

Thursday, February 8, 2018

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE STUDENTS AND FAMILIES COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held February 8, 2018, at Bridgeport City Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 5:37 p.m. Present were members Chair Joseph Sokolovic, Ben Walker and Maria Pereira. Board member Jessica Martinez arrived subsequently as noted.

Ms. Pereira moved to approve the committee's minutes of January 10, 2018 with edits. The motion was seconded by Mr. Walker. Corrections were noted. The motion was unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was discussion and possible action on magnet school policy changes. Mr. Sokolovic said he would like to get this out to the board as soon as possible.

Mr. Sokolovic said the current governing policy for magnet schools includes entrance exams, grades and a deselection process. He said he knew the members were far apart on some things and he wanted to explore a compromise.

Ms. Pereira said we are flatly opposed to testing, especially for kindergarten. She said testing young children has been shown to be unreliable in studies. She said we're here to do what's in the best interests of students and families. She said the policy could be discriminatory and racist because the majority of children who wouldn't attend preschool would be impoverished students.

Mr. Sokolovic said there are currently 1628 minority students in the district's magnet schools receiving an excellent education and outperforming all the other schools in the district, and even some of the charter schools. This represents 87 percent of the magnet school population. He said eliminating the policies that have led to this would be racism in itself. He said if all magnet schools were eliminated, the scores and outcomes for all the other children will not go up one iota.

Mr. Sokolovic said he did see that kindergarten testing could be unfair, especially to minority children. He said he was in favor of testing for Grades 1 to 3.

Mr. Walker said magnet schools were created to draw students into a different school based upon an interest or theme, and had nothing to do with achievement or higher test scores. They were designed to correct a racial imbalance by drawing kids by an interest group. He said he could see no justification for any testing to get into the magnet school because they are not designed as talented and gifted schools. He said similarly there should not be academic criteria for removing a children from a magnet school.

Mr. Sokolovic said the district currently has testing policies and grade standards for the magnet schools. Mr. Walker said he believed those policies are in error and should be revised to reflect the true meaning of a magnet school.

Mr. Sokolovic said the magnet schools were preparing students for automatic entrance into Central Magnet, which is an advanced curriculum and magnet program.

Ms. Pereira said the board learned that a student can be expelled from Fairchild Wheeler for a year and under the law they must get their seat back. Mr. Sokolovic said that is not our policy, but one created by the federal government.

Mr. Sokolovic said there were high schools in New York City that require applicants to be in the top ten percent of those tested. Mr. Walker said those schools probably did not have lotteries. He said he believed a parent could successfully sue the district for its entrance requirements for magnet schools. He said he applauded Mr. Sokolovic for wanting to see the district have a higher academic standard, but that should be handled by talented and gifted programs.

Mr. Sokolovic said the district devoted only about \$300,000 to talented and gifted. He said it doesn't cost the district one extra dollar to send a child to a magnet school. Ms. Pereira said there were bus transportation costs.

Mr. Walker said he believed the magnet schools were outperforming other schools because the students had interests in the programs in the magnet schools.

Mr. Sokolovic said all schools could be made magnet schools just by making them theme schools.

Ms. Pereira said there was a horrible story of a kindergarten student who had behavioral issues and was told she was not being allowed into Classical studies. Mr. Sokolovic said he did not see the policies as punishing the child but redirecting the child towards the resources that are needed. Mr. Sokolovic pointed to the lack of interventionists in the magnet schools.

Ms. Pereira said Dr. Johnson advocated for the policy calling for documented behavioral and academic supports for students in magnet schools. She questioned challenging a policy favored by Dr. Johnson.

Mr. Sokolovic said Dr. Johnson was responsible for implementing the policies created by the board. Ms. Pereira said Dr. Johnson wants the policy because it is the best thing to do for students. She said close to six thousand children a year apply for about fifteen hundred magnet school slots.

Mr. Sokolovic said the magnet slots are so in demand because the kids feel safer in the schools and because of the improved test scores. He said taking away the policies would lead to sinking to the lowest level.

Mr. Walker said the problem of interventions should be fixed, but the definition of a magnet school should not be reinvented. Ms. Pereira said Ms. Baraka said when she challenged the magnet policies it was determined by Yale that the test being used was racist.

Ms. Pereira said she wanted policies that were in the best interests of children first, families and parents second, and staff third. Mr. Sokolovic said he agreed one hundred percent, but the disagreement was over how to get there.

Mr. Walker said the National Institute of Magnet School Leadership indicates that the concept of magnet schools is to attract students of various socio-economic backgrounds, race and academic achievement levels. He said it was about integration, not about segregation. Anything that tests a kid out of a program is about segregation.

Mr. Sokolovic said it was not a racial segregation due to the 87 percentage of minority magnet students.

Mr. Walker said he would never vote for a policy that deselects children at the magnet school level.

Ms. Pereira said a compromise had been reached before that students in Grades 4 to 8 would have to maintain grades to stay in the magnet schools.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested the policy be moved to the full board with blanks in the areas where there is dissent and have the full board vote on the options.

Ms. Pereira said what Mr. Sokolovic was suggesting was not in the best interests of children.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested children in K to 3 will not have to take an entrance exam, but Grades 1, 2 and 3 will have to meet the academic criteria that was suggested for Grades 4 to 8. He said perhaps a provision allowing a parent to challenge a decision should be created in the magnet policy, similar to that in the controlled transfer policy.

Ms. Pereira said she believed moving the matter to the full board for a vote is the best thing to do. Mr. Walker said this is such an important issue that it should be turned over to the superintendent and the executive staff to rewrite the policy for consideration by the committee. He said he would be guided by the superintendent's recommendations because the educators are the experts

Mr. Sokolovic said the committee had been discussing the issue for a year.

Ms. Martinez arrived at the meeting.

Mr. Sokolovic said he understood the higher level administrative staff think one way and the building principals think another way. He said he had been asking building principals their opinions. He said not one principal had any wiggle room on the behavioral policies for the schools. One or two principals believe in wiggle room for the entrance exam and academic requirement.

Mr. Walker moved "that we move this to Dr. Johnson and her executive staff to rewrite and that they will re-present this two meetings from today, and then we can discuss it at that particular time." The motion was seconded by Ms. Pereira.

Mr. Sokolovic said the effect of the motion is to keep the current policy in place, which includes testing and deselection criteria. He said the policies needed to be followed until the policy is changed.

Ms. Pereira noted Dr. Johnson indicated she met with the magnet school principals. She said there seemed to be disconnect between what Mr. Sokolovic is saying and Dr. Johnson's input of last year.

Mr. Walker suggested the magnet school principals be invited to the April meeting.

Mr. Walker restated the motion: *"That we send this magnet school policy to Dr. Johnson to have her and her executive staff rewrite it and re-present this to us at the April Students and Families meeting."* The motion was seconded by Ms. Pereira. The motion was passed by a 2-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Pereira and Walker. Mr. Sokolovic was in opposition.

Ms. Pereira moved *"to table the sibling policy until we have further action on the magnet school policy."* The motion was seconded by Mr. Walker and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on school and district PACs.

Mr. Sokolovic said there was a horrendously low level of parental involvement in the district. He said parental involvement is probably the most thing in children doing well in school.

Mr. Sokolovic said there were some schools with no PACs, some with two-member PACs. Ms. Pereira said she found 15 schools with no PAC members, including Central High School, the largest school in the city.

Mr. Sokolovic said he believed the board needed to address this.

Mr. Walker said the goal tonight was informational. He said the board can help with some oversight, not management. He said perhaps district personnel involved in the oversight allowed their personalities or other personalities to interfere with the collegial operation of the District PAC and the school PACs. He said he was approaching the matter with an open mind and hoped everyone in the room had the same goal to work to the best of our ability for children.

Mr. Sokolovic said the word “advisory” would be a better than oversight for the board’s role.

Mr. Walker said he did not want to manage or referee the parents. The focus should be on distributing the money properly, seeing that the elections are being run according to the bylaws and the voices are at the table. He noted the three board members just had a discussion where they were on different sides, but were able to talk through the issues.

Ms. Pereira said the parent engagement policy had an entire section on PACs. It indicates that all school PACs and PTSOs are managed under the District PAC and operate under its bylaws.

Ms. Pereira said one person should not be making decisions on how to spend hundreds or thousands of dollars for parent activities. Only four out of thirty-seven school PACs have all its officers.

Mr. Sokolovic noted the board and the superintendent are required to facilitate and ensure the creation of a functional District PAC and one PAC for each school. He said until the District PAC can run elections, it is the responsibility of the board and district leaders to make sure the schools are functioning on an individual level.

Ms. Perinea said officers can only sit in their seat for two years. She said all schools should hold their election on the same cycle.

Delores Mason said she created the spreadsheet provided to the committee.

Mr. Walker said he envisioned each school's PAC bylaws being the same.

Ms. Martinez said she envisioned each school having different bylaws because they have different issues or different groups of individuals. She said are no bylaws currently that the school PACs should be following. She said she advised the school PACs individually to revise the bylaws on their own tailored to their school's needs.

Mr. Walker said all PACs should elect the same kind of officers, who come from the same parent base, and have similar election processes and meeting schedules. Ms. Martinez said she agreed.

Mr. Walker said he talked with Mr. Sokolovic about creating an ad hoc committee to look at the current bylaws and see how they can be used or rewritten so that would work in all our schools.

Ms. Martinez said the bylaws contained a conflict of interest clause that is dictating what parents can and cannot be involved. She added there were also provisions for the removal of grandparents as leaders.

Ms. Martinez said the parent engagement policy does not supersede Title I, Section 118. She said when the parent engagement policy was revised we were unaware of that it should go hand in hand with that section. She suggested the parent engagement policy be revised as well.

Mr. Walker said we should outline what we want to accomplish first. He said if bylaws are in place we can start with an election cycle and fill out the list of PAC officers that the committee has.

Mr. Sokolovic said the bylaws would have to be approved by the District PAC, which would have to be comprised of all the PAC presidents of the local schools.

Chaila Robinson was recognized. She said she believed the breakdown came when the schools lost their home-school coordinators. She said this was the case at Hallen School, where she is the PAC president. She said she is now left to figure out how to keep parent engagement going.

Ms. Martinez suggested an informational tour of the schools by parent leaders and the board about Title I and the money received.

Ms. Pereira said there are school bylaws in effect. The minutes of the Special Meeting held in February 2015 confirm that, and they were re-verified by the board in a 2016 Regular Meeting. The bylaws are on the district's website under board policies. Ms. Pereira said there was previously great training for parents on Title I in this room.

Ms. Martinez said a grandparent or a foster parent can be a parent and should be treated as such. Ms. Pereira said such people can participate in parent activities, but they cannot make decisions about the Title I funds.

Nilda Barahona, the PAC president at Blackham School, said one of the school's teachers stepped up to help the PAC. She said parent participation has greatly increased, but the board or Ms. Martinez never visited the school. She said her next PAC meeting was February 25th, at 5:30. Mr. Sokolovic said he would like to attend the meeting.

Mr. Sokolovic urged the discussion be kept civic.

Ms. Barahona said Ms. Mason sends e-mails to the principal, but not to her as PAC president.

Ms. Robinson said when the home-school coordinators were lost, business didn't stop. The principals have been helpful, as well as teachers. She said she was not familiar with the bylaws regarding elections and relied on Ms. Mason for that.

Mr. Walker said we're all here together for the same thing and it does no good to bring up past things perceived as negative unless we have a solution.

Mr. Walker left the meeting.

Elizabeth Perez, the new PAC president at Multicultural Magnet, said training the PAC board would be a significant plus. She said she was learning as she goes on. She said more communication was needed.

In response to a question. Ms. Mason said training of PACs falls under her job. She said training had been provided in the past for both School Governance Councils and PACs. She noted the School Governance Council is not on her job description. She said she responds to parents who call her for help and she e-mails parent leaders.

Sylma Vasconcellos, the former PAC vice president at Multicultural Magnet, said she did many meetings with the new members, but Ms. Perez did not participate. Ms. Perez noted she was inundated with e-mails.

Ms. Pereira said perhaps the board could ask Ms. Mason to schedule training, maybe in early March. Ms. Mason said she would need a venue to hold such training. Ms. Pereira suggested Room 305 at City Hall be used, with sessions on different days of the week.

Ms. Mason said there were some wounds among the parents that was interfering with getting large amounts of them out in large groups.

Rosie Jones Clark, the former PAC vice president at Central High, said she really worked on trying to recruit parents. She said many parents don't understand what it's all about and they have the preconceived idea that it's going to take up so much of their time. She said by being proactive she got information about the PAC. She said someone in the school was needed to help parents as to what the responsibilities are and who to go to.

Ms. Pereira suggested identifying staff members to work with parents who could receive a stipend for about ten hours of work a month. She said stipends are paid to school webmasters.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested a phone blast for PAC participation be considered.

Ms. Pereira said the current PAC bylaws are on the district's website. She described them as a very broad document about governance.

Ms. Martinez said we need to celebrate the PACs that are very effective. She said some of the PAC leaders could help in providing training.

Ms. Robinson suggested the provisions that exclude grandparents be revisited. She said there are a lot of families headed by a grandmother. She added her mother helps her a lot with her children, and she should not be excluded from a parent position.

Albert Benejan, PTSO president at Bassick, said he was involved in other schools because they call him for help. He said the bylaws had never been updated since 2013. He said he didn't believe any of the schools are following the bylaws of 2013.

Ms. Pereira said the District PAC bylaws don't exist, but the school PAC do bylaws exist. She said this was contained in the minutes of the Special Meeting in February 2015.

Tammy Boyle said she was asked to bring the draft of the bylaws that the committee was working on in June 2016. She said e-mailed those to board members.

Mr. Sokolovic said since the new bylaws were never ratified the last ones in existence are in effect.

Ms. Martinez said the District PAC still exists, since the school PAC presidents can meet. She said the parents decided to dismantle the District PAC because of the contention, the toxic environment and the lack of involvement. She said the District PAC never ran elections.

Ms. Pereira said the legal battle over the District PAC was never resolved because the plaintiff disappeared. She added that she funded the lawsuit.

Ms. Martinez said there are positive leaders and negative leaders. She said she wanted to ensure that we do not have dictators, bullies and people who decrease parental involvement.

Ms. Martinez said she believed the District PAC still exists and they can still come together to share best practices and support one another.

Mr. Sokolovic said there should be democracy and checks and balances.

Ms. Pereira said the ten-member executive board of the PAC are elected in a citywide race. The District PAC used to be made up of those ten members and the president of every school.

Ms. Martinez said Mr. Illingworth as the former District PAC president created the executive board of the District PAC. She suggested Mr. Illingworth participate in the discussions.

Ms. Mason said the executive board of the District PAC changed after Mr. Illingworth left. She said meetings started taking place of the executive board, who developed the agenda and brought it to the District PAC meetings, without input from others.

Ms. Martinez said she believed in people, but the meetings became worse than dysfunctional with police officers present. She said it was not working and parents dismantled it.

Ms. Robinson said she agreed. The meetings were extremely chaotic and the parent leaders just stopped coming. She said literally nothing got done.

Mr. Benejan said we need to let go of the past and help all the new PAC leaders and whoever needs help.

Ms. Martinez said we need to create a welcoming environment for those who have been wounded by the conflicts.

Ms. Pereira asked if Ms. Mason could provide the training at different times and days. Mr. Sokolovic asked that the phone blasts take place.

Ms. Pereira suggested Ms. Wong be approached about getting food donations for meetings or training.

There was a discussion of a \$16,000 amount of money for parent involvement.

Ms. Mason said she believed the funds for the convention came from the overall Title I allocation to the district.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested Ms. Martinez obtain that information from Marlene Siegel.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested Ms. Mason send notifications of the Students & Families Committee meetings to her e-mail distribution list.

The next item on the agenda was on sharing tables in cafeterias. Ms. Pereira said it was a good way of teaching children civics.

Mr. Sokolovic said a lot of schools are using sharing tables. He said meats or milks could not be shared.

Several of the PAC presidents said they had seen the tables in use in their schools.

Ms. Mason said sharing tables exist in all the elementary schools. Students are required to take a required number of food items. The students can place unwanted items on the sharing table.

Ms. Pereira said she would like to see the sharing tables at every school.

Mr. Sokolovic said he understood that students receive the same portion size regardless of age or grade. He said 8th graders needed more calories than 2nd graders.

Mr. Benejan said there were two sharing tables at Bassick, but typically food is not put there because it is all consumed. He said it was painful to see that all unused food has to go into the garbage.

Ms. Boyle said there is a sharing table at Bridgeport Military Academy, but a lot of times the students share items on their own.

Ms. Pereira moved *“that we move to the full board that we establish share tables in every single school cafeteria in the Bridgeport Public Schools.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

Ms. Pereira moved that the meeting be adjourned. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:40 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod