

Tuesday, June 11, 2019     **DRAFT**

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE SUPERINTENDENT SEARCH COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held June 11, 2019, at Geraldine Magnet Academy, 240 Ocean Terrace, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:02 p.m. Present were Chair John Weldon, Secretary Joseph Sokolovic, Joseph Lombard, LaMar Kennedy, Hernan Illingworth, Sybil Allen, and Maria Pereira.

Mr. Weldon said there were three candidates to be interviewed this evening for the position of interim superintendent.

The first candidate was Dr. Jonathan Brice.

Dr. Brice chose to have his interview take place in public because it was appropriate for public education.

Dr. Brice said he viewed himself first and foremost as a teacher and someone who believes in the power of public education to change lives. He said he grew up in Baltimore, Maryland, a city which is like Bridgeport. He said both cities face similar issues, including an education system that has not always done right by its students. He said his parents did not have college degrees and only one had a high school diploma, yet education was the most important thing in the household. He said at no point did ever think as a young boy from East Baltimore that he would graduate from school, have multiple degrees, and earn a doctorate from Harvard University.

Dr. Brice said his career was about giving back to society and young people. He said he has worked in a large number of urban districts and loves urban education.

Dr. Brice said regarding a student-centered learning environment he finds too often students are not being challenged and not being given support. He said teachers should be facilitators rather than lecturers. He said counselors, psychologists and mental health professionals were also needed to support young people.

Dr. Brice said he would develop a leadership team as superintendent by utilizing the talent that is present in Bridgeport. He said in his review of the district's data and the organization chart it was clear there are a number of staff that should be consulted. He said an interim superintendent is not merely a caretaker, but someone who moves student achievement and the district forward. He said he would look at the district's curriculum and the work in social-emotional learning. He said the leadership team would be focused on how we can better students to prevent misbehavior so we don't have to implement suspensions. He said the budget was the white elephant in the room and there would be a leadership team focused on that.

Dr. Brice said as superintendent his responsibility would be to make sure all our students, staff and the board are well aware of what is taking place in our schools. He noted social media was a game-changer, and unfortunately sometimes things appear there before he can inform the board.

Dr. Brice said he was a devotee of project management and would assign cabinet staff tasks with deliverable dates.

Dr. Brice said he could fairly and objectively address employee discipline within the district. He said the board was very astute in creating the interim superintendent position with the caveat of not being able to apply for the permanent job. He said he has dealt with employee matters in his current and past school districts and as a deputy assistant secretary at the United States Department of Education. He said staff should be well trained and made aware of what our expectations are for their conduct and behavior.

Dr. Brice said he believed you have to be honest and transparent with people when it comes to sharing bad news.

Dr. Brice said he had not lobbied or communicated with Mayor Ganim, his chief of staff, any cabinet level member of the Ganim administrator, Mario Testa or any board member regarding the position of interim superintendent.

Dr. Brice said three of his measureable accomplishments were monitoring student discipline and addressing the number of out-of-school suspensions and disproportionality in his current position; the recent implementation of a districtwide social-emotional learning project; and a huge reorganization in his district of how family and student support engagement operated. He noted the effort included work on chronic absenteeism.

Dr. Brice said the three areas he would like to focus on are curriculum, including the quality of teaching and learning; social-emotional learning; and budget issues and the organization of the district.

Dr. Brice said he was attracted to the position because he is at core an urban educator. He said if urban education doesn't work our country is lost. He said he believed the

position was a perfect match between his skill set and the opportunity.

Dr. Brice said he had been trained to be an urban superintendent in his doctoral program. He said the one-year position would give him an opportunity to learn. He said he believed he had the experience and ability to lead a district of this size that will create conditions for the incoming superintendent to hit the ground running.

Dr. Brice said he did not believe the first thing we should think about for students is sending them to the office, although significant incidents do require removal from the classroom. He said when he arrived in the Baltimore district there were about 15,000 out-of-school suspension the previous years for about 85,000 students. He said supports are needed for students coming to class with Tier II or Tier III issues. He said there had to be alternatives to tossing students away.

Ms. Pereira said she was impressed with Dr. Brice's resume, but found he supported permanently expelling children involved in arson incidents in Baltimore. Dr. Brice said there were a number of school-based arsons. He said a hard-line stance was needed after a student created a bottle bomb and threw it into an area of a building where there was a pre-K classroom. He said it was not an easy decision. He said he fully supported the compromise with the community partners that the partners should provide the students with a level of educational services. He said the safety and security of students and staff are among, if not the greatest, responsibility of school administrators. He said another horrible incident occurred when a child was killed on school grounds.

Mr. Weldon informed Dr. Brice that the board has determined to hold a community forum for all six finalist candidates on June 22. He said the board's goal was to have an interim superintendent in place by the end of the month.

Dr. Brice thanked the board for the opportunity to share his thoughts and experience as a school leader. He said he was well suited to be interim superintendent. He said, despite the budgetary issues, there are a lot gems and diamonds in the community who only need public education to move forward. He said he looked forward to June 22.

Ms. Pereira thanked Dr. Brice for making the longest trip.

The next candidate was Christian Upright. Mr. Upright chose to have the interview take place in public.

Mr. Upright said he grew up with a single mom on Section 8, and has been working in the district for eleven years. He said he was the head of the special education department for Central High School, supervising 13 teachers and 200-plus students. He said he prided himself with having a good rapport with everybody.

Mr. Upright said before he became a teacher he worked for MTV in New York City. He said he moved to Bridgeport and started a family with his wife, and found a passion as a teacher.

Mr. Upright said the district needed to work on having a more student-centered environment. He said everybody does not learn the same way. He said teaching and learning strategies and SRBI strategies needed to be implemented more in the lower grades. He said almost one in seven

special education students are in out-of-district placements, which he described as an irrational expenditure of money.

Mr. Upright said he would work with others to determine who would be the strongest members of his team. He said he would work through the new special education director to reduce out-of-district placements.

Mr. Upright said he would take a non-negotiable stance to leading with his guidelines and standards. He said he would stick with Dr. Johnson's strategic plan. He said a leader had to be impartial and lead with authority.

Mr. Upright said he could effectively address employee discipline. He said he worked with a colleague, who was a good friend, that he had to turn in. He said he turned in another teacher when Dr. Johnson was the principal of Central High. He said social-emotional education had been effective in reducing bullying. He said social media bullying was a huge thing.

Mr. Upright said he would be transparent when he had to communicate unpopular decisions. He said working in an urban district is one of the hardest jobs in the nation.

Mr. Upright said he had not lobbied or communicated with Mayor Ganim, his chief of staff, any cabinet level member of the Ganim administrator, Mario Testa or any board member regarding the position of interim superintendent. He said he interviewed because he wanted to see change. He said the achievement growth that had been achieved was not acceptable.

Mr. Upright said his top three measurable accomplishments include becoming a teacher in an urban district and spending

his entire career here. He said the door was wide open to work in another district, but he would not leave the district for the world. He also cited continuing his education to contribute to the school system, including obtaining his 092 certification, and work towards 093. He said he was very direct and gets his point across, even though he doesn't speak with as much clarity as a lot of people.

Mr. Upright said his third achievement was piloting a program and bringing the wrestling program to Central High.

Mr. Upright said he keeps seeing the same thing being done over and over again, and he believed he could lead and manage and work with anybody. He said he does better with more on his plate and considers himself a workaholic. He said his first step would be to redefine the leadership role of the district office and create a strategy for strengthening teaching and learning and building an organization coherent with this strategy.

Mr. Upright said he would be visible as superintendent, including visiting the schools and getting to know the personnel. He said he would have an open-door policy to listen to anyone.

Mr. Weldon informed Mr. Upright that the board has determined to hold a community forum for all six finalist candidates on June 22.

Mr. Upright thanked the board for accommodating his schedule with his daughter's soccer team.

Dr. Portia Bonner was the next candidate.

Dr. Bonner chose to have the interview take place in public session.

Dr. Bonner said she had been educator for over 26 years, starting as a high school biology teacher. She said her science background leads her to be analytical when it comes to problem-solving and looking at data. She said she has served in Hamden as an assistant superintendent and superintendent, and as superintendent in East Haven and New Bedford, Massachusetts.

Dr. Bonner said she had an urban background, having grown up and worked in Waterbury. She said she has been doing consulting work since leaving the position in East Haven.

Dr. Bonner said she went into the profession for students. She said a student-centered environment means a hands-on approach to the classroom, including project-based learning or personalized learning. She said all the decision-making should center around students, including budgetary actions.

Dr. Bonner said as an interim superintendent there will be a leadership team already in place. She said it was important to heal the loss the leadership team feels from the departure of the superintendent. She said she would assess the weaknesses and strengths of the current leadership team.

Dr. Bonner said accountability includes student data and responsibilities and roles of the leadership team and building personnel. She said goals would be set with the board in terms what they want to see this year. She noted the strategic plan was in its third and final year. She added the school principals are part of the leadership team.



Dr. Bonner said in East Haven she worked with her HR director to create a format to handle disciplinary issues. She had many experiences dealing with certified and non-certified staff regarding discipline. She said she has experience dealing directly with union presidents and staff.

Dr. Bonner said in her experience it is best to put information out about emotional, controversial or unpopular decisions. She noted the board makes the final decisions, which puts them in hot seats, particularly around budget time. She said she knew Bridgeport was in a trying time with its budget situation. She described the difficult process in East Haven where it was necessary to close a school.

Dr. Bonner said she had not lobbied or communicated with Mayor Ganim, his chief of staff, any cabinet level member of the Ganim administrator, Mario Testa or any board member regarding the position of interim superintendent. She noted she was from Waterbury.

Dr. Bonner said her three most significant deliverables were the master facility plan in East Haven to address declining enrollment; SBAC performance at high-needs schools in East Haven; and decreasing chronic absenteeism in the East Haven district.

Dr. Bonner said her priorities would be developed from working with the board. She noted the district's data indicated the need for improving student achievement and increasing students on the college and career track by looking at the course offerings and dual enrollment at colleges and universities. She said absenteeism would be worked on as well.

Dr. Bonner said she would also like to engage the community through meetings with parents and community groups.

Dr. Bonner said the last two times the district had an opening for superintendent she applied. She said she wanted to work in a diverse district and a district with challenges. She said she believed Bridgeport had the seed because the initiatives being put in are sound and should work. She said during the year she was the interim superintendent she would like to do assessments of the initiatives for the board. She noted she worked together with Dr. Johnson in Waterbury and considers her a friend. She said she would like to continue on the great work Dr. Johnson had done.

Dr. Bonner said she left East Haven in 2017, and spent the next year involved in matters related to her parents' deaths. She said she has done private consulting or mentoring for anyone who would call her.

In response to a question, Dr. Bonner said the New Bedford school system had a large Portuguese population. She said the Portuguese community, including the Cape Verdean population, wanted to embed their culture in the schools. She said there were projects involving schools in Cape Verde. She said New Bedford also had a Haitian population.

Mr. Weldon informed Dr. Bonner that the board has determined to hold a community forum for all six finalist candidates on June 22, followed by a public hearing. He said the board's goal was to have an interim superintendent in place by the end of the month. He said there would be time to overlap with Dr. Johnson.

Dr. Bonner said she knew it was a difficult decision for the board. She asked the board to be mindful of its students when putting someone in the position. She provided the board with a draft of a transition plan for the year.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 7:57 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod