

Thursday, January 27, 2022

MINUTES OF THE STUDENTS AND FAMILIES  
COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF  
EDUCATION, held January 27, 2022, at Central High  
School, 1 Lincoln Boulevard, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:08 p.m. Present were members Chair Albert Benejan, Erika Castillo, and Bobbi Brown. Board member Joe Sokolovic was present.

Ms. Brown moved to approve the minutes of the meeting of October 21, 2021. The motion was seconded by Ms. Castillo and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was a PAC update.

Carli Rocha-Reaes, director of school counseling and parent partnerships, said all school action plans have been developed and detailed budgets have to be submitted to the grants office. Two schools are pending approval.

Ms. Rocha-Reaes displayed a PowerPoint of the expenditure report, including budgeted amount, encumbered funds, and spent funds. She said spending benchmarks are established for various dates through the year.

Lynn Stephens, community/family engagement coordinator, described how the revision was made at Johnson School. Ms. Rocha-Reaes described the support being given to the PACs and PTSOs.

Ms. Rocha-Reaes said \$27,000 is available for the parent convention. She described the quarterly resource events that

have been held, including a toy drive, a coat drive, and a food drive for extra support.

Ms. Rocha-Reaes said there would be Lunch & Learn events held online each week that are open for all parents to attend. Each one will concentrate on a different theme.

Mr. Benejan said in some cases the lists of parent leaders is not accurate. He said parent leaders often tell him what is going on because he knows them. He said he believed communications between the PACs and PTSOs and the principals is not running well.

Ms. Rocha-Reaes asked Mr. Benejan to invite the parent leaders to the roundtables that are being held.

Ms. Stephen said relationships take time and she is starting to establish relationships with the parent leaders and principals.

Mr. Benejan said the District PAC's bylaws had been reestablished.

Ms. Stephens said all PAC and PTSO elections have occurred, although not all results have been inputted into the form. Mr. Benejan said in one case a district employee was an PAC officer at Classical Studies, which is not allowed by the bylaws.

Mr. Sokolovic said due to provisions in Mr. Testani's evaluation that hopefully he is emphasizing to his staff that they need to create welcoming environments for parents whether they want the parents there or not.

In response to a question, Ms. Stephens said the feedback she has received from principals is that it is difficult to

engage parent leaders in some schools. She said Covid and remote learning has exacerbated everything. Ms. Rocha-Reaes said she believed everyone had a lot on their plates and she really did not know what more we can do except perhaps a small focus group. She said a goal of the monthly roundtables was to get feedback from parents. There will be an upcoming social-emotional survey for parents that can help.

Mr. Sokolovic asked about a timeline for District PAC elections. Mr. Benejan said he was working with the committee, but it is up to the parents to establish the date for elections.

In response to a question, Ms. Stephens said there are deadlines for establishing student government councils.

Herminio Planas, executive director of elementary education and mathematics, said parent involvement is emphasized to principals and it is part of the evaluative process. He said Ms. Rocha-Reaes and Ms. Stephens had done a great job, and principals are referred to them for their support when needed. He said family engagement is one part of the domain in the principals' evaluation. Mr. Sokolovic said maybe it should be weighted more heavily.

Mr. Planas said one way to improve school behavior is through parent involvement.

Ms. Brown suggested using Parent Square to push parent involvement in activities. She noted the district is paying quite a bit for the app. She suggested the district's Facebook page also be used.

Mr. Benejan suggested some communications of phone blasts be directed to parent leaders, but not all parents in the schools. Ms. Rocha-Reaes said she would learn more about two-way communication on Parent Square at a meeting next week. Mr. Benejan urged notices of the roundtables be sent out well in advance.

Mr. Benejan said in the past when there were home-school coordinators things ran smoothly with parents.

Mr. Benejan said he reported an incident to the superintendent about a principal not allowing parents or teachers to send a flyer out. He noted parent leaders do not get paid. He said it is sad that communication is not working very well.

Ms. Brown suggested guidelines on deadlines for submission of flyers.

In response to a question, Ms. Stephen said the student government council lists are up to date.

Mr. Benejan said he spoke to a PAC leader at Beardsley School today who informed him that she did not know about expenditures that have been made. He said he was surprised that the principal cancelled the turkey bingo night without informing the PAC president. He said he was upset because the PAC president must approve expenditures. He also questioned the expenditures listed on the report. He said he was tempted to go to Hartford and report this because the money is for the parents, not for school supplies.

Mr. Planas said he did not know about the specific incident, but when he was a principal parent supplies from a vendor

was sometimes sold at events to benefit the PAC. He said he would look into the school in question.

Mr. Sokolovic said this issue came up a few years back where items were purchased without the signoff by the PAC president. He said it needs to be emphasized that that is committing fraud. The principal and PAC leader are co-equals on the submission of the documents.

Mr. Benejan said he noticed another expenditure at Black Rock School of \$497 about graduation. Mr. Planas said that may have been an event at night with a speaker, but he would check on it.

Mr. Benejan noted a \$625 item on book planners. Mr. Planas said that goes back to when he was principal of the school. It is so the parents can see the homework of their children.

Mr. Benejan said Bryant School has a pending expenditure about trophies. He said he doubted the trophies were for parents.

Mr., Benejan said he sees a lot of food expenditures and purchases, but he does not see speakers listed or parent education events.

Mr. Benejan said when Ms. Pavlich was in the district, she often told parents they could not make expenditures that inappropriate. He said he was going to sit down with parent leaders and help them.

In response to a question, Ms. Rocha-Reaes said the budgets are allocated based on the population of the schools. Ms. Castillo said she was surprised to see the

schools with zero expenditures. Ms. Rocha-Reaes said the benchmarks are sent to the administrators and support is offered to the parents.

Mr. Sokolovic said every dollar not spent is a lost opportunity to engage with a parent. He said this was emphasized with the prior superintendent. He said if there are no consequences it's not going to change.

Mr. Benejan said he was going to meet with the Central High leaders because they are being told that some expenditures are not allowed.

Ms. Rocha-Reaes said she could provide information on what was purchased by vendors indicated by Mr. Benejan.

Mr. Benejan said a committee was needed to organize the parent convention. He said it was complicated because of Covid. Ms. Rocha-Reaes said she could ask Ms. Siegel what would happen to the \$27,000 if the convention could not be held again this year. Mr. Sokolovic said he believed at some point the money could be in jeopardy of being lost.

Ms. Brown suggested creating the event and just inviting the parents. In response to a question, Ms. Rocha-Reaes said the money could be spent on districtwide parent events, not necessarily one convention. It was noted that an outdoor event could be held in better weather if Covid is still a concern.

Ms. Brown suggested some possible events that could be held.

In response to a question, Mr. Benejan said in the past the parent conventions have had social aspects and educational

events for parents, including workshops. He said it was amazing and it cost about \$9,000.

Mr. Benejan urged Mr. Planas to discuss the communication problems between principals and parent leaders with Supt. Testani. He said principals should be able to document their communication attempts with the parent leaders. He said he had to say some parent leaders are lazy.

The next agenda item was on the nutrition department's wellness committee.

John Gerrity, director of food and nutrition, was present. Mr. Benejan said there was a discussion of a possible Zoom meeting. He added he had received complaints from students about always seeing the same food.

Mr. Gerrity said the wellness committee has been approved and he will be reaching out to board members, administrators, parents, and students interested in joining. He said the focus will be on updating the wellness standards. He said it would probably occur remotely on Teams.

Mr. Benejan suggested the information be provided to Ms. Rocha-Reaes to reach out to parents.

Mr. Gerrity said he reported earlier in the year that this was very challenging year due to supply chain issues and the inability to receive the items that have been ordered. He said companies have cut back on their product line offerings due to lack of staff in their facilities. He said there are also transportation issues and price increases off of our bids. He said he was informed today at a meeting that a truckload

that used to cost \$4,000 to transport product now costs \$10,000.

Mr. Gerrity said the previously planned cycle menus have to be deviated from. Due to the uncertainty of obtaining some food items, menus are built weekly instead of monthly. He said monthly menus cannot be published because some items don't come in. He said there is more redundancy in the menus than he would like, but we're trying our best to get product.

Mr. Gerrity said some items not available early in the school year are now becoming available. He said locally some of the department's employees have been absent due to Covid. There were also unprecedented vacancies in the department this year. About 95 percent of the vacancies have been filled, but there remains a relatively high turnover. He said the department is doing its best.

In response to a question, Mr. Gerrity said there are currently two field supervisors. At one time in the past there were five supervisors. He noted the district also provides meal services to four Catholic schools and to the parent of Six-to-Six Interdistrict Magnet, for a total of about 42 locations.

In response to a question, Mr. Gerrity said each high school has a manager on site because they have larger staffs. He described the staffing in the elementary schools, which is based on the number of meals served. He said lunch periods timings vary from school to school and cleaning time must be taken into account.

Ms. Brown said the department seemed to be doing a good job. Mr. Gerrity said there are a lot of dedicated employees



in the department who enjoy what they do. He said a number of excellent employees were hired this year who were laid off from Fairfield University's food services.

Ms. Castillo said she works at a private school in Stamford and hears similar comments that the food is not good as prior to Covid, so it seems to be a universal issue.

Mr. Gerrity noted all meals provided have to meet the nutrition regulations for what we offer students.

The next agenda item was on student grades. Mr. Planas said the data is from 2019-20 and 2020-21, both years which were impacted by the pandemic. The data was displayed on the screen. He said we were very lenient on retentions at the end of the 2019-20 year due to Covid.

Mr. Planas said the state-mandated credits went from 22.5 to 25 credits to graduate. This caused a difference in the data because each student needed five credits in 2019-20 compared to a minimum of six in 2020-21.

Mr. Planas said the failures displayed in pre-K 3 and pre-K 4 included parents who chose to hold children back because attendance in those grades is optional.

Mr. Planas said some students, especially older ones, were very hard to reach in the pandemic even to the point of the district going to a home and trying to locate them. He said retentions were able to be controlled among younger children. He noted some kindergarten students were retained because parents chose to keep them home.

Mr. Planas said he believed the data would improve now that we're fully in person.

Mr. Planas said, for example, there might be sophomores that do not have enough credits to be considered sophomores so they could be counted as retained. He said there is a credit recovery program available for students who fail a course. Students can also take up to two summer courses if they fail a course. He said the semester-based scheduling gives more opportunity for students to get the credits they need.

Ms. Rocha-Reaes said the Ingenuity classes are held after school.

Mr. Sokolovic said Grades 9 and 10 seem to be a sticking point. Mr. Planas said he assumed this was the case historically, but he has not seen the data pre-pandemic.

Mr. Sokolovic said it could be that students are not prepared for Grade 9 or 10. Mr. Planas said there is an effort to implement the freedom and rigor of high school in middle school grades to prepare students.

Mr. Sokolovic noted there was a drop-off in the student population in Grades 11 and 12. He wondered if the gains were caused by students dropping out. Mr. Sokolovic noted he dropped out of high school in 10th grade (and later obtained a GED), so his absence would not be reflected in a percentage.

Mr. Planas said it is important to have tracks for students that they like in high school so they will stay in school.

Ms. Brown said there is often fear of the unknown in going to high school and she described her experiences. Ms. Rocha-

Reaes said 8th graders still visit high schools during 8th grade.

Ms. Castillo suggested the data for the year prior to Covid be provided to better understand the impact of the pandemic. She said a breakout by school would also be helpful.

Mr. Benejan said items 9 and 10 on the agenda should be tabled because Mr. Young was not present.

The next agenda item was on the district talent show. Mr. Benejan said the flyers were very nice.

Dr. Sarah-Jane Henry, director of performing and visual arts, said a show was difficult due to Covid, so her proposal was to do a showcase of talent presented via a polished video. She suggested planning out at the beginning of next year a high quality, well-organized talent show.

Ms. Brown said she saw an excellent virtual talent performance by Middletown students.

Dr. Henry said she would like to have principals and schools submit videos or photos to her, which she would organize into visual or performing arts. She said it would not be live, but the final product would be uploaded to video sites.

Mr. Benejan urged the students be given enough time to make their submissions.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:09 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

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