

Thursday, April 22, 2021

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE STUDENTS AND FAMILIES COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held April 22, 2021, by video conference, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 5:00 p.m. Present were Chair Albert Benejan, and committee members Joe Sokolovic and Bobbi Brown.

Ms. Brown moved to approve the committee's minutes of March 18, 2021. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on the districtwide PAC/PTSO situation. Mr. Benejan said he was confused about some of the information that was sent to the committee. Carli Rocha-Reaes, director of school counseling and parent partnerships, said some administrators have provided information recently and the report could be updated.

The next agenda item was on parent engagement spending for 2020-21. Mr. Benejan said he believed schools were spending money on things that were not related to the parents. He said it seemed money was being spent on school supplies or for school staff. Ms. Rocha-Reaes said a request was sent to the grants office to pull the data.

Mr. Benejan said many of the entries are classified as "school supplies." He said he would provide Ms. Rocha-Reaes with the names of the schools where he has concerns and he would be on top of this. He questioned why Marin School was spending money for uniforms.

Mr. Sokolovic said this was encountered in the past, and the committee had all expenditures from certain schools brought before us. It was found some of the P-10s did not have proper signatures. He suggested the committee conduct basically an audit of questionable situations. He said believed 99.9 percent of the people involved are doing things fine and they would not mind their work being looked at.

In response to a question, Ms. Rocha-Reaes said she created some P-10 forms that were filled in for the parent leaders at the roundtable with the superintendent.

Mr. Benejan said he would be on top of this.

The next agenda item was on the parent convention. Mr. Benejan said he was recently hospitalized and would participate in a meeting with some of the parent leaders soon.

The next agenda item was on PLTLI(Parent Training Leadership Institute). Mr. Benejan noted he was a proud graduate of PLTI in 2009.

Diana Planas, coordinator of Bridgeport PLTI through BCAC and RYASAP, said PLTI had been long running in Bridgeport, although participation has lost its momentum recently. She said she was working to reverse this and 15 parents will graduate on June 1st. She said all the classes were held remotely and consisted of 60 hours of classes for the participants.

Ms. Planas said she wanted to get out into all of the schools and work with Ms. Rocha-Reaes going forward.

Ms. Planas said PLTI had been in Bridgeport for 23 years. It teaches parent empowerment and civic engagement. She said parents interested can e-mail her at dplanas@ryasap.org or 475-298-0207.

Mr. Benejan asked Ms. Rocha-Reaes to send Ms. Planas's flyer to all the parent leaders. He said he still remembered his 2009 project for PLTI.

Ms. Brown said the board's Branding Committee was looking at better ways to send out information to parents and staff. She noted her mother went through PLTI.

The next agenda item was a report on student grades. Herminio Planas, executive director of elementary education, said it was determined that a report on the 2020-21 grades will be tough because they're not even close to being done for the year yet.

Mr. Planas said the data from last year's indicates pre-K promotion is at 93 percent, with pre-K to 4 at 94 percent. He said only a small amount were retained at Grade 5. He said anyone failing for the first and second marking period who did not do any type of work or minimal work for the third marking period were considered for retention; anyone else was promoted. He said truancy was an issue last year.

Mr. Planas said Grades 7 and 8 had a 99.47 percent promotion rate. In 9th Grade there was a 6.57 percent retention rate, which carried through 10th grade to 12th grade. Data management said these figures were after summer school.

In response to a question, Mr. Planas said there are preliminary lists being created in schools now. Parents have

to be notified by February 1st that students are in danger of being retained. He said if students make progress throughout we're careful about retaining because it often does not help the issue.

In response to a question, Mr. Planas said he could answer at the next meeting how the retention rates compare to the year before Covid. Mr. Sokolovic said he would be curious if it was up or down.

In response to a question, Mr. Planas said there are efforts underway on students who will be retained, including summer programs. Ms. Brown noted the governor had addressed this issue. She said some students perform better online and some better in person, so the grades could look very different.

The next agenda item was on parent concerns of communication with school staff and principals. Mr. Benejan said this item was the result of many e-mails and texts he has received. He said he did not appreciate that some staff and administrators feel they don't want to communicate with parents. He said sometimes parents are crazy or out of control, but this is not the case all the time.

Mr. Benejan said he has e-mailed Mr. Testani about this issue. He noted parents are dealing with a lot of stress. He said staff should be careful how they speak to parents.

Mr. Planas said he had been a parent advocate for many years. He said he would invite any parent having an issue like this to contact any of the executive directors at 203-275-1380 or 203-275-1035, or Dr. Jenkins at 203-275-1081.

Mr. Benejan said he has urged parents to go step by step. He said he had always received positive responses from the central office administrators. He urged the administrators to talk to parents a little more professionally.

The next agenda item was on the School Volunteer Association. Anne Gribbon was present.

Ms. Gribbon said last year was a challenge due to the shutdown. Read Aloud volunteers and tutors were not able to visit schools, but the mentoring program was kept going with the mentors calling mentees.

Ms. Gribbon said help was received from Dr. Jenkins, her supervisor, and the IT department, in planning for this year. There was a Read Aloud program with the elementary summer school program via Teams. A citywide Read Aloud day then was held for every pre-K and 6th grade class. Participants included the superintendent, the mayor, a branch manager at Peoples Bank, John Ratzenberger, and a minority business owner.

Ms. Gribbon said teachers were polled as to which volunteers they wanted to read to their classes. About 160 volunteers have picked up books to read, which will be donated to classroom libraries. Mentors continued to work with mentees this year; permission was finally obtained to allow meetings on Teams. About 65 mentors are still in contact with mentees.

Ms. Gribbon last year there were 300 tutors, with the number dropping to 55 this year. She said trainings for the tutors have been held on Teams.

Ms. Gribbon said she provided the committee with a list of partnerships that exist with the volunteers. Recently, a federal judge has been connected with students at Harding High for sessions on civics, and which will be expanded to lower grades.

Ms. Gribbon said the committee was aware her position has been not been in the budget for three years and the School Volunteer Association has paid her salary and that of Ms. Goodwin, who has now been moved out of the office. She noted the office is not in the budget next year.

Ms. Gribbon said volunteer coordination is not casual; there have to be programs in place, and she was not sure what would happen next year if board employees were not involved.

Ms. Gribbon said about 10,000 books purchased by the School Volunteer Association will be donated to classroom and student libraries by the end of the year, with another thousand donated by a publisher for pre-K classes.

Ms. Gribbon said she believes the volunteers bring joy to the teachers and the students with their interactions.

Mr. Benejan said he wished he could give the money from his own pocket to fund the school volunteers. He said his son at Johnson School was helped by a volunteer.

Mr. Sokolovic said the superintendent indicated that even though Covid relief money was received the district is still facing a structural deficit. He said there was some discussion about being able to fit the School Volunteer Association into the Covid money but it may mean some realigning of mission to fit into the grants.

Mr. Benejan said he supported Ms. Gribbon and the volunteers, especially since she was now alone in her office. He said he would communicate with Mr. Testani and the committee to see what we can do.

The final agenda item was on the name change at Columbus School. Mr. Benejan said he was still waiting for information from the principal. He said he understood the parents have voted to retain the name. He said as a former PAC president at Columbus he would not like to ignore the vote of the parents.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 6:05 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod