

Saturday, September 22, 2018

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT
BOARD OF EDUCATION, held September 22, 2018, at Housatonic
Community College, 900 Lafayette Boulevard, Bridgeport,
Connecticut

The meeting was called to order at 9:10 a.m..

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

Supt. Aresta L. Johnson, Ed.D., was present.

Mr. Weldon said the meeting was designed to develop the board goals and objectives for the coming year. He introduced the facilitator, Dr. Robert Villanova.

Dr. Villanova thanked the board members for serving. He said it was part of the American democracy that people don't see sometimes. He said he had spent a lot of time in the past ten years working with boards and superintendents on trying to implement best practices around board governance. He said he was honored to be asked by Dr. Johnson, whom he has known for ten years, to act as the facilitator. He said about 70 out of 169 Connecticut superintendents, including Dr. Johnson, have come through the UConn superintendent preparation program.

Dr. Villanova said he viewed the superintendent and the board as the governance team of the school district. He said if they aren't moving in a similar direction then everything else tends to stall in the district.

Dr. Villanova said there is a lot of evidence that boards that work well together with their superintendent produce better gains for children. He said he mostly wanted to talk about the board's role in supporting the district's strategic plan. He said the plan was impressive because

it was specific, concrete and short.

Dr. Villanova said he encouraged the board to have a small number of board goals and to have the goals support the strategic plan.

Dr. Villanova asked the board members to think about what they bring to the board that makes their contributions unique. Ms. Pereira said it was institutional knowledge because she was the most tenured board member. Mr. Walker said it was his 38 years of experience as a school teacher. Ms. Allen said she was a retired principal. Mr. Sokolovic said he brought a parent perspective and was married to a lifelong educator. Mr. Taylor said he was fiscally responsible and interested in pragmatic solutions to problems. Mr. Illingworth said he brought parental involvement, especially with the parent group. Mr. Weldon said he was a career public sector person in various industries with an understanding of large-scale public sector entities.

Ms. Pereira said the catalyst for board involvement was her daughter having nine different math teachers in 7th grade. Mr. Walker said he taught in Greenwich, which had abundant resources, while his wife teaching in Bridgeport lacked basic supplies. Mr. Illingworth said he believed in the great things in the district, but he believed there is also a great deal of work to be done and he wanted to be part of the solution. Ms. Allen said she saw a need to help the children after being in the business world and it bothered her that students did not know how to read and write.

Mr. Sokolovic said he joined the board due to the presence of his son in the district, particularly because a prior superintendent attempted to change his magnet school. He said the change was stopped and he learned one person can make a difference.

Mr. Taylor said he was the product of a failing school system forty years ago in Norwalk and a leading example of the prison pipeline. He said he failed to do his civic obligation when he failed to go into the Navy. He said he ran for the board because he was asked by the Republican Party and because he has further political ambitions. He said he wanted to prevent what happened to him as a student.

Mr. Weldon said his motivation for involvement was because several

years ago the board was operating very dysfunctionally and the district itself was not operating like a public sector entity should.

Dr. Villanova said a frustration he hears from board members is they can only fix a problem as a part of a group or a majority of the board.

In response to a question about good things going on in the district, Mr. Sokolovic said the board, unlike other boards, had completed an evaluation of the superintendent. Mr. Illingworth said he agreed. Ms. Pereira said it was not done well and was very unfair to the superintendent. Mr. Walker said that process was herky-jerky but at least we completed it. He said it could be refined going forward.

Dr. Villanova said the *Hartford Courant* did an expose about superintendent evaluations across the state that indicated practices varied widely. He said he tells superintendent they need evaluations to get feedback from the board.

Ms. Pereira said there is a lot of good being done in the district but not because of the board. She said she credited Dr. Johnson for doing an amazing job, including in minority recruitment.

Dr. Villanova recounted written answers by the board members to the following question: What would it take for the board and the superintendent team to create the right conditions for schools to be as good as they can be in Bridgeport. The answers included trust and open communication; look to the bigger picture; collaboration and knowing our place and our role as policymakers versus the superintendent's role; the full board must understand that the superintendent manages the day-to-day decisions of the school system; the superintendent only takes direction from the full board, not individual members of the board; the board sets policy and the superintendent must implement our policies with fidelity; no individual member or faction of the board can direct the board to violate board policy.

Answers to the question of what will it take to be successful included the superintendent should stay out of politics and stop favoritism to certain board members; dialogue; mutual respect; and come to an understanding what policy must drive action.

Answers to a question of what would be a good outcome of what we should try to accomplish together today included: Reach an understanding that each member of the board shares an equal authority in the decision-making; getting the board to start thinking on how we can work together and focus on the bigger picture; if I could walk out of here feeling everybody participated and will follow through on what we've learned; we would understand that all nine members are equals with no member or faction believing they have more power than another member; board goals will be drafted for 2018-19 and a common understanding of how to communicate with the board and the superintendent; all board members leaving with all hearts and minds on one page.

Dr. Villanova said he had used similar questions in working with the Hartford board and superintendent, which became good reference points going forward.

Dr. Villanova then shared things he was completely convinced are best practices. Team members are united in their commitment to serve the children; the board and the superintendent are different, but interdependent; good boards have success indicators established; governance team relationships are based on trust and respect; governance team continuously develops strong and durable the relationships out in the community.

Ms. Martinez arrived at the meeting.

Mr. Walker said he prefers not to have any notoriety, but to assist the superintendent in running the district and let all of the accolades and acclaim come to her. Ms. Martinez said the biggest problem we have is the lack of parent engagement and parents not knowing how they can be involved. She said nothing can get done without partnerships.

Mr. Sokolovic said he started off with Mr. Walker's position, but to accomplish what we need to accomplish requires outreach and coming out of comfort zones.

Mr. Taylor said we're elected officials and constituents often call us with problems and expect us to be their voice. He said he can't call

back a constituent and say he can't micromanage the superintendent's office.

Mr. Illingworth said no one here ran to be on the board to do harm to the district or students because we all care. He said our differences are about how to accomplish the same goal, which divides us. He said we judge each other on how we got on the board, which unfortunately is a political process. He said what matters is whether it's still a political process once you're elected. He said trust and respect among the board members was needed.

Ms. Pereira said two of us were never endorsed by a major political party and had to go to the people. Ms. Martinez said that was also a political process.

Mr. Walker said he was concerned about the micromanaging he sees by board members. He said he brings concerns he has directly to the superintendent.

Mr. Sokolovic said no matter how anybody got here politically we're all here now. He said he did not owe anybody anything for doing a volunteer job that takes about a hundred hours a month. Mr. Taylor said constituents bring problems to him. He noted in Bridgeport everybody is connected to everybody. He said what might appear to be micromanaging might be cutting red tape. He said people in Bridgeport don't get hired on merit, but on who you knew or past relationships.

Dr. Villanova said board members hate to hear they only have one employee, the superintendent. Mr. Taylor said he disagreed. He said when a department head can't give an answer or double talks, he will hold them accountable for their actions. He said it may be time to try something new.

Dr. Villanova said strong superintendents had to balance their attention to the board and community and the district's staff. He said in a strong school system boards and superintendents realize they have an interdependent responsibility.

Ms. Pereira said under state statute the board must set goals and the

board's policies indicate it must be done by June 30th. She noted it was now the end of September. Dr. Villanova said he viewed the board's strategic plan as the goals. Mr. Sokolovic said the strategic plan was put in place by Dr. Johnson because the board fell down on the job.

Mr. Weldon said the four pillars of the strategic plan were developed by Dr. Jonson after engaging the community and others, while subsequently it's the board's responsibility to develop goals and objectives that are aligned with the strategic plan.

Dr. Villanova said best practice in most school districts is the strategic plans are in fact the board's goals. He noted the board's 2014 goals read like the board was employees due to the level of detail.

Mr. Sokolovic said due to board turnover the goals should come before the strategic plan.

Dr. Villanova said typically boards and the superintendent have a community-based process to develop an overarching plan.

Ms. Martinez said she had yet to understand if the pillars to the strategic plan would be followed throughout the three years. She said she believed the board and superintendent had yet to collaborate on anything big yet. She noted the board's foundation was a possible way this could take place.

Ms. Pereira said Dr. Joyner was a facilitator for the work of the last board. She said the issue is the goals must be set annually. She said it was supposed to be done by June 30th.

Mr. Weldon said he viewed the strategic plan as a long-term document with the board incrementally going year by year to work on how to achieve that. He said he thought we stumble over ourselves when we get caught up in whether it should have been done three months ago. Ms. Pereira said breaking the law is more than stumbling.

Dr. Villanova said the board should celebrate the fact that it has a strategic plan, unlike a lot of districts.

Mr. Walker said since he has been on the board it had been under tremendous pressure from budget cuts and to be behind on process bothers him, but he was glad to see there was a progress on the evaluation and discussion of goals.

Dr. Villanova said the conversation he just heard was the exact same conversations he had with the Hartford board and superintendent 18 months ago. He said that board is now progressing with timelines in place.

Mr. Sokolovic said he believed the board was doing pretty well despite the lack of board experience by some members. He said a lot of the problems had been institutionalized through prior boards and superintendents, which could not be fixed overnight. Ms. Martinez said she had been requesting training over and over. She said she believed respect had to be before trust for the board because the respect will build the trust.

Mr. Illingworth said he believed what was missing is the year-to-year discussion about what was working and what is not working. He said he would like to start the community outreach earlier in the budget process. He said it was important to have board goals to keep on top of things.

Dr. Villanova said the board could have an agenda item to periodically review goals. Mr. Illingworth said sometimes the board gets bogged down with too many things that it should not be getting involved with. Dr. Villanova said one reason it's hard to keep board members involved is because of the responsibilities and time commitment to meetings.

Dr. Villanova said he would distribute a survey on practice during the upcoming break. He said the board seemed to be agreeing the goals should be supporting the strategic plan.

The meeting was recessed at 10:41 a.m. and reconvened at 10:51 a.m.

Dr. Villanova said in 2014 the state paid a lot of money to farm out a

nationwide study on board-superintendent relations that found four summary points.

Dr. Villanova said he distributed an article on the eight characteristics of high-performing districts. He asked the board members to rate where the governance team is on the various characteristics from 1 to 10(the highest).

The first characteristic referred to the governance team committing to high expectations for student achievement and quality instruction and has clear goals towards that vision.

Ms. Martinez said she rated it at about four. She said the vision and goals are clear, but she was not sure about accountability and the timeline. Mr. Walker ranked it at seven because the strategic plan is strong, but he was not a hundred percent convinced the board was committed to supporting the plan as our mission.

Mr. Illingworth said he rated this about a four. He said he supported the strategic plan, but the issue is he had seen at least three prior strategic plans by other superintendents and for the most part they go on the shelf and are forgotten. He said he supported monitoring the strategic plan.

Ms. Allen said she rated it a six because there's always room for growth and we need to constantly monitor improvement in the district.

The next category rated by board members was the statement that effective school district governance teams have strong beliefs and values about what's possible for students and their ability to learn and of the system's ability to teach all children to learn.

Mr. Walker said he rated this at a six because he believed everyone shared a belief that all students should learn, but he said he was not sure everyone shared the vision as to how to get there. He said he viewed himself as serving three constituencies: teachers, parents and students. He said some board members often we don't see how important it is to have the best, most qualified teacher in front of our children.

Mr. Sokolovic said he also rated this a six. He said while everyone wants students to succeed, some of us come from different value perspectives. He noted an issue where he was on the other side from Mr. Walker.

Ms. Allen said she gave it a six. She noted expectations for inner city students are sometimes not rated very highly.

Ms. Martinez said her rating of five was because the board gets bogged down in things we shouldn't be bogged down with. She said teachers and children should be the center of all.

Dr. Villanova said in a perfect world the board's role is to create the conditions for the superintendent to do the work she needs to do. The superintendent's main responsibility is to create the conditions for principals to do what they need to do as leaders, while principals create the conditions for great teachers. He said boards and superintendent who can see the connection between their policy work and the classroom are the ones who feel better about their work.

The next metric was effective school district governance teams are accountability-driven with the board spending less time on operational issues and more time focused on policies that could improve student achievement.

Mr. Sokolovic rated the item at four because the board is emerging from a lot of structural deficiencies. He said he wants to raise accountability in the district, particularly with respect to principals. He added the district needed to hold principals accountable on reporting of bullying.

Ms. Pereira rated the board a one in this area. She said in the last school year the board did not pass one single policy, while a magnet school policy has been in committee for two years. She said the Governance Committee only met once last year. She said nothing happened with policies referred to committees.

Ms. Pereira said she strongly agreed the board had one employee. She said under board policy no board member can call a member of the superintendent's staff without first notifying Dr. Johnson. She said

board members directly contact Dr. Johnson's staff without her knowledge and give them direction. Dr. Villanova said that would not be good practice. Ms. Pereira said it was disrespectful to the superintendent.

Ms. Pereira said she was a fanatic about board policy and state statutes because if we don't follow the policies that we create we cannot expect administrators, students or staff members to follow them.

Mr. Taylor said he would agree with the rating of one. He said he could not substantiate that any board member has talked to any department head without first letting the superintendent know. He said he gave the rating of one because the superintendent's hands are tied on accountability due to contracts and state statutes.

Dr. Villanova said this item was about holding the district accountable for progress going forward. Mr. Taylor said he believed the board was interested in holding people accountable.

Ms. Martinez said she was at a one because accountability was not present in all areas. She added the board should be creating more policy. She said there are board policies that should be eliminated.

Mr. Illingworth said he rated this area as a one. He said he believed the board and the superintendent believed in accountability. He said if the board holds the superintendent accountable, the superintendent must hold everyone in the system accountable. He said the board should be evaluating its policies at least every two years, which it had not done. He said often the board passes policy and it is not implemented consistently.

Mr. Walker said he gave this a four because he had seen the progress the superintendent has made in accountability, particularly in the area of documentation. He said things can be very slow in a union environment, but the superintendent works very well in that area.

Mr. Walker said the board spends too much time on items of lesser importance instead of focusing on what can truly improve our

students. Dr. Villanova noted a lot of board members' heads were nodding in agreement.

Ms. Martinez said her rating was aimed at the board, while the superintendent was different. She said the superintendent provides a great level of direction, feedback and data to the board.

The next area was, effective school district governance teams have a collaborative relationship between the board and the superintendent and together they establish strong communication structures to inform and engage internal stakeholders.

Ms. Pereira said this was the worst area on the superintendent's evaluation, although not because of the ratings by herself and Mr. Walker. She said she had many disagreements with the superintendent but was able to move on and leave those in the past.

Mr. Illingworth said he rated this area five because it was an ongoing thing and there was a will to work at it. He said when the board members were running in the election there was an untruthful charge that the first thing they were going to do was fire the superintendent. He said at some point we need to stop that, put things to the side and start from scratch again.

Ms. Pereira said the superintendent's toughest job is to manage a board with a lot of different personalities and expectations. Ms. Pereira said she had managed up to 52 people, which was all about managing personalities. She said it was a difficult position to be in because there are political factions.

Ms. Pereira said the superintendent's job is to follow board policies and report to the board as a collective body.

Dr. Villanova said that issue was not just related to Bridgeport, but lots of boards. He said with nine-member boards every superintendent knows they're going to spend more time with some people than others.

Ms. Martinez said she believed a board goal should be created that the superintendent be comfortable coming back to board members

individually or as a whole. She said time is wasted on the board in micromanagement. Dr. Villanova noted he mentioned before Ms. Martinez arrived that often the word micromanaging is overused. He said as a superintendent he made it a practice to respond to the entire board in response to inquiries from individual board members.

Mr. Sokolovic said he believed micromanaging was not as much a problem as previously. He said he believed the board members had grown. Dr. Villanova said part of the privilege of being on the board is the ability to bring problems to the superintendent's attention.

Ms. Martinez said she believed another retreat was needed to complete the board's goals.

Dr. Villanova said in some big city districts the board committees become their own power structure, which he described as bad practice. Ms. Pereira said that was not the case in Bridgeport. He said the work of committees should be tied to the strategic plan.

Dr. Villanova suggested the board have a conversation on communication within the district and with the board.

Dr. Villanova noted some danger signs listed in the article he distributed. He said if these kind of things get in the way the board will be unable to move its strategic plan forward.

Mr. Illingworth said this is where we need the time to have an honest dialogue about each issue. Dr. Villanova said all boards have a hard finding time to do things such as this.

Mr. Walker suggested a continuation of the retreat at a future session relatively soon. He said he was glad to see the board was finally taking steps to unify our processes for being board members.

Mr. Weldon said as difficult as the processes have been the board had done them, unlike prior boards. Mr. Walker said the board always had to spend a lot of time to deal with budget crises.

Dr. Villanova said as an outsider when he read the article about the board's evaluation of the superintendent he had a positive impression

about the board's work.

Dr. Villanova said the board's strategic plan was really good and could be used in his class at UConn. He said he had never seen a strategic plan with such clear action steps and evidence bullets. He noted the absence of a reference to equity and the achievement gap, unlike most urban districts. Dr. Johnson said the Males of Color initiative was embedded in the action steps.

Dr. Villanova said he looked at the board's 2014 goals and asked how they looked from the present day. He asked the board members how much tweaking they needed. He suggested someone draft goals and bring them forward for discussion.

Dr. Villanova said the goals referred to in the state statute are those in the strategic plan. He said the board's goals as represented by the 2014 goals are parenthetical in support of the strategic plan.

Ms. Pereira said the goal saying the board will ensure appropriate financial and physical resources are available to fulfill its mission has a problem because the board does not appropriate funds.

Mr. Walker said a board goal should be to develop a responsible district budget and advocate for such a budget.

Ms. Martinez said the board had power in the community and should hold fundraisers during the year for the district. She said Dr. Johnson did a great job by putting the district's foundation out there.

Dr. Villanova said in some cities the municipal officials take fundraising to mean boards need less of their money.

Mr. Walker suggested a goal of developing better partnerships with universities and other educational foundations that can help with mentoring teachers and students.

Ms. Pereira said the board had not finalized the superintendent's goals from her evaluation.

Dr. Villanova said a potential board goal about reviewing board

policies could be phrased as the policy committee reviewing and prioritizing policies that relate to the strategic plan.

Mr. Illingworth suggested leaving the proposed goals at three and reviewing the situation at a subsequent meeting.

There was a discussion about continuing the retreat with Dr. Villanova.

Ms. Martinez said the two main things out of today were seeing what a board should look like and the danger list. She said the board had done things that fell into both categories.

Mr. Weldon suggested a future meeting be no more than a half a day. Ms. Martinez said she agreed.

Ms. Sokolovic said he would like to see a goal towards following board bylaws that currently exist, and if there are problems undertake work to change them.

Mr. Sokolovic said he believed right now our foundation was very shaky. Mr. Walker said when he joined the board he attended a seminar with Gary Brochu at Shipman & Goodwin which he said was eye-opening and very informative.

Mr. Weldon said when he came on the board there was a seminar given by Atty. Brochu. Ms. Martinez said she did not have a presentation as described by Mr. Walker.

Mr. Walker said he felt we were on the verge of something really helpful if we move forward with Dr. Villanova and training from Berchem Moses.

Ms. Pereira said Pillar 3, which covers recruiting, hiring, developing and training qualified and culturally sensitive staff, was critical. She said training was needed on how to successfully lobby our municipal and legislative elected leaders. She noted the board had made \$45 million cuts in five years.

Ms. Pereira said what we've been doing, such as filling up the City

Council chambers once a year, has not been working. She described an approach to invite council members to meetings at different schools. She said she presented the concept in Dr. Johnson's evaluation.

Mr. Weldon said some organizations such as CABA could present a training program for board members. Ms. Pereira said she believed the board needed that. Ms. Martinez said she agreed.

Mr. Taylor said he had a problem with alienation with board members, three in particular, in that he was different and doesn't fit in. He said he had received attacks on social media and Only in Bridgeport, which made people reluctant to share. He said it was hard to come in here and have trust when you may have the leader throwing wood on the fire. He acknowledged he could be disrespectful himself, but at some point it hinders the district when someone is distributing his criminal record at a board meeting via a fellow board member. He noted he had three criminal convictions and he had been honest with his story with everybody.

Mr. Taylor said he was not a snazzy dresser any more, but he was photographed by a board member, who posted his photo in his current garb. He said then there's a reference to a dress code policy and he received a nasty letter from a teacher about how he was dressed, and there's no support from the superintendent. He said it goes on and on with petty nonsense.

Mr. Weldon said that's where the trust and relationship building comes in.

Ms. Pereira said no board member had been more offensive to our staff, teachers and fellow board members than Mr. Taylor. He said Ms. Pereira was absolutely right. He said there are people who make \$140,000 a year and come up to the podium and can't answer his questions. He said he represents the students and the parents.

Ms. Pereira said Mr. Taylor was not a victim. Mr. Taylor said Ms. Pereira was entitled to post whatever she wants. He said he speaks his mind and then Ms. Pereira gets upset.

There was a discussion of future steps. Dr. Villanova suggested Dr. Johnson and Mr. Weldon send a draft of goals for board members to react to.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 12:17 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Draft