

Thursday, March 3, 2022

MINUTES OF THE STUDENTS AND FAMILIES  
COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF  
EDUCATION, held March 3, 2022, at Central High School, 1  
Lincoln Boulevard, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:18 p.m. Present were members Chair Albert Benejan, Erika Castillo, and Bobbi Brown. Board members Sybil Allen and Joe Sokolovic were present.

Ms. Brown moved to approve the minutes of the meeting of January 27, 2022. The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on Elevate Bridgeport. Eric Torres, executive director, was present. He said Elevate Bridgeport's mission is to develop long-term, life-changing relationships with urban youth. The organization started in Colorado forty years ago and is now in fifteen cities across the nation.

Mr. Torres described the use of mentors in the life of young persons. He said it would be an essentially a free program. The work would take place fifty percent of the time in school and fifty percent outside of school. He said currently Elevate is at Bridge Academy, where it serves 89 students. He added that there is a family engagement component to get parents involved.

Mr. Torres said those participating in the program see a decrease in chronic absenteeism, increased student

engagement, and increased graduation rates. He said nationwide 96 percent of participants graduate high school.

Mr. Torres said he has worked with Supt. Testani and Dr. Raiola at Bassick High to implement an extended day program. He noted he grew up in the city and has been a 3rd and 4th grade teacher in Bridgeport.

In response to a question, Mr. Torres said the program costs \$460,000 a year for three teacher mentors at every school. He said it was important to hire mentors in the city who are readily available to the students.

In response to a question, Mr. Torres said students at other schools would be able to engage in a support group and a parent support group outside of school.

In response to a question, Mr. Torres said students will be tracked by matriculation and credits acquired, as well as program participation and engagement.

In response to a question, Mr. Torres said it is hoped to expand into other schools when more money is available. He said there had been conversations about getting Elevate into Bassick for two years.

In response to a question, Mr. Torres described the use of an accredited course at Bridge Academy. In the district, the Elevate model would be used but it would not be accredited. The class will be an extended day program on Monday through Thursday for two hours.

In response to question, Mr. Benejan said the presentation was just for discussion at this point.

In response to a question, Mr. Torres said funding was in place for three years. He said the mentors were not certified teachers, there will be background checks through the city, and Elevate Bridgeport will also do its own background checks. Mr. Torres said the organization has insurance and would have no issue getting molestation insurance. He said the Bridgeport teachers would be hired as 1099 employees.

In response to a question, Mr. Torres said the recommendation from the administration was to network with the school guidance counselors at Bassick to recruit students. He said the goal is to keep the ratio at twenty students per staff member, but right now the school wants to start with twenty-five students. He said three staff members are on deck right now ready to jump in.

Herminio Planas, executive director of elementary education, said the program sounds exciting and he looks forward to seeing it implemented at Bassick.

The next agenda item was an update on the bilingual department. Ana Sousa-Martins, director of bilingual education and world languages, was present.

Ms. Sousa-Martins said a newcomer arrival center was opened during the summer. It provides resources and assistance to parents who are new to the country. The parents get assistance with registering students, as well as connections to health care and other resources.

Ms. Sousa-Martins said the school year started with about 3,800 English learners; currently, there are over 4,700. The students are coming mainly from Central and South America. About five parents register students every day at the arrival center.

Ms. Sousa-Martins said there are 7,763 families or students that are speaking Spanish; there are 1,195 families that speak Portuguese; and 432 families that speak Haitian-Creole. She said the Office of Civil Rights has asked us to translate materials into those three languages. The district no longer is required to translate into Vietnamese.

Ms. Sousa-Martins said not all Hispanic families qualify for bilingual programs. She described a home language survey that is sent to parents, which is used to identify students for a language assessment to see whether they are eligible for ESL or bilingual education. If twenty or more students in a building speak the same language, the state mandates native language support be provided. She said under the law bilingual instruction can be done two ways: (1) in a classroom with a bilingual teacher to teach children of the same heritage and language; or (2) native language support for the students who need it. She said the second model occurs more often with the Portuguese population.

Ms. Sousa-Martins said ESL uses instruction in English with specific strategies to get students to learn English quickly. It also uses a pullout model as well. She said there is also ESL tutoring at some schools during the day.

Ms. Sousa-Martins said in almost every school in the district there is a bilingual model, an ESL model or tutoring. She said parents have the option to decline services. She described parent chats that are being implemented through the newcomer center.

Ms. Sousa-Martins said there will be a summer academy for English learners in Grades 4 to 6 at Batalla and Marin.

In response to a question, Ms. Sousa-Martins said the information will be available on Parent Square in the future.

In response to a question Ms. Sousa-Martins said the welcome center is at Central High and has its own entrance. She said the parents being welcomed have been very appreciative. Mr. Benejan said the location is much better than its prior location in City Hall.

In response to a question, Ms. Sousa-Martins said 25 students have been registered from Afghanistan. She said she has reached out to a few organizations that have donated uniforms for children because families often come with nothing.

In response to a question, Ms. Sousa-Martins said she estimated about ten percent of parents decline bilingual or ESL services. She said those students are being tracked. They do receive tutoring because they are considered English learners. She said research shows it takes three years for students to develop social language and it takes four to seven years to develop cognitive, academic language. Annual standardized testing is being tracked, which bears out those figures.

Mr. Sokolovic said he would like to see the metrics between students receiving services compared to those who refuse services. Ms. Sousa-Martins said that data is available.

Mr. Planas said he was glad the meeting was being streamed on YouTube because it is a great tool for parents to learn about the services. Mr. Benejan said there are captions in Spanish available on YouTube.

The next agenda item was on the parent involvement allocation.

Carli Rocha-Reaes, director of school counseling and parent partnerships, said all school action plans have been submitted to the grants office and approved.

Ms. Rocha-Reaes discussed a slide on the percentage of funds spent or encumbered. The current average is 66.2 percent for elementary/middle schools and 45.4 for high schools. The goal is to reach 100 percent by April 1st.

The next slide displayed the layers of support. Lynn Stephens, community/family engagement coordinator, said she has reached out directly to parent leaders. She said that has been helpful in understanding parent and school-based needs. Ms. Rocha-Reaes said, we're trying to connect parent leaders with each other to share practices and information about vendors.

Ms. Brown said she at a Black History event tonight at Barnum School, which was amazing. Ms. Rocha-Reaes said the parent leader at the school is excellent and was wholly responsible for the event.

Mr. Benejan said Ms. Stephens and Ms. Rocha-Reaes are doing the best they can. He said he has spoken to parent leaders in the district, and some are not aware of the expenditure of money. He said in some cases principals are blocking the spending of money. He said he has spoken to Supt. Testani about this.

Mr. Benejan described the use of the P-10 forms. He said parent leaders have shown the proof of expenditures being denied and money being spent without their signature.

Mr. Benejan said he knows Mr. Testani has sent e-mails about this matter. He noted he has been involved as a parent for twenty years and he knows how the process works. He said when he searched through expenditure he has found spending for exercises, socks and pens, which do not educate parents. He said the situation has made him upset and stressed.

Mr. Benejan noted Central High still had \$8,000 to spend before April. He said he offered the parent leader help, which he has done with other schools. He said he was here to tell the truth.

Mr. Planas said he would invite Mr. Benejan to provide information about specific schools. He said he has heard Mr. Testani tell principals the same thing Mr. Benejan is saying three or four times in the last month. He said he believed a majority of the principals are complying with the mandate. He said he has been asking the eleven principals he supervises about their plans and their interactions with parent leaders.

Mr. Benejan said Skane School and Hooker School are not spending money. He said behind the scenes he is trying to help the parent leaders.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested principals appear before the committee and report out on expenditures. He said the reports could consist of five core questions on what they're supposed to be doing. Mr. Benejan said Supt. Testani said he was in favor of the principals appearing before the committee.

Mr. Sokolovic said this would create a whole different vibe than receiving an e-mail. He said principals could see what their colleagues are doing successfully. He added that the board could not hold the principals accountable, but merely receive reports.

Mr. Benejan said when she sees budgets it seems like it's a food pantry due to the large expenditures on food. He said feeding the parents was not a problem. He questioned expenditures that involved swimming.

In response to a question, Ms. Rocha-Reaes said sometimes school staff do workshops and training for parents that are not reflected in expenditures. Mr. Benejan said the staff members can be paid for those presentations.

Mr. Sokolovic said if the workshops were free, they would not be reflected in the spending. Ms. Stephens said free workshops would be reflected in the action plans.

Mr. Benejan said he would provide some e-mails to help make sure the parents spend the money by April 1st. He said he was working with the committee for the District PAC and the parent convention.

Mr. Benejan said some parent leaders had to remain outside a school because the principal did not want them inside. He said he reported the situation to the superintendent. He said he was not here to lie and noted some principals don't like it when he speaks out. He noted the board members had received training earlier that indicated how far they can go. He added that sometimes parents go crazy, but he tells them if they use drama no one will listen to them.



Mr. Planas thanked Mr. Benejan for bringing that incident to his attention. He said the superintendent has been speaking to everybody about the importance of parent engagement. He said Covid really put a damper on engagement, but now schools are open. He said there were recent discussions about what kind of workshops would be helpful going forward.

Mr. Planas said parents watching who experience such incidents can contact him at 203-275-1380. He also provided numbers for Dr. Jenkins and Dr. Morgan.

Mr. Benejan said whenever he contacts Mr. Planas, Dr. Morgan or Dr. Jenkins, the situation is fixed right away.

Ms. Brown suggested there be an event with the PAC leaders and principals outside the workday to help build relationships.

The next agenda item was on student grades, promotions, and retentions.

Mr. Planas said a comparison between the 2020-21 and the 2018-19 years indicate retention rates very similar. He said 9th grade remained high. He said the 8th to 9th grade transition is being looked at, including programs in the summer. The pre-k to K transition is being addressed by the Hill for Literacy.

Mr. Planas said the overall retention rates for Grades 2 to 8 are about one percent, which is fairly low.

Ms. Castillo said the older years are college preparatory years, so the retention rates are concerning. She said there seemed to be an impact from Covid as well. She asked if the

figures over the last three years could be broken down by school. There was a discussion of what the data was indicating.

Mr. Planas said the pathways at the high school and the switch to the semester system has allowed more opportunities for students to make up missing credits. He said the new emphasis in high schools is to engage in tasks that are meaningful to students.

The next agenda item was a bullying report by Dementred Young, director of social work and interim director of specialized instruction.

Mr. Young said the official name of a bullying report is school climate. He said the first slide covers bullying allegations, which covered 82 incidents, with the schools represented. The next slide demonstrated 18 substantiated cases. In 2020, there were 30; in 2021, during Covid, two cases. The figures were broken out by protected and non-protected cases. He said it was important not to label students as bullies because the numbers are reported to the state and label remains attached to them.

Mr. Young provided the racial and ethnic breakdown data of the substantiated cases.

Mr. Benejan said parents should be involved in the disposition of bullying cases, so they understand what's going on. Mr. Young said allegations are investigated by schools, which involves parents. The school climate officer in each building sends a school climate plan to Mr. Young. If possible, there is a restoration of the relationship between the students involved. Sometimes parents of the students involved are brought together.

Mr. Young said mutual combat or internet disputes are not considered bullying. Bullying occurs when a student directs their attention to one student or a group of students. He said in the instance of 82 allegations, there is often mutual combat that occurred before the substantiation phase.

In response to a question, Mr. Young described situations when law enforcement is involved. He described the safety plan used for victims of bullying. He said a wide variety of interventions used.

In response to a question, Mr. Sokolovic noted he was the one who always asks for racial breakdowns. He noted there were eleven African Americans compared to eight Latino incidents, while Latinos outnumber African Americans in the district. He said this may be an issue the district needs to look at, particularly if these trends continue.

Mr. Sokolovic said the allegation numbers are higher at Johnson, Marin, and Hooker, which means the schools are doing what they're supposed to do. He said when he sees very low numbers it means there's a possibility of a child being victimized and not being helped.

Mr. Young said there are anti-bullying grants available for the entire district, which all schools have to apply for to spend on anti-bullying initiatives. School climate offices will be encouraged to be proactive to find out what is going on and allow students to do anonymous reporting.

Mr. Sokolovic asked if the reporting could be integrated with Parent Square. Mr. Young said the issue would be who in the district can respond immediately, particularly when

school is not in session, and the lack of manpower to monitor the communications.

Ms. Brown noted that incidents that start in school often result in things happening after school. Mr. Sokolovic said reports to Parent Square could have a disclaimer attached about emergencies. Mr. Young said there have been incidents of suicidal ideations that are hard to respond to in real time.

The next agenda item was on referrals to special education.

Mr. Young said a referral to special education is the first step in the process of determining whether someone has an eligible special education label. It is done by written requests, followed by a PPT. A school must do a PPT if a parent asks for it.

Mr. Young said a referral may be made by a student who is 18 or older, a parent, guardian or surrogate parent, school personnel, other individuals or other agencies, a physician or caregiver.

Mr. Young discussed a slide with all the eligible special education services, including autism, deafness and blindness, developmentally delayed, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disabilities, orthopedic or health impaired, ADHD, specific learning disabilities, TBI, and vision impairment.

Mr. Young described the composition of a planning and placement team (PPT). He noted students at the age of 14 and above have to be invited to the PPT. He described the PPT process, including the baseline, reviewing all relevant evaluations, and obtaining information from the parent. He

described the proper practices that should be followed in a PPT.

Mr. Young said the team should focus on the strengths and needs of the child.

Mr. Young said the IEP (Individualized Education Program) that is developed can be reviewed by the parent for a ten-day period. He discussed the rights of parents and students in the process.

In response to a question, Mr. Young said students younger than 14 years old can participate in the PPTs if the parents wish. He said if parents wish to record a PPT, the district also must record it.

Mr. Benejan said he has attended PPT meetings. He said he believed some district employees need more training because 75 percent of what Mr. Young described do not occur in the meetings.

Mr. Young said every person in the district from principals on down is being trained on how to write IEPs and how to conduct PPTs. He described this as pushing a reset button on July 1st. He said this was a state mandate.

Mr. Benejan said parents tell him the PPT protocols are not being followed. He said if parents call him for assistance, he will follow through on the request. He said he did not like to hear the staff was made nervous if he attends a PPT with parents. He said he is still waiting to hear if there is a law that prohibits a board member attending a PPT.

Mr. Benejan said he heard about a situation at a school today that is very bad. He said he would speak to Mr. Young later about it.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:39 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

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