.

Mr. Weldon moved *“adopting the proposed busing increase limit for high school from 2.0 to 2.25, with it being equitable to all high school students.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Lombard

The motion was unanimously approved.

Ms. Martinez moved to remove number 15 under the parent involvement, eliminating the Parent Convention.

Mr. Kennedy suggested taking action on Item 12 on consultants.

Mr. Kennedy moved *“to vote on the cuts for Item 12 in the 2019-20 budget plan, consultant per diem services, elimination of per diem consultants, district improvement plans, and elimination of per diem consultant teacher evaluation.”* The motion was seconded by Ms, Martinez

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said these are per diem employees on our payroll.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said she was in support of the cut.

The motion was unanimously approved.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 7:25 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

DRAFT