

Monday, July 22, 2019

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE STUDENTS AND FAMILIES COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held July 22, 2019, at Bridgeport City Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 5:31 p.m. Present were members Chair Joseph Sokolovic and Hernan Illingworth. Board member Maria Pereira was present. Board member LaMar Kennedy arrived subsequently as noted.

Mr. Sokolovic said there was an issue brought to our attention by the *Connecticut Post* that exposed deficiencies in oversight and policies that need to be tightened up. He said the intention is not to cast blame, but to find out what went wrong with the expenditure of federal dollars.

Michael Testani said the nutrition director was not available tonight. He said Mr. Gerrity submitted everything he could find and indicated the issues were the result of decisions of his predecessor. He said Mr. Gerrity indicated there was no violations of city purchasing policies. Ms. Pereira said it was a violation of board policy.

Mr. Sokolovic said he had some questions about the justification letters.

Mr. Sokolovic noted the district had a proprietary machine for the food trays. He said there seemed to be only one bidder for the trays. Mr. Testani said he could inquire of the nutrition department; it could be the company that produces the trays and the machine are hand in hand. Mr. Sokolovic said it was

possible the use of a more universal machine could save some money.

Mr. Sokolovic noted the federal dollars in question do not affect the classroom, but they are taxpayers' dollars and the appearances of the matter are important. Mr. Testani said some of the same justification letters were submitted following Ms. Wong's departure.

Ms. Pereira said a possible motive was wanting business to go to someone specific. She said when you go out to bid the worse thing that happens is you end with what you have at the price you're paying now.

Mr. Kennedy arrived at the meeting.

Mr. Sokolovic then discussed the purchase of Italian ice in 2016. Mr. Testani said he would verify the receipt of the goods. Ms. Pereira said \$75,000 is a lot of money for Italian ice.

The next subject discussed was whole wheat pasta.

Ms. Pereira said the board was lambasted about this on social media. She said most people don't understand the nutrition funds are a separate pot of money. She said Mr. Tardy, the purchasing agent, is also at fault. Mr. Sokolovic said Mr. Tardy would not know that something was or was not vetted by us.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said it seemed the software system had been in effect for 21 years.

There was a discussion of an item designated commodity cheese left over from the last school year.

Mr. Sokolovic said he assumed it referenced leftover contracts to purchase cheese. Mr. Kennedy said it seemed to refer to leftover money.

Mr. Sokolovic noted the cost of the software purchased every year needed to be provided.

Mr. Testani noted that that in his experience Mr. Tardy was pretty thorough in the need to obtain quotes for expenses related to the graduation ceremonies. He said he received three quotes on everything.

Ms. Pereira said Mr. Tardy told Ms. Siegel she could negotiate five-year contracts until Ms. Pereira gave them the state statute and the ordinance.

Mr. Illingworth said the issues being discussed were not happening under our current director and were two or three years ago. He said the only thing the board could control was to make sure how it won't be done again.

Mr. Sokolovic said one incident occurred in December 2018 and it seemed a lot of people are following past practices. He said he hoped the nutrition director would be available for the August 15th meeting.

There was a discussion of the hummus purchase. Mr. Testani said he was told it was a popular item in the high schools.

The next agenda item was on policies in this area.

Ms. Pereira said she submitted policies to the Governance Committee, where they sat for a year, and then she finally

get them on the board agenda herself. The first reading occurred June 26, 2017. She said there were some issues and she went back to research and edit the policies. There was another first read in September 2017. The second read was approved unanimously in October 2017. The board voted they could not go into effect until October 30, 2017, pending legal review. She said the policies all went into effect on that date.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested adding to 3310 that any purchase over \$5,000 that does not go out to bid would require a justification letter.

Nichola Hall from the nutrition center arrived at the meeting.

Ms. Pereira said the way to tighten this up was to add a separate paragraph to add no requests for a qualified purchase may be submitted to purchasing in the amount of \$25,000 or more without prior approval of the Board of Education. Mr. Sokolovic said no-bid contracts were different animals and the amount should be lower.

Ms. Pereira described the process that involves obtaining three quotes for expenditures between \$1,000 and \$25,000. She said she had never heard of this being an issue, but the bidding process has been a big issue.

Mr. Sokolovic said he would defer to the consensus of a \$25,000 minimum.

Mr. Testani said if the amount was lowered to \$5,000 the board would be reviewing a lot of purchases.

Ms. Pereira noted contradictory language under 3560b.

After discussion, she suggested the language: The director of food services, subject to the approval of the Board of Education, shall be authorized to award all bids for food supplies, equipment and other services particular to food services totaling \$25,000 or more to the lowest qualified bidder meeting specification requirements. She said it was necessary to add the word “qualified.” She suggested deleting the requirement that the director inform the superintendent of all awarded bids. Mr. Testani agreed.

Mr. Illingworth noted the director of food services currently reports to Ms. Siegel, the chief financial officer.

Mr. Testani said the district does run into situations where the lowest bidder is providing a product of lesser quality.

Mr. Testani agreed that the perception of the public regarding the no-bid contracts is important. He said some of the issues such as lemon bars have been taken out of context.

Ms. Pereira said even Faith Acts people, who come to board meetings, were writing a lot of stuff that indicated they did not seem to understand the nutrition budget is totally separate.

Ms. Hall said the department often has to work against tight deadlines. She said she was all in favor of transparency, but many things are time-sensitive.

Ms. Pereira suggested the nutrition department look at the way New Haven handles nutrition bids.

In response to a question, Ms. Hall said the reference to leftover cheese refers to the leftover money, which is sent back to the state.

In response to a question, Ms. Hall said newer machines to wrap trays are more universal and can accept different types of tray.

In response to a question, Ms. Hall said the department had a goal to explore alternatives to the current software.

Ms. Hall said it was important that each student is provided with a full meal to comply with regulations.

Mr. Illingworth moved that the meeting be adjourned. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved. The meeting was adjourned at 7:06 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Approved by the committee on September 19, 2019