

Monday, April 16, 2017

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held at April 16, 2018, at Bridgeport City Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:01 p.m.

Present were Chair John Weldon, Vice President Hernan Illingworth, Secretary Jessica Martinez, Chris Taylor, and Joseph Sokolovic. Dennis Bradley arrived subsequently as noted.

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

The sole agenda item was discussion and possible action on the 2018-19 budget gap plan. Mr. Weldon noted a lot of information had been disseminated.

Supt. Johnson said the latest iteration of the budget gap plan was Version 7, which has very slight changes from Version 6 previously distributed to the board.

Dr. Johnson said the focus is to look at the budget gap plan and the impact it's going to have on the education structure. She said there are impacts to staff from the plan. She said the plan reduces the budget gap to \$6 million.

Dr. Johnson said furloughs are built into the document, but approvals from bargaining units have not been received.

Dr. Jonson said notification was received today that the grant programs for pre-K programs(PDG) will be cut. The programs are at Cross, Claytor, Batalla and Beardsley. She said the reduction will be \$3.9 million inclusive of community sites.

In response to a question, Nadira Clarke, grants director, said it was a federal program that comes to the state. She said federal funding is being eliminated.

Dr. Johnson said if the board wishes to remove an item from the budget gap plan it is imperative that something replace it given the \$13 million gap.

Ms. Martinez said she was not comfortable with assistant principals being removed. Mr. Illingworth said he felt strongly about that as well.

Dr. Johnson said the recommendations in the plan make all of us uncomfortable, but in a worst case scenario something had to be done. Mr. Illingworth said we were told that principals were told that they were going to lose the assistant principals. He said he was concerned about that communication because the board had not taken any action on the matter.

Dr. Johnson said when she met with the BCAS union in December she shared with them the information in the budget plan, including the six assistant principals. She said she described this as a possibility and requested input on alternatives. She said principals were made aware of the possibility as well.

Elizabeth Maurer, manager of budget and financial reporting, said it was made very clear that the budget gap plan is a suggestion.

Mr. Illingworth said he believed the issue of instructional coaches was troublesome to the board. He said he would like to hear from the math and literacy directors on the impacts from cuts to coaches.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said Marlene Siegel, chief financial officer, did not come to work today. Mr. Taylor said this was probably the most important meeting of the year. Ms. Clarke said she was available by phone if there were questions. Mr. Taylor said he had to be here in person, Ms. Siegel makes \$210,000 a year and maybe she should be the first person to chop.

Mr. Taylor noted the board's budget was \$245.7 million. He said since the board is \$14 million shy he proposed everybody across the board receive a haircut of six percent. He said it sucks, but it sucks for everybody. He said it would focus management to keep reins on the cash. He said six percent wasn't a great deal to keep every

employee and every program functioning. He said desperate times require desperate measures.

Mr. Taylor said he was tired of hearing you can't do things; all vendors should be cut six percent and contracts renegotiated.

Mr. Weldon said another alternative is to stop spending money in an area which might leave a vendor with no contract. He said the board received some information today around open purchase orders that seemed astronomical. He said if those things are addressed looking at labor and things like furloughs may not be necessary. He said he saw one category for meetings and events to the tune of \$4.4 million.

Dr. Johnson noted that even after tonight another \$7 million in cuts were needed. She said an additional \$1.1 million is expected from the state's biennial budget.

Ms. Martinez said she believed the board needed to go through every detail no matter how long it takes.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said there were upcoming meetings with the City Council. She said she said hoped the board would support her presentations to the City Council and speak on their own.

Mr. Illingworth said if the assistant principals are removed from the plan the board would have to identify \$900,000 more in savings.

Mr. Sokolovic said the school volunteer office brings a lot of free labor to the district, which you can't really put a dollar amount on.

Mr. Taylor said he was with Ms. Martinez on staff. He said cuts should include contracts, software we don't use, and the overpaid rent.

Ms. Martinez said it was about the students and the teachers within the school. She said the population of a school with 497 students could increase via transfers, but the assistant principals would have been removed due to the formula that is used.

In response to a question, Ms. Maurer and Dr. Johnson said there was no legal requirement for an assistant principal at the 500-student level. Ms. Martinez said she believed the teachers and students needed the support of an assistant principal.

Mr. Taylor asked if there was going to be a vote. Ms. Martinez said the issue was very important and it should not be rushed. Mr. Taylor said he would be out in the hallway and he could be called in when it was time for a vote. He said he was tired of people paraphrasing what he was saying. He said the students were very important to him. He said Ms. Martinez's statement had an innuendo that students don't matter him. Ms. Martinez said she did not say that.

Mr. Taylor said he did not want to be here all night on something that we all agree on now. Ms. Martinez said other people want to discuss the issue and said she apologized. Mr. Taylor apologized.

Mr. Illingworth said each school had to be looked at individually in regard to assistant principals and not as a rigid number. He said the amount of special education challenges and other data should be taken into account.

Dr. Johnson noted the board requested additional information from the math and literacy directors looking at reducing the amount of instructional coaches by half.

Ms. Martinez said she asked some questions about the instructional coaches and learned that coaches are not at schools on a fulltime basis. She said reducing the number of instructional coaches to five would not be viable. She said she didn't want to remove one of them, but she was comfortable with removing all of them if we have to.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested instead of cutting the school volunteer office the board stop paying tuition to send students to the Regional Center for the Arts(RCA) and Six to Six Magnet School. The cost is \$2600 per student at RCA, so the cut would yield \$54,000. The amount of tuition paid to Six to Six is about \$180,000. He said he believed the school volunteer office is more beneficial. He said the number of students sent to the RCA could be capped and a lottery process created if there are too many applicants.

Dr. Johnson said the number of students sent to RCA is capped at 82. Mr. Sokolovic said the cap could be reduced to 61, a 25 percent cut.

Ms. Martinez said such a cut would affect children in the classroom. Mr. Sokolovic said there would still be art and music classes in the district's schools.

Mr. Taylor said he would not vote for anything that takes something away from a student, including staff. Ms. Martinez said she was in favor of keeping the student volunteer office open.

Mr. Sokolovic said if we cut every single central office administrator we're still \$2 million short.

Mr. Bradley arrived at the meeting.

Mr. Weldon said the overarching theme was whatever we do the impact has to be minimal as we can to the students and the staff.

Mr. Weldon noted there were union representatives present at the meeting. Dr. Victor Black of the BCAS union said there had been conversations about these subjects. He asked the board be cognizant of the children who will be impacted.

Mr. Weldon said we don't want to create a circumstance where people lose their jobs and the work for the people that remain becomes more difficult, resulting in diluting the quality of education provided to students.

In response to a question about furloughs or wage freezes/reductions, Dr. Black said it's hard to make a comment because we're not aware of all the cards on the table that the board may have access to.

Mr. Taylor said he was not in favor of asking organized labor to take a haircut and not everybody else. He said he was a card-carrying Teamster. He said he was in favor of cutting everybody equally

across the board. He said he saw no reason why the unions should give up anything unless everybody else does.

Mr. Illingworth said to be fair to the unions they need to see a lot more from us before we ask them to do anything. He said if the unions saw something across the board they might be more cooperative.

Dr. Johnson said the proposal includes furloughs for everybody, including herself.

Mr. Sokolvoic noted throughout the country there is a movement among teacher unions to walk out of the job. He said he has been a lifelong union member. He noted the district had great difficulty in retaining teachers as it was. He said it involved the jobs and careers of the teachers and how they feed their families and kids.

Mr. Taylor said he knows how to play extortion too. Mr. Weldon said he was not suggesting that the union should consider alterations of their contracts, but was just asking if they were willing to share thoughts.

Ms. Martinez said it sounds like we're unable to remove a lot of the things within the scope of the reduction and we should talk about what we are willing to reduce.

Mr. Illingworth said he thought we had to go line item by line item, which could not happen all in one night. He said he was not sure if a cut across the board was feasible.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said it was important to have a plan in place when we go before the City Council. She said they're going to be looking to see what we've done on our end.

Mr. Sokolovic said if we can't come up with something on our own that we accept the superintendent's recommendations, whether we like them or not. Ms. Martinez said we should stay here until we come up with something because it is our job. She said she refused to agree with removing assistant principals, but would agree to cutting literacy and math coaches.

Dr. Johnson said the usage of some programs has been looked at. She said the Lexia program has a fairly low usage and would not be continued.

Mr. Bradley suggested the board consider a six percent, equal reduction and have the superintendent present such a plan. Mr. Taylor said he previously said this.

Mr. Weldon said he didn't see where we're permitted to evenly just cut people's pay by six percent.

Mr. Bradley said the union contract indicates we can dismiss employees as long as it's the prerogative or the need of the schools. He said if they're not willing to make cuts, that means people get fired.

Mr. Sokolovic said if each department cut its budget by six percent they could still choose to make cuts the board doesn't like and we'd be back where we are now.

Mr. Weldon said our customers are the 21,000 students and the 3,000 employees. He said Mr. Taylor was saying he'd rather receive a six percent pay cut than lose his job or see a colleague lose their job. He said a dialogue was needed with the union leadership and they needed to see that their membership was not bearing the brunt of the reductions. He said the union was hearing what the board was talking about and he hoped they were taking it to heart.

Mr. Illingworth said we need to look at programming before looking at staff. He said often inefficient programs are kept in place, which is money after bad money.

Mr. Bradley said the six percent reduction would be spread out throughout the budget and everybody would carry the burden equally. He said it was the most equitable thing to do.

Dr. Johnson said programs such as myON are embedded in grants and have been removed from the grant allocations. She said it was

not just about saving jobs, but bodies in schools and classrooms were needed for kids.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said she has approached the BCAS and BEA unions regarding two furlough days and had not received approval. Dr. Black said he no opinion on this at this time.

Mr. Taylor said the unions should not be dragged into this. Dr. Black said the furlough days have been requested, but the union has no basis on which to make a decision.

Mr. Sokolovic noted the BEA union, which is probably the majority of the budget, is not present. He said he assumed no one would want to take a six percent pay cut and we should work under the impression that they will not take the pay cut. Mr. Weldon said the focus would then be on areas like contracting and things that are considered luxury.

Mr. Taylor said the unions work for us and they're not going to do anything if Mr. Sokolovic keeps up his position. He said a proposal should be brought to the unions professionally, other than shooting from the hip, and let them have a dialogue with it.

Mr. Sokolovic said he was considering students first and foremost. Mr. Taylor said he believed Mr. Sokolvoic was more a friend of labor than he was for the students. Mr. Sokolovic said if we lose teachers due to discontent, they will go to another district. He said the district will then get lower quality teachers and the education of students will suffer. He said he was thinking long term.

Mr. Taylor said we already have Bridgeport teachers that are underpaid and more of them are here because they love their job and their students. They should be paid \$100,000, but unfortunately we don't have it. He said if they're going to leave over six percent, we don't want them here anyway; good riddance to bad rubbish.

Ms. Martinez asked that Mr. Taylor be a little bit more respectful to the staff and the board members. She said she responded to Mr. Taylor a little snippy because he responds a little snippy. She said he should think before he speaks.

Ms. Martinez said if the unions say no, we're back in the same position that we are in. Mr. Taylor asked Ms. Martinez to suggest a solution.

Mr. Weldon suggested redirecting the focus from staff cuts to other areas. He said when he asked the question of the BCAS representatives it was to hear what they had to say; he was not advocating it.

Mr. Taylor suggesting cutting everything else ten percent and leaving the unions alone.

Mr. Weldon noted the item about meetings, workshops, catering and food covered \$4.4 million. Mr. Sokolovic said there were a lot of grocery stores on the list. Mr. Illingworth said that might include grant money and Title I money for parents which has nothing to do with the operating budget.

Ms. Clarke said the budget is a combination of grants and money that we get from the city. She said in a lot of cases money can't be swapped for something else because the grant is for something specific.

Mr. Sokolovic asked if the board could see the funding stream for areas of the budget. Ms. Maurer said she believed the board had the account numbers and anything beginning with 01 would be general fund and 02 would be grants.

Dr. Johnson noted that the board received a document delineating the programs that have been cut over time.

Ms. Maurer said she had been around for about twenty years on the budget. She said we are at the point where we have cut as much as we can from the general fund. Protecting the classroom has always been the priority and giving the schools their allocation for supplies, but the district has been underfunded for twenty years. Now the district is facing a reduction in grants, in Title I, Title II, Priority and PDG. In addition, costs escalate. The negotiations with unions are entered in good faith that we can afford increases and this year we're

facing about \$5 million in labor cost increases with no infusion of new money.

Ms. Maurer said when the recommendations were put together we felt that we were protecting the classroom and as an opportunity to look at things in a new way, including redirecting the instructional coaches. She said we are at bare bones and it has not been an easy process.

In response to a question about a budget code, Ms. Maurer said most of the food for meetings and workshops in the \$4.5 million number is food from the nutrition department. She said nutrition was a wash because it was expended by the general fund and then federal and state revenues equal the expenses. She said the MUNIS accounting system sets up the codes.

Mr. Bradley said cuts can be done either as across the board to all departments and programming or we identify in general what percentage of cuts each department or program needs to be cut.

Ms. Martinez said she requested the information ahead of time so we're all here today prepared with recommendations. She said her recommendations were line item-by-line items, not department by department. She said she was ready to make her recommendations.

Ms. Martinez said she was willing to budge with the ten literacy coaches and ten math coaches, which equal \$2 million. She said she refused to budge on the assistant principals.

Ms. Martinez said she recommended that we remove two assistant superintendents for a savings of \$310,000. Ms. Maurer said the figure did not include benefits and the total amount would also include travel allowance.

Ms. Martinez said she was willing to remove the athletic director since there is an athletic director in each school.

Ms. Martinez said payroll had a huge staff and she questioned the need for the staff. Ms. Maurer said payroll had been cut many times. Two of the employees are part-time, and they do benefits, payroll,

and health benefits. She added that the district is self-insured, so the employees manage all that for active and retirees. She said employees who have retired in the payroll department have not been replaced.

In response to a question, Ms. Maurer said she was in the position of financial reporting. She said Ms. Siegel prepares the overall budget and has control over grants, nutrition and other budgets. Ms. Maurer said she does all the forecasting on the general fund, budget transfers, works with the city on journal entries, helps payroll during the summertime in relation to personnel changes, does all financial state reporting such as the EDO-1 that's filed in September, as well as auditing filed in December, state reimbursement for the transportation and magnet operating grant, and whatever else is required.

In response to a question, Ms. Maurer said she did not want Ms. Siegel's job.

Mr. Weldon asked the board to be mindful of talking about people's employment. He said this is not the forum for that.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested we refer to titles instead of individual people.

Dr. Johnson noted the post of chief financial officer had been posted.

Ms. Martinez said she didn't know everybody's function. She said she had managed departments and people and done the work of many people. She noted Mr. Testani had done the job of ten people and not been paid for it. She said if the board is not going to go line by line, let's just cut across six percent.

Mr. Sokolovic said the line-by-line approach would net what we need eventually. He said Ms. Martinez was on the right track.

Mr. Sokolovic said Ms. Martinez's suggestions total \$339,000, which does not reach the assistant principals. He said it could cover the volunteer office.

Mr. Weldon said we have to look at this from the 30,000-feet view. He said it would be fair to say the focus would be on outside services and contracts. He said the board could direct the superintendent to use her resources to figure out where that should be, instead of the board going line by line through the budget. He said the approach seems to be the administration is top heavy and we want to stay away from wage reductions.

Mr. Sokolovic said the line-by-line approach would be preferable because departments work together every day and there are personal connections that will make it difficult for administrators to cut positions.

Mr. Bradley said he had opened businesses and currently had eight employees. He said it is the job of a boss to manage, although it is difficult to fire people. He said he was sure the superintendent could make the recommendations.

Mr. Bradley said he supported cutting across the board, with the superintendent making the appropriate recommendations.

Mr. Weldon said we would then look at what the superintendent came up with. He said the board sets the tone for the superintendent and he thought she will know what her marching orders are.

Mr. Illingworth said he struggled with the six percent across the board. He said the board should designate percentage cuts in different areas of the budget, while trying to keep the cuts away from the classroom. He said the six percent cut would affect classrooms.

Mr. Taylor said he did not want to affect the classroom.

Mr. Weldon said there should be a descending order of focus, with the last thing being anything that impacts the rank and file staff and the classrooms.

Mr. Bradley said the board should identify central office, contracts and programs as being a place of interest.

Mr. Taylor said it should be focused across the board, otherwise the six percent doesn't work.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said Lexia and myON are considered contracts, while programmatic things like MAX and Today's Students/Tomorrow's Teachers have been eliminated, which have a direct impact on students.

Dr. Johnson said cuts to outside contracts and central office will not reach \$13 million.

Mr. Sokolovic said the board could either direct it line by line or accept what the superintendent gives us. Mr. Weldon said the board will see what the superintendent comes back with.

Ms. Martinez said she was not going to apologize for wanting to be here all night if we have to. She said the board is here unprepared despite the fact that she had information e-mailed to the board over a week ago. She said she was uncomfortable with making decisions that she doesn't have all the information for. She said we need to come to these meetings prepared.

In response to a question, Ms. Martinez said she was comfortable with the removal of the twenty instructional coaches for \$2 million, even though that did not make her happy.

Mr. Taylor said he would not make any cut to any staff. He said he believed the budget could be cut \$13 million without eliminating one person. He said if we stay focused on this it will work; even if we don't get six percent, five percent would cut the budget gap immensely.

Mr. Weldon said if union membership saw every other area being cut that was the only way such a cut could take place.

Mr. Taylor said the unions were scheduled for \$5 million in raises. He said freezing the raises would be a big number. He said he would be happy with saving teachers and administrators for last.

Ms. Martinez said she spoke to some staff members who indicated the instructional coaches are not in the schools fulltime because of

prior cuts. She said they're great and staff members love them, but they are shared among schools.

Mr. Taylor said principals have emphasized to him that the instructional coaches were important. He said he gave his word that they would not be cut. He said if we don't get the six percent across the board, he would support Ms. Martinez's proposal.

Mr. Illingworth said he understood the proposal to be asking all staff to take a six percent pay cut. Mr. Taylor said everybody, including vendors.

Mr. Weldon said the first step is to see where we can find savings in other outlying areas.

Mr. Bradley moved that "*we look for six percent cuts across the board, highlighting and concentrating on possible cuts in central office and contracts.*" Mr. Taylor seconded the motion.

Mr. Weldon said he viewed the board's approach to be to ask for cuts in descending order.

Ms. Martinez said the reason she was uncomfortable with the motion was because it was talking about the whole \$13 million. She said we need to be in front of the City Council on Wednesday. She said the board needed to give the superintendent something today, perhaps three or four million, not thirteen million.

Mr. Sokolovic said we're not considering what percentage of the budget is six percent.

In response to a question, Ms. Maurer said payroll was a disproportionately large amount of the budget because we have three thousand employees with benefits.

Mr. Sokolovic said he cannot support the motion as is.

Mr. Illingworth and Mr. Sokolovic said line item by item and department by department was the best approach. Mr. Illingworth said that way the board would look at every stone.

Mr. Illingworth said if he is going to talk about coaches, he needs to know more about the impact. Mr. Taylor said there was no impact because it was six percent of the salary.

Mr. Taylor said he did not want to eliminate anything; he just wanted a price reduction of six percent on everything. He said he shops on Tuesday nights to save seven percent at Shop Rite.

In response to a question, Mr. Taylor said he leaves it to Dr. Johnson however she gets to a six percent reduction whether in salary or in a department as long as it includes a \$14.7 million reduction.

Mr. Illingworth said there's a big difference between cutting each department or contract by six percent versus asking every single employee for a six percent reduction. Mr. Taylor said you may not need the full six percent.

Mr. Illingworth said he did not want to touch special education because the last time it was cut we got into trouble. Mr. Taylor said we're not touching special education. Mr. Illingworth said he wanted to be informed on The University School where the board is not getting reimbursed.

Mr. Bradley restated the motion to include a six percent cut overall with a descending order. He noted cutting literacy coaches is not a new proposition. He said this was a way of spreading the burden across the school district and if not, there are areas identified as possible cuts.

Mr. Taylor said he told Ms. Martinez if she supports this motion he will support that approach if we don't get there.

Mr. Weldon said the cuts should start in central office and contracts. Mr. Taylor said he was okay with hitting central office with a twenty percent cut as long as we get to \$14.7 million.

Mr. Weldon said he viewed this as step one.

Mr. Illingworth said he had some concerns with the motion. He said he preferred the line-by-line approach. He said if the majority of the board wants to go this way, let it be what it is.

Ms. Martinez said we've already proven we were not prepared and we're not prepared to go line item by line item. She said we need to give Dr. Johnson an overall framework to work with. She said she did not want to touch teachers.

Ms. Martinez said if the majority of the \$6 million is going to come from central office and contracts she is okay with that.

In response to a question, Dr. Johnson said she would need up to next Monday to come up with a response. She said she would present a PowerPoint and also share the budget gap and a historical perspective as to what has been eliminated.

Mr. Weldon said Dr. Johnson could present to the City Council that the board is exploring this as an avenue.

Dr. Johnson said she believed the board should speak with one united voice at the City Council public hearing.

The motion was approved by a 5-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Weldon, Illingworth, Martinez, Bradley and Taylor. Mr. Sokolovic was in opposition.

Dr. Johnson said she could present a report at Monday's board meeting

Mr. Bradley moved the meeting be adjourned. The motion was seconded by Mr. Taylor and unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:45 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod