

Thursday, October 21, 2021

MINUTES OF THE STUDENTS AND FAMILIES
COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF
EDUCATION, held October 21, 2021, at Central High
School, 1 Lincoln Boulevard, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 5:15 p.m. Present were members Chair Albert Benejan, Joseph Sokolovic, and Bobbi Brown.

Ms. Brown moved to approve the minutes of the meeting of September 23, 2021. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic. The motion was approved by a 1-0 vote. Mr. Benejan voted in favor. Ms. Brown and Mr. Sokolovic abstained.

The next agenda item was on the Raising Highly Capable Kids program. Lourdes Delgado, director of the Faith and Education Coalition, said she retired from the district after working for 38 ½ years as a paraprofessional, teacher, and administrator. She described as the program as a movement to champion highly successful kids, with a 13-week, evidence-based curriculum. She described some of the teaching tools used.

Ms. Delgado described working with parents during the pandemic. The goal of the program is to get students into colleges. She said described the components of the sessions that are presented.

In response to a question, Ms. Delgado said the cost of the guide is about \$18 to parents.

In Mr. Benejan suggested Ms. Delgado sent the information to Ms. Rocha-Reaes.

In response to a question, Ms. Delgado said the program does not have a faith component. Mr. Sokolovic noted the board does not have the authority to spend PAC dollars, so whether PACs wish to use the program would be their own decision. He suggested Ms. Delgado present to the PACs.

A parent described how the program helped her with her five children, including the importance of reading for pleasure.

The next agenda item was on consequences for parents in school protocol. Carli Rocha-Reaes, director of school counseling and parent partnerships, said there are no consequences for parents can be implemented, but there are always efforts to help parents, including strategies and interventions, to build relationships.

Mr. Benejan said this discussion took place at the Governance Committee in the context of students who continue to violate the student handbook. He said he believed education starts at home. He said he believed in the past there were consequences for parents through DCF.

Ms. Brown suggested describing it as support for parents. Ms. Rocha-Reaes said schools follow SRBI, a multitiered system of support. A student with an attendance, academics or behavior issue is referred to a school team. Parents are notified when the child is referred to the team and are invited to participate in the meeting. She said the teams have been renamed the student success team. She described resources available to parents.

In response to a question, Ms. Rocha-Reaes said last night was the second roundtable with the PAC and PTSO leaders, which included a survey asking what could be done to support them more and to improve attendance.

Mr. Benejan described how parents should transition their roles when students reach teenage years.

Mr. Sokolovic said anything like DCF has to be used very carefully because the only consequence from that involvement is parent losing their children.

Mr. Benejan said he believed the effort should be to help the parents and he did not want to see DCF involved.

The next agenda was on policy and protocol for PPTs. Dementred Young, director of social work, said the PPT process is different for all students because they are individualized.

Mr. Benejan said he receives calls from stressed parents for help with PPTs. He said he has guided parents who are in this position, but he knows the limits of what he can do to help.

Mr. Young said a really strong team is in place to work with parents who are having issues and participate in PPTs.

Alyssa Olivier-Mann, a special education supervisor, said parents should call a supervisor if they are not getting a response from a school principal. Mr. Young said the team has an ombudsperson who can be contacted. He said perhaps advertising of this position to principals was needed.

In response to a question, Ms. Olivier-Mann said parents are told in writing who the participants in the PPT will be.

Mr. Benejan said he was here to support parents, not to tell staff what to do. He said he was very honored the team was at the meeting tonight.

In response to a question, Mr. Young said by law a parent can bring anyone they want to a PPT, but there are circumstances where some people should not be present. Mr. Young said he would personally feel intimidated if a board member was present at a PPT because he works for the board, and likewise if the superintendent is present. He said things should go well regardless of who is present.

Mr. Benejan said he has been involved with the district for 20 years and he was here for parents. He said he was not here to tell staff members what to do. He said the PPTs he attended went well because the parents went away happy.

The next agenda item was on the district talent show. Sarah-Jane Henry, the director of performing and visual arts, was present.

Mr. Benejan said he has spoken to Supt. Testani about creating a districtwide talent show. Ms. Henry said she wanted to see kids highlighted, but the one hesitation is an elimination-style show for kids because it tells them they're not good enough. Mr. Benejan urged there be rules for participation so the parents and students will understand. He said there should be criteria for grades for the students participating. Ms. Henry said she agreed and noted a lot of organizations are reaching out to help the district.

Ms. Henry said there would be protocols in effect this year if the event is held, which would limit the amount of people in attendance.

The next agenda item was on district sports.

Herminio Planas, executive director of elementary education, said middle school sports is now a partnership with Caribe Youth League, which will be offering basketball for students in Grades 5 to 8 from January to March. He said Mr. Torres of Caribe is also working on e-sports with a pilot program at Columbus School. He said the Rocket League software will be used, but there are issues being worked with on protections built into the district's internet for safety.

Mr. Planas said Mr. Torres will also be present indoor baseball and softball clinics on Wednesday nights and Saturday mornings in January through March for students in Grades 2 to 8.

Ms. Rocha-Reaes said Mr. Torres spoke to middle school administrators to start recruiting both female and male students. Mr. Planas said e-sports have become huge in colleges, with scholarships available.

Mr. Planas said the three athletic directors at high schools run high school athletics. He said there is a portion of the district's website that covers athletics. Current fall sports are football, boys' and girls' soccer, volleyball, and cheerleading.

Mr., Planas said students at Fairchild Wheeler and BMA can play sports at the high school located in their district. He said the website includes a phone number where students in those schools can find out which area that they are live in.

Mr. Benejan noted the district did not offer sports such as swimming. He said some parents have to pay for students to go out of district to participate swimming. He expressed concern about students' safety if they are not involved in activities.

Mr. Planas said he was part of a committee looking at grant submissions for ARP funds, which include flag football, soccer, and lacrosse. Mr. Benejan requested an update on the grants at the next meeting.

Mr. Sokolovic said he believed a central clearing house was needed for parents to cover the various partnerships and services that are available through the city and the board. Ms. Brown said she believed the city was talking about creating a hub on their website. She said the Branding Committee could look at that issue. Mr. Benejan noted that a lot of parents don't use websites.

The next agenda item was on parent engagement action plans and budgets. Ms. Rocha-Reaes said she is actively involved in getting the budget plans submitted. Lynn Stephens, community/family engagement coordinator, said 18 schools have submitted budgets. Ms. Rocha-Reaes said most action plans have not even been approved yet, however, one school is already at 50 percent of funds spent or encumbered. She said the schools will be provided with expenditure goals that include dates, to avoid spending at the last minute.

In response to a question, Ms. Rocha-Reaes said the expenditures and actions plans are sent to the grants office. Mr. Benejan pointed to flaws in action plans he had seen in the past which used a copy-and-paste style. Ms. Rocha-Reaes said she did not have supervision over the content of

the action plans. Mr. Benejan said he wanted to be sure the workshops were for the education of the parents, not something else.

The next agenda item was on PAC and PTSO elections. Mr. Benejan noted Ms. Stephens sent information to the committee. Ms. Stephens said PAC and PTSO teams have been formed at most of the schools.

Mr. Benejan said he heard from a parent at Read School who never heard about the elections. Ms. Rocha-Reaes said most of the schools notified parents via Microsoft Office forms and held the election in that fashion. Ms. Stephens said some elections were held at school open houses.

Mr. Benejan said the key here was communication. He said he spoke to a parent who did not realize she had been made the president of the PTSO.

The next agenda item was on the nutrition center. John Gerrity, director of food and nutrition, was present. Mr. Benejan apologized for not getting back to Mr. Gerrity. He said Mr. Gerrity can call him at any time if it is about an issue with parents.

Mr. Benejan said parents and students had complaints about food, including dryness, odors, and items that were too cold or hot.

Mr. Gerrity said if he is told about specific schools he can drill down to correct issues. He said there are field supervisors, but they can't be in every school every day. He said he believed occasionally lunch periods are delayed and food is put out too soon before students arrive for meals. In some cases, this involves discipline for students' behavior.

The newer schools have built-in heating elements in their serve line. He said high school meals are not prepackaged and are held in a steam table unit.

Mr. Gerrity noted each kitchen has at least one employee who is certified as a food protection manager via a course for food safety. He said he could address school-specific issues if he is provided information. He said items are heated to a minimum of 165 degrees.

Mr. Benejan said he was a chef for 21 years and was aware of heating issues.

In response to a question, Mr. Gerrity said students who bring their own lunch or breakfast are allowed to do so. Mr. Benejan said students have been told that they are not allowed to eat such items in the cafeteria. He said he would inform Mr. Gerrity which schools this took place at. Mr. Gerrity said the nutrition staff is typically in the kitchen and does not tell students what to eat at the tables.

Mr. Sokolovic said there had been to be reasonable limits on what foods students can bring to schools. Mr. Benejan said he believed parents should be able to send items such as soda or rice and beans with their students to school.

Mr. Planas said he believed what students bring to school to eat is not strictly policed, but if something out of the ordinary is seen it might be mentioned to parents.

In response to a question, Mr. Gerrity said it was hard to what was considered food “waste” or not eaten by students. He said the level of attendance in a school each day determines how much is wasted, as well as students who do not consume the entire meal. He said students are offered

five meal components and they have to take a minimum of three, including a half a cup of fruit or vegetable.

Mr. Gerrity said the department is understaffed and there are unprecedented supply chain issues. He said he had never seen anything like the current supply issues in the past.

In response to a question, Mr. Gerrity said menus are usually planned in the spring in advance of the new school year. The menus are based on popularity of items. He said currently orders are being placed, but some of the items are not being delivered. The prior system had to be scrapped and the current method is to plan menus two weeks in advance, which is based on what items are in inventory.

In response to a question, Mr. Gerrity said currently there are ESSER funds for extended school day, which includes supper meals for Lighthouse participants.

The next agenda items were on school SGCs and the District PAC elections.

Ms. Stephens said SGCs are a work in progress. She said principals have indicated it is harder to engage parents in SGCs. Mr. Benejan said more communication to parents was needed. Ms. Stephens said she would share a document on the status of SGCs.

Mr. Benejan discussed the District PAC. He said the bylaws indicate District PAC officers have to be parents of a district student and they cannot be school PAC or PTSO leaders.

Mr. Sokolovic said the SGCs had a responsibility to make sure a school climate survey is completed. He said a lot of this has fallen by the wayside in the past. Ms. Rocha-Reaes

said the state regulations on SGCs have been provided to administrators.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 7:09 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

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