

Thursday, May 27, 2021

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE STUDENTS AND FAMILIES COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held May 27, 2021, by video conference, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 5:00 p.m. Present were Chair Albert Benejan, and committee member Joe Sokolovic.

Mr. Sokolovic moved to approve the committee's minutes of April 22, 2021. The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on the Title I parent involvement allocation for 2020-21. Herminio Planas, executive director of elementary education, said Ms. Rocha-Reaes was not available tonight, but he was available to answer any questions. Mr. Benejan said he was disappointed because he had requested some information from Ms. Rocha-Reaes for tonight. He said he will speak to Supt. Testani about this because this is not the first time someone has not been available for one of the meetings. He said he knew Mr. Planas could provide the information, but he wanted to hear from Ms. Rocha-Reaes.

The next agenda item was on a nutrition department update. Mr. Benejan said some parents are complaining about the lack of hot breakfasts and food that sticks to the plastic. He said his heart breaks at the amount of food that has to be thrown in the garbage.

John Gerrity, director of food and nutrition, said he wanted to start with an overview of what is different this year from a normal year. He said in the high schools, due to the pandemic, students did not go through the cafeteria serve line. The food is premade before the students come into the cafeteria and put into Styrofoam takeout containers and all the menu items were in the containers. Students can take the featured hot meal or a premade deli sandwich made fresh that morning.

Mr. Gerrity said the quality of meals may have declined slightly due to the way the takeout containers are distributed. He said we are slowly reverting back to regular meal service in the high schools, except at Central High. He said the volume of high school meals is down compared to the past.

Mr. Gerrity said students have a choice as to which meal components they take, with a minimum of three components being mandatory.

Mr. Gerrity said in K-8 schools there are several different types of models. Batalla has continued to use food service lines. Other schools serve meals in classrooms. In some schools, meal service is set up in the corridor outside the classroom. He said all the departures from the norm potentially result in additional waste due to pre-packaged meals.

Mr. Sokolovic said if students don't take a meal the district doesn't get reimbursed for the meal, which costs the district money. Mr. Gerrity said that was the case.

Mr. Gerrity said food waste can occur in food production on the kitchen side, where the amount of food needed each day has to be projected. He said the kitchens are managed very

well and the cooking occurs in batch cooking throughout the morning, which allows for cutting back. He said students who don't eat food they take have the option to place items on a share table for other students.

Mr. Gerrity said the grab-and-go meals are divided into frozen, refrigerated, and room temperature items. He said cafeteria assistants in the room encourage students to consume the meals and not waste the food.

In response to a question, Mr. Gerrity said composting was looked at a few years ago, but it would cost the district money to implement, including transportation costs. He said he had met with the Green Village Initiative, a partner in school gardens, but they do not use food waste from schools.

Mr. Gerrity said students at every meal have to have a half cup of fruit or vegetable according to the federal regulations. Mr. Benejan said 75 percent of students don't eat fruits or vegetables, so he would like to see those items saved instead of being thrown away. Mr. Gerrity noted many different varieties of fruit are offered. He said staff is trained in reducing food waste.

Mr. Benejan said it breaks his heart to see how much food is wasted.

In response to a question, Mr. Gerrity said there are a 'la carte sales at a snack bar in the high schools, but they have been closed during the pandemic. The money from sales are deposited into the nutrition department's account, which goes to offset expenses.

In response to a question, Mr. Gerrity said there used to be vending machines in schools, but it created problems for school administration and was not in compliance with the healthy foods program, which allows the district to get extra money.

In response to a question, Mr. Gerrity said the nutrition department's budget is \$19,651,000. He said participation has decreased this year due to remote and hybrid learning.

Mr. Benejan said parents have asked to be part of a committee on the nutrition center. Mr. Gerrity said he was working to formulate a wellness committee to strategize on parent concerns. He said there was an internal menu committee that meets weekly; planning for next school year is already underway. He said the popularity of items are reviewed and are observed by the supervisory staff in the cafeterias. He said an electronic survey was prepared right the pandemic and he said that will be revisited.

The next agenda item was the parent convention update. Mr. Benejan said the superintendent informed him that the \$18,000 will be held for next year. He said there will be a meeting in September to discuss what to do with the money. He said the money would be combined with the \$18,000 from the prior year.

The next agenda item was an update on vendors. Mr. Benejan said he researched on the internet the vendors from which purchases had been made and he questioned why the parent leaders are ordering items that are not for parents such as tee shirts. He said it seemed like they spent the money like crazy right before the April 1st deadline.

In response to a question about wireless technology, Mr. Planas said any parent engagement expenditures have to be in a plan. He said in the case of Black Rock cited by Mr. Benejan the parents were upset that the amplifier that they use for the gym was broken, so plays and other events with children had inferior sound. The PAC and the principal decided to spend some of the money for the system for activities in the gym. Mr. Benejan said he did not feel that was right because it was not for parents. He questioned another expenditure at Read School of \$6,000 for books at Barnes & Noble. He said a parent at the school told him they had never seen any books.

Mr. Benejan asked why Ms. Siegel, Ms. Clarke and Mr. Lombard approved the expenditures with the vendors even though they were not expenditures for parents.

Mr. Benejan said there was no PAC at Tisdale, yet they spent about \$3,000. He said when he questions PAC leaders, they inform him the expenditures occurred without their signature.

Mr. Sokolovic said he believed we were experiencing growing pains. He noted at one point Black Rock had zero expenditures and that an amplifier might technically be considered a parental expenditure since parents attend school plays and it draws them into the school. He said now that the amounts of expenditures are increasing, we can try to get to get better quality expenditures. He said the District PAC would be helpful in this when it is up and running.

Mr. Benejan said when he was a PAC president he had many of his expenditures questioned as not being appropriate for parents. He said he did not understand why this was not taking place now.

Mr. Planas said he would like to present a report during the summer to show some of the actual goods that were purchased, along with the parent engagement plans, to give the committee the whole picture on why things were purchased. He said it was a very unusual year with schools opening and closing on several occasions, and it was difficult to have parent meetings in schools. He said issues with Covid made it difficult to get signatures on documents, despite many e-mail reminders from Ms. Siegel.

He said he did not want to make any excuses, but next year we will take a look at this from the very beginning. He noted since Mr. Testani took over the parent expenditures have been taking place.

Mr. Benejan said he appreciated the communication Mr. Planas had with his committee. He questioned how parents could spend money on food if parents are not in the school. He said he was very angry about schools where there are no PAC leaders but the schools are spending the money.

Mr. Sokolovic urged parents to get involved in their children's education. Mr. Benejan said he agreed.

The next agenda item was on the PTSO and PAC update.

Mr. Benejan urged the PAC leaders watching this to work together with the principals and said they should not take the PAC leader title if they do not want to do the work. He said if meetings can't be held, there is modern technology to communicate with parents.

Mr. Sokolovic said he agreed one hundred percent.

Mr. Benejan noted the District PAC had been approved and the elections need to take place. He said the president must understand the responsibilities of the position.

Mr. Sokolovic said there should be a timeline, particularly since the board members may be changing in the near future. He said the District PAC can bring to the board members things they do not see about the district.

Mr. Benejan said he would bring to Ms. Rocha-Reaes the item about communications with PACs and PTSOs. He said she needs to determine why elections are not being held and why a lot of schools do not have parent leaders. Mr. Benejan said he would not be involved in the elections, but would be behind the scenes to see what was going on.

Mr. Sokolovic said a lot of this is on the schools and the parents. He noted it is hard to get parents involved at his son's school. He said learning the vote totals of the elections would give the committee information, such as if there were only three people voting.

Mr. Benejan said the committee needed more information on the PAC leaders. He said the members at large on the boards should not include employees according to the District PAC bylaws. He objected to PAC presidents who did not have children in the school. He said he would like to receive a list of when the PAC leaders are going to have workshops for parents.

Mr. Benejan urged parents and students listening to the meeting to reach out to him. He congratulated Mr. Planas and Ms. Planas about the award their son received.

Mr. Sokolovic moved to adjourn the meeting. The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan and unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned 6:13 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Approved by the committee on September 23, 2021