

Thursday May 28, 2020

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE STUDENTS AND FAMILIES COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held May 28, 2019, by video conference, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 5:31 p.m. Present were members Albert Benejan and Bobbi Brown. Board member Hernan Illingworth was present.

Ms. Brown moved to approved the committee's minutes of April 23, 2020. The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan and unanimously approved.

Mr. Benejan said he received from Nadira Clarke, director of grants, a report on the percentage of parent engagement funds spent by the deadline of May 1st.

Mr. Illingworth indicated that the leftover funds are supposed to be rolled over for parent engagement activities that the district as a whole will do, not individually at schools. Mr. Benejan indicated \$5,209 was left over between for all elementary schools. Ms. Clarke said there was an additional \$1,043 at the high schools, for a total of \$6,353. Mr. Illingworth said that was not that bad. Mr. Benejan said he was glad to see the money was used.

The next agenda item was on bullying. Mr. Benejan said there was a terrible situation around bullying and it seems it will never stop. Dementred Young, director of social work, gave a report.

Mr. Young said nine elementary schools reported bullying cases in 2019-20 up until March and distance learning. Three high schools reported incidents. He said the data was broken out by race, gender, ethnicity and protected classes. He said grand total is 35 as of March.

Mr. Young said allegations were reported at 29 elementary schools and all but one high school reported allegations, for a total of 142 cases.

Mr. Young said student allegations in the fall of 2018-19 were 383 and more as of March of last year, compared to 142 up until March 2020.

Mr. Young said this has been a tough issue because there has been a reduction in the numbers but people have said that those numbers are not right. He said he created tools to get the actual snapshot number. He said social-emotional learning processes are going on and there is a process for students who are found to have bullied someone. He said that was not the case in the past when it was found that the numbers were going down.

Ms. Brown said if the numbers go down the board will be happy and the students will feel safer. She asked about protecting those who report bullying who may be viewed as snitches. She said she felt strongly about the subject because she was bullied in school.

Mr. Young said he was working hard on getting the community to understand what substantiated bullying is. He said reported bullying incidents often involved mutual things going on between students. He said there are safety plans for students who report bullying, and parents are made aware of the safety plan.

Mr. Illingworth said he has probably been a little bit of a critic in the past years and knows the work Mr. Young and his staff have done to put things in place, which is one of the reasons the numbers are lower.

Mr. Illingworth said there is a lot of bullying going on, but a lot of it is not confirmed, which parents have to understand. He said he was such a critic because he had heard at least three times of incidents at Claytor School, but only one case was reported in the data. He said he did not want it looked like the board was going after schools with high numbers. He said some principals may be leery of reporting some incidents.

Mr. Illingworth his daughter was being picked on by a boy in 7th grade, and he was told by the vice principal that it was because he likes her, even though he did dangerous acts. He said he believed this fit the definition of bullying and it should be up to the victim to determine if bullying takes place or not.

Mr. Benejan said one of this sons was bullied as well and sometimes staff and teachers are not doing the jobs they should. He said he often receives calls from parents who say their children are being bullied. He said parents have to have consequences if their children are bullying others.

Mr. Young said he wanted to caution people that if you receive information about bullying it is one side of the story, and it is his job to uncover the other side. He said sometimes cases sound horrific, but there are often underlying issues. He said he wanted to make sure there was bullying before someone's name is memorialized in a state document as a bully.

Mr. Young said last year there were 55 substantiated cases of bullying, while as of March 2020 there were 35 cases for the current school year.

Mr. Illingworth said bullying is a problem, but he knows we're going in the right direction. He added that we need to ensure that we have a system of integrity when someone reports bullying. He said he would like to see it out of the principal's hands. He said he knows the state guidelines provide the definition of bullying, but he would like to see the district go over and above the definition to adopt a zero-tolerance bullying policy. He suggested treating every reported case as a confirmed case. He said under the current system there is an incentive for principals not to report bullying incidents

Ms. Brown said she has a lot of girls who tell her that they have been bullied, but they haven't reported it. She said a no-tolerance policy would send a different message.

Mr. Young said the zero-tolerance policy the district has is about substantiated cases. He said if students are labeled a bully we have to take steps to do everything we have to do for that student. He said investigations could be handled by school climate officers, who hold an 092 certification, instead of principals, but we can't just recreate the legal definition of bullying.

Mr. Young said he will emphasize in training that school climate officers should investigate all cases of bullying, substantiated or not. He added that the state does not ask for cyber-bullying data and the data is not collected in Power School. He said he would work with data management to see if that option can be added.

Mr. Benejan said it is a big issue when schools do not act on bullying.

Mr. Young said he can't do anything to parents, but only give students consequences. He said the way it is structured from the state parents cannot be forced to do things.

The next agenda item was on student discipline and arrests.

Herminio Planas, executive director of elementary education, was present. He noted the committee had been provided with a lot of numerical data.

Mr. Planas said the data is very similar to last year. A few schools jumped by about ten suspensions, but most schools stayed in the same range due to social-emotional learning and restorative practices and the acceptance of teachers in using it. He noted this year's data only goes through March.

Mr. Planas said the out-of-school suspensions had been reduced at Central High from 351 last year to 268. Harding went from 281 to 360.

Mr. Benejan said he would request the 2018-19 data for comparison purposes.

Mr. Planas said expulsions have been greatly reduced.

In response to a question, Mr. Planas said he did not have data on arrests. Mr. Illingworth said he would look at arrests at the Facilities & Security Committee.

Mr. Illingworth said if big, big drops in suspensions are seen that could be a red flag as well. He said we had to be

conscientious in looking at the data. He said he had heard from some principals that in order to bring the numbers down they just stop suspending students.

Mr. Planas said it was important to look at distinct instances as opposed to students who may have committed multiple offenses.

Mr. Benejan said often staff do not follow all the rules and the policies to help students avoid getting suspended. Mr. Planas said that was a great point and often we don't have enough staff. He noted the numbers in the discipline data are excellent compared to back when he was at Curiale and other schools.

Mr. Benejan said we need a plan so the numbers won't go up when the schools reopen. Ms. Brown said she believed reopening would be challenging because of the time the students have spent away from schools, and there may be some cabin fever leading to breaking of rules.

Mr. Planas said he agreed and that could be addressed by the task force working on reopening the schools.

Ms. Brown moved that the meeting be adjourned. The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan and unanimously approved. The meeting was adjourned at 6:31 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Approved by the committee on June 18, 2020

