

Thursday, March 17, 2022

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE STUDENTS AND FAMILIES COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held March 17, 2022, at Central High School, 1 Lincoln Boulevard, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:02 p.m. Present were members Chair Albert Benejan and Bobbi Brown. Board member Joe Sokolovic* was present. (*remote participation).

Superintendent Michael J. Testani, was present.

Mr. Benejan said it was an honor to welcome Supt. Testani to his committee for the first time. The superintendent said it was an honor to be here.

Ms. Brown moved to approval of the committee's minutes of March 3, 2022. The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on the district parent handbook. Supt. Testani said there had been hiccups with using Title I funds and engagement. He said a short handbook to help parents on operational things would be helpful. He said auditing of IEPs has found things that are not acceptable, and it should not be acceptable for parents. He said putting together a handbook would empower mandates and give them information on who to contact. He said he would like to start the project with committee.

Mr. Benejan said he thought it was a great idea. The superintendent said the work of the committee could be brought back to this committee for feedback.

Ms. Brown said this would help increase parent engagement.

Supt. Testani said when balls get dropped in the district it is sometimes because parents are not involved, which would not be the case in some suburban districts.

Ms. Brown suggested a video highlighted active parents. Supt. Testani said a teacher at Harding High might be willing to work on such a project with the studio at the school.

The next agenda item was a presentation by 100 Girls Leading. Naomi Dawkins, secretary of the group, was present. Mentors from the program Rasheya Lewis, Leslie Dawkins, and Sandy Mack were present.

Ms. Lewis said the group is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit based in Bridgeport to provide mentoring programs for underserved girls, ages 9 to 18.

Ms. Mack said the organization began in 2019 and was founded by Bobbi Brown. Ms. Dawkins said there are now over 15,000 followers on social media. She described partnerships with other organizations, including students at Harding High, and the group's meeting schedule. She described the approach as helping girls grown into the young women they want to be.

Ms. Dawkins described upcoming events, including a fundraiser which Supt. Testani will be attending. Contributors can purchase a ticket so a girl can attend. She

said there the group's girls tours, which visits schools in Southern Connecticut, will be resumed. She also described volunteer opportunities.

In response to a question, Ms. Dawkins said prospective mentors undergo background checks and training.

Ms. Dawkins said the mentors are not paid but contribute their own time. The mentoring currently takes place at Harding High, with the possible future expansion to Barnum School.

Ms. Brown said being able to see women, and especially woman of color, interacting with our girls benefits our girls. She said there is great talent in a wide variety of fields in the group. She noted she is not paid for her involvement with the group and there is no cost for the girls who join the program.

Ms. Dawkins described a recent event where a young girl was successfully engaged.

Ms. Mack and Ms. Leslie Dawkins described their involvement with the group and some of the approaches that are used with the students they mentor. Ms. Lewis described her experiences and the resources the group can bring to young girls.

Mr. Benejan contributed his experience as a parent and growing up.

The next agenda item was on parent engagement expenditures.

Carli Rocha-Reaes, director of counseling and parent partnerships, said the update on the budget was very

positive. She said the slide shown demonstrates the growth over the last two weeks.

Ms. Rocha-Reaes on March 1, 56 percent average total was used; and as of March 15th, the average is 74 percent. She said this is the biggest jump that has been made. In high schools, the total went from 45 percent to 61 percent over the same period. She said the benchmark established for this time period was 90 percent, but if the trend continues, we will be in a good place by April 1st deadline. In response to a question, she said she would check if April 1st is the deadline this year.

Ms. Rocha-Reaes also noted she provided the committee all the March orders. Mr. Benejan said he checked into vendors. He questioned if some of the expenditures were for education of parents.

In response to a question, Ms. Rocha-Reaes said the P-10s are included with the orders submitted in the board packet.

Mr. Benejan said he has urged PAC leaders to be sure the P-10s are submitted and they are signed.

Lynn Stephens, community/family engagement coordinator, said parent leaders have told her they submit the information for the P-10 to be completed at the school.

Mr. Benejan expressed concern about the lack of expenditures at Fairchild Wheeler and some elementary schools. He noted Classical Studies and Discovery Magnet had spent virtually all their money.

In response to a question, Ms. Stephens said she is collecting information on workshops held for parents.

The next agenda item was on a Title I book for PAC and PTSO leaders. Mr. Benejan to document meetings and events. He said he remembered when people from Hartford checked on Title I the book would be available. He said he would like to bring that back.

Mr. Benejan said in the next month he would like to have principals and PAC leaders appear before the committee.

The next agenda item was on the healthy food certification for 2022-23.

John Gerrity, director of food and nutrition, said she was discussing adoption of the food certification for the next school year. He said this is an annual certification. He said it is required by the state to be adopted for all districts that participation in the national school lunch program.

Mr. Sokolovic left the meeting.

Mr. Gerrity says it requires the district to only sell foods to students that meet the definition of healthy foods. He said the state publishes a list of the items that are allowed to be sold a 'la carte in the high schools. He said it includes vending machines.

Mr. Gerrity said the district receives 10 cents per lunch based on the previous year's meal count. He said some vending machines in are in schools, but they are inaccessible to students.

Ms./ Brown moved to push this to the full board for a full board vote at our next board meeting. The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan and unanimously approved.

The last agenda item was on student suspension broken down by gender and race.

Herminio Planas, executive director of elementary education, said he just received the data of 2021-22 year. He said he broke them down by race and gender. He said the statistics included unique incidents.

He said about 300 more males were suspended than females. The spread larger among in-school suspensions. He said similar data applies to expulsions – 12 for females, 31 for males.

Mr. Planas said Hispanic represents 56 percent in the district, 9 percent white; and 230 percent black or African American; Asian, 2 percent, Native American or Alaskan native, 0.5.

Mr. Planas said the next slide covered elementary and middle schools. He noted although the numbers are lower, the suspension ratios persist. He said high school data also indicates more male suspensions and the same ratios concerning race.

Mr. Planas said last year's data is a very different because of Covid. He said, however, the same ratios in the 2019 school year.

Mr. Planas displayed the numbers broke own down by school.

Mr. Planas said a new SEL curriculum is being introduced this year to address these issues. He noted mentoring is a powerful tool.

Ms. Brown said there are teachers in our district that students trust and who they go to. She urged finding ways to connect students to teachers.

Mr. Planas said when students miss schools – like occurred with Covid – they lose structure, and it is hard to bring them back to where they should be. He said he was an optimist and believed that next year will be better.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 7:19 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Approved by the committee on April 28, 2022