

Wednesday, June 12, 2019 **DRAFT**

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE SUPERINTENDENT SEARCH COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held June 12, 2019, at Geraldine Magnet Academy, 240 Ocean Terrace, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:47 p.m. Present were Chair John Weldon, Secretary Joseph Sokolovic, Joseph Lombard, LaMar Kennedy, Hernan Illingworth, Sybil Allen, Chris Taylor and Maria Pereira. Vice Chair Jessica Martinez arrived subsequently as noted.

Mr. Weldon said the meeting was originally scheduled to begin at 6:00 p.m., but one of the candidates withdrew his candidacy this afternoon. He asked that the board and the public act civilly during the interviews this evening.

Ms. Martinez arrived at the meeting.

Michael Testani was the next candidate. He said he had letters of recommendation he would like to provide to the committee. He chose to have his interview take place in public.

Mr. Testani said he was currently the director of adult and continuing education, as well as overseeing some areas including the juvenile detention center's educational component, the athletic department, and the district's attendance team.

Mr. Testani said he began his career in Bridgeport in 1994 as an intern at Curiale School and a baseball coach at Harding. He said in 1994 he was happy to get a job as a

guidance counselor and work with kids. He said he has worked at the elementary, middle and high school level, as well as the district office. He said he also worked briefly in Norwalk Public Schools.

Mr. Testani said he believed his experience was pretty vast, although it was not the most traditional trajectory of a career.

Mr. Testani said he has been an assistant principal at Cross School, Bassick High and Cesar Batalla, before being asked by Supt. Vallas to work on a high school transformation task force.

Mr. Testani said he had the opportunity to work with and be mentored by some of the best leaders in the state and the country such as Roberto Rodriguez, Bruce Posey, Fran Rabinowitz, Ron Remy and Dr. Johnson. He said he believed he brings a unique skill set and knows all aspects of the district. He said he was born and raised in Bridgeport, and had been involved in Bridgeport his entire life.

Mr. Testani said students should be in the forefront at all times. He said a student-centered learning environment is multi-faceted, including being fun, being highly engaging, and of high quality and high standards. He said as multi-tiered support system was needed for students.

Mr. Testani said we're in a different era with students growing up in a time where they don't know anything other than a smart phone and the Internet, with access to information at lightning speed. He said the teacher-provide-information classroom needs to shift to a mindset where we are more of a consultant and a coach. He said cultural differences should be incorporated into all aspects of

instruction and the physical plant, and diversity should be taught as a strength.

Mr. Taylor said students are faced with challenging environments at home and in traveling to and from school. Mr. Testani said the district had a responsibility for the students traveling to and from school safely.

Mr. Testani said as an interim superintendent he would build a leadership team with the resources we currently have. He said he would reach out to people currently on the staff who can hit the ground running and produce high-level results.

Mr. Testani said when delegating the most important thing is delegating in a timely manner. He said those delegated tasks should be given clear expectations and provided guidance and support. He said you should take an interest in project monitoring. He said he believed in delegating to one person who is ultimately responsible for the task.

Mr. Testani said when delivering emotional or unpopular decisions you have to put yourself in the audience's shoes and be prepared on the message you are presenting. He said it was important that people are given time to process the information and then you should follow up later to make sure everyone's okay.

Mr. Testani said the three measurable accomplishments he has achieved in his current position are work with the attendance team, including at meetings in Hartford, which led to a five percent decrease in chronic absenteeism; work with revamping the curriculum in the adult education program, which converted a stale program to one that was thriving and was recognized at the state level; and the work

he did in creating college and university partnerships while Mr. Vallas was superintendent.

Mr. Testani said his three priorities were making sure the budget is rectified, putting together a leadership team at the district level to support our schools, and looking at other opportunities for struggling students and who are falling through the cracks in comprehensive high schools.

Mr. Testani said he did not foresee any conflict of interest in enforcing employee discipline. He said he was currently vice president of the BCAS union, but we are all part of a union in a union-driven public entity. He said he believed everyone should be held to the standards and if the standards are not met you should be held accountable. He said if he ever felt he could not be objective, the process would revert to the Board of Education.

Mr. Testani said in his current position if a principal committed a violation that would cause them to be terminated and the charge was just he could not fight for them in good conscience. He said the union is bound by the four corners of the contract and it does not cover folks who are negligent or abusive toward kids.

Mr. Testani said he was attracted to the position because he was a Bridgeport guy who came up through the system. He said he believed Bridgeport was in a critical transition period with limited human capital. He said it was critical that someone who is familiar with the district and its challenges and issues can step in and carry the ball forward until there is a permanent superintendent.

Ms. Pereira asked if Mr. Testani had lobbied or communicated, either verbally or in writing, with either Mayor

Ganim, his chief of staff, any cabinet level member of the Ganim Administration, Mario Testa or any school board member regarding the interim superintendent position. He said he had not lobbied to any of those folks. He said in his position as a community member he does run into people at different events and speaks cordially with them. He said when Dr. Johnson resigned he expressed an interest in applying for the interim superintendent position. He said he could not recall to whom he said he was interested in applying for the position. He said nothing was said to anyone after the position was posted and the parameters made public.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said he graduated from Notre Dame High School. He said he attended Madison School and St. Andrew's School.

Mr. Taylor said he had concerns because the current administration has not treated our support staff with the respect and credit they deserve. He said he comes from a working class family. He asked how Mr. Testani would prevent that.

Mr. Testani said he was the first of his family to graduate from college, where he received three degrees. He said his father was a union carpenter, his grandfather was a union mason, and his grandmother worked at Remington Shaver and at a dress shop. He said he appreciated what working class folks in this community do. He said he believed security guards, clerical workers and cafeteria workers who know him would say the same thing.

Mr. Taylor noted that in the past he made a rude and unprofessional comment about teachers and said he would like to apologize for that again. He asked if Mr. Testani

avored a forensic audit, noting he did not believe the money gets to the classroom. He said he was frustrated with Ms. Siegel.

Mr. Testani said he was in full support of an audit of the budget. He said he wondered how time and time again, year after year, we have the same range of a budget deficit without putting a stopgap in. He said if every employee received a two percent raise each year, it doesn't come anywhere near the amount of the deficit. He said he doesn't see where the numbers add up.

Ms. Martinez said she had worked with Mr. Testani since she started as a parent leader in 2011. She said his resume was extensive, but does not reflect the passion that he exudes in conversations. She said way prior to the position being available Mr. Testani called her upset and frustrated about what the district lacks and doesn't get for the children.

Mr. Testani said the job requires being an educator and a little bit of a politician in terms of trying to leverage money from the city and state. He said we cannot sit back and expect money to fall into our laps.

Ms. Martinez said when she became chair of the Finance Committee Mr. Testani helped her out and helped her with thinking about things out of the box. Mr. Testani said it was important to convey the budget in layman's terms. He said the online information placed online by Ms. Siegel is very difficult to decipher.

Mr. Testani said the children mean the world to him. He noted some of his former students were present tonight. He said these are relationships that go beyond the school walls. He said he did not realize the extent of what our children

lacked until he had the opportunity to work in Norwalk, where there are greater resources.

Ms. Martinez said Mr. Testani worked very closely with the parent leadership when she was the District PAC president. Mr. Testani said he believed we could do better in activating partner partnerships.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said he has an 092 certification and is currently enrolled at Central Connecticut State University seeking an 093 certification.

In response to a question, Mr. Weldon said an 092 certification is an administrator's certification; an 093 is a superintendent's license.

Mr. Testani he could manage the 093 certification work because the program at Central works around work schedules, with a lot of work in the summer and in the late afternoon.

Mr. Testani said it was important to meet parents where they are, with the frequency of meetings to be determined. He said meetings should be held in the community with parents in their comfort zone.

Mr. Weldon said he wanted to be sure Mr. Testani was crystal clear that the interim superintendent position was only for a year and he would be precluded from applying for the permanent position. Mr. Testani said he understood.

Mr. Testani said it was important that the transition is smooth. He said Dr. Johnson was leaving the district in a spot where we can build on successes. He said the average

tenure of an urban superintendent is about two years, so if the opportunity presents itself again he will be here.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said he is enrolled and begins his 093 course of study on July 8th.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said he had never been a classroom teacher in a K-12 classroom. He said he has been a guidance counselor in the K-12 system, which included going into classroom daily to provide a developmental guidance curriculum. He said he had supervised teachers for sixteen or seventeen years, including evaluating and supporting across all disciplines. He said it's not about content when you go into classrooms, but recognizing what is good instruction.

Ms. Pereira said under state statute the superintendent is the chief educator and provider of instruction. She said it was challenging to be the leader of the state's largest school district without having firsthand experience around K-12 curriculum, instruction and pedagogy.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said he supported the athletic directors as a favor to Dr. Johnson. Mr. Kennedy noted the athletic directors have threatened to leave their jobs. Mr. Testani said he can provide insight and support in this matter. He said if there was not going to be a citywide athletic director it is important to specifically lay out the responsibilities that should go with the stipend provided.

Mr. Testani thanked the board for the opportunity, especially at Claytor School because he was a personal friend of Rev. Claytor. He said he had never been one to tell someone they can't do something and said he looked forward, if given

the opportunity, to work with the board members individually and collectively.

Mr. Weldon said there would be a public forum for all the candidates on June 22. He said the objective is to have the process wrapped up and an appointment made by the end of this month.

Ms. Pereira said she had concerns about a Saturday forum, noting that Seventh Day Adventists and Jewish and Muslim community members will not be able to attend.

The next candidate was Denise Clemons. Ms. Clemons chose to have the interview in public.

Ms. Clemons thanked the board for allowing her the opportunity to have the interview. She said she was born in Bridgeport, has worked overseas teaching with the Department of Defense, was a superintendent in two school districts, and spent over sixteen years in Bridgeport public education as a teacher, assistant principal, principal, executive director of elementary education, and assistant superintendent for secondary education.

Ms. Clemons said she could help bridge the gap with her expertise caused by the loss of the superintendent. She said she had walked the same streets in Bridgeport that students do. She noted the changing demographics in Bridgeport, particularly the teaching and administrative staff not reflecting the nearly 50 percent Hispanic population.

Ms. Clemons said she presented the board with a copy of her theory of action, her vision, and her 30, 60 and 90-day entry plan.

Mr. Taylor apologized to Ms. Clemons for missing a board meeting due to pressing family matters which would have led to her being afforded an interview if he had been there.

Ms. Clemons said as a superintendent in Massachusetts she led in bringing social-emotional learning to the state. She said she gained a million dollar grant to provide social workers and guidance counselors to work with that district. She said everything needs to be student-centered, including providing the students with a voice. She said pathways for students not going to college need to be created.

Ms. Clemons said as principal of Wilbur Cross she created a community environment, including professional development sessions where teachers walked the route the students have to take to school. She said as a student she walked from Connecticut Avenue, up Central Avenue and Barnum Avenue, to Harding High for four years. She noted Dunbar and Tisdale students have to walk by liquor stores to get to school.

Mr. Taylor said he was worried about gang violence. He said he did not agree with moving Bassick students to the old Harding High.

Ms. Clemons said she was a taxpayer in Bridgeport even while she worked in Torrington and Massachusetts. She said she just lost a couple of cousins to gun violence. She said she feared for the safety of her daughter and young cousins.

Ms. Clemons said she would develop a leadership team from within, looking at the expertise each one can bring to the table. She said the strategic plan will have to be worked on this year because the state requires each district to have

a strategic plan. She said there should be community involvement in the creation of the plan.

Ms. Clemons said her approach to accountability would focus on people's job descriptions. When they fall short, the supervisor has to step in and provide support and then follow up. She said that is where the visibility of the superintendent in schools and the community is important.

Ms. Clemons said as a superintendent in two districts she has had to communicate emotional or unpopular decisions such as budget cuts. In Massachusetts, she found a way to collaborate with a community college to get donations to start a STEAM program in the middle school after budget cuts. She noted Bridgeport was in dire straits; the same budget conversations were being held in 2012 when she was here.

Ms. Clemons said tapping into community resources allowed her to close the achievement gap as principal of Wilbur Cross and receive recognition from the Broad Foundation.

Ms. Clemons said her three measurable accomplishments included dealing with multiple citations for racial imbalance in schools in Torrington. She said the board moved forward with a redistricting project that cleared up the citations. The second one was in Massachusetts where she took a sheltered English-immersion program offered to teachers, which led to curriculum changes and development of courses and programs to reduce special education identification.

Ms. Clemons said children turn to gangs due to things such as a lack of food at home or kids at school making fun of

their clothes. She said she knew the district had a huge anti-bullying initiative going on that should be continued.

Ms. Clemons said the district's data indicated there is a huge drop in the district's high school students applying for financial aid. She said she would like to look into that further. She said she would use community resources to help in this area.

Ms. Clemons said as a superintendent she has had to discipline union employees. She said you build positive relationships, but sometimes everybody doesn't do the right thing.

Ms. Clemons said she was attracted to the position because she was born and raised in Bridgeport, and the city is in need right now. She said it she had spent sixteen years in the district and wished to work with the great foundation laid by Dr. Johnson. She said when she graduated from Harding she received a full scholarship to the University of Michigan. She said teachers and a supportive family pushed her forward, and her mother subsequently got a college education and her daughter graduated from college.

Ms. Clemons said she was in education because of her passion. She said given the right tools, everyone can rise about poverty.

Ms. Pereira asked if Ms. Clemons had lobbied or communicated, either verbally or in writing, with either Mayor Ganim, his chief of staff, any cabinet level member of the Ganim Administration, Mario Testa or any school board member regarding the interim superintendent position.

Ms. Clemons said she did meet Mr. Taylor prior to the posting of the job. She said she spoke to Dr. Ford during the period after Dr. Johnson resigned. She said Dr. Ford reached out to Mr. Taylor and she met with him very briefly. She said about three weeks later the posting came out with the caveat about not being apply for the permanent position. She said at this point she reached out to Ms. Pereira to clarify that and how it would work. She said Ms. Pereira explained the process. She said she did not meet with anyone else and never lobbied for an interview or a vote because she stands on her skills.

Mr. Taylor said Ms. Clemons was exactly accurate about his meeting with her and Dr. Ford, and he was thoroughly impressed. He said he was a very candid individual, and noted that the president of the teachers' union had put out negative propaganda about Ms. Clemons. He said it warmed his heart that Mr. Peluchette was scared of her. He said Ms. Clemons had the right to know what transpired behind her back.

In response to a question, Dr. Clemons said she was prepared to have a forensic audit of the board. She said she would do so in any new position, be it a fiscal, operational or curriculum audit. She noted as a taxpayer she wanted to know where her money was going. She said transparency is a key and she does not have anything to hide.

Ms. Clemons noted the large expenditures in the district on special education. Mr. Taylor said that seems to be the myth, but it hasn't been proven to him. He said money seems to evaporate here and we keep people on that don't work, who have been interim for twenty years and don't have our students' best interests at heart.

Mr. Taylor said he represents the working class such as security officers, paraprofessionals and cafeteria workers that are not treated properly by the current administration. He said he came from a single mother who worked in a deli or at a cash register.

Ms. Clemons said she came from a similar home and was always visible to her staff as a principal or assistant superintendent. She said there may be some negativity because she was present, saw things and addressed them.

Mr. Taylor said he has openly supported Ms. Clemons. He said some of his constituents were concerned about preference for sorority sisters by Dr. Johnson. Ms. Clemons said she would hire on capabilities, not affiliation, because they are a reflection of me.

Ms. Martinez said Ms. Clemons was Bridgeport and had answered with passion and experience. She said she learned when her son transferred from Marin School to Winthrop of the disparities in the district. She noted Winthrop tapped into wraparound services from Sacred Heart University.

Ms. Martinez said you can't always believe what you see in the media. She asked Ms. Clemons to explain her exit from Torrington and a petition signed by a large number of parents. Ms. Clemons said there was a petition, but it was not validated that everyone who signed were parents. She said in certain communities there is over-identification for special education. She said it is not a program intended to be for a student forever, but to provide them with skills so they can be exited. She said people are not favorable to decisions that must be made due to state or legal mandates

Mr. Illingworth said it was important to hear Ms. Clemons's perspective on that issue. He said he never heard about what Mr. Taylor spoke about earlier. He said he had always known Ms. Clemons to be a straight-shooter and he could understand when people are held accountable some people may not like that. Ms. Clemons said the allegations mentioned by Mr. Taylor earlier are not true.

Mr. Illingworth said district morale was already low in some areas and asked how Ms. Clemons would overcome people who are afraid of her coming in. Ms. Clemons said we're focused on children here, not about hurt feelings.

Mr. Illingworth said he believed the interim superintendent had a different role than a permanent superintendent. He asked Ms. Clemons why she applied for the position since the person selected could not apply for the permanent position. Ms. Clemons said, why not? She said the city is in dire straits and she can bridge the gap. She said she doesn't need GPS to get around the city or someone to tell her who to contact at local universities or institutions. She said she attended the Males of Color in the district last week. She said she was a Bridgeport resident and was capable of doing the job.

Ms. Allen said welcome home to Ms. Clemons and thanked her for taking time to answer our plea for help. She said Bridgeport does not know how to come together and educate our children.

Mr. Kennedy noted he worked in the Valley. He asked if Ms. Clemons was given support from the board and/or the community in Torrington. Ms. Clemons said the board was supportive. She said when she went into Torrington she was the first African-American superintendent of any level. She

said only one cabinet member was African-American. She said we are both gone. She said you can just look the website and she doesn't need to say anything more.

Ms. Pereira said she was known for researching everything. She asked if closing the school in Torrington was related to the racial imbalance. Ms. Clemons said the board wanted to close the school because of budgetary issues and to address the citations. She said parents objected to their kids attending schools with the increasing population of Hispanics. She said that broke her heart.

Ms. Martinez said there were divisive leaders and community members in our own city who don't lead with the focus that we are neighbors and face the same things. She said she believed now white people and Latinos are now getting discriminating against. She said she learned of slavery and discrimination when she attended Curiale School. She said we need to teach unity. She said she hoped Ms. Clemons was ready to bring unity.

Ms. Clemons said she believed it was about children, not politics. Ms. Martinez noted the mayor had not been funding us forever. Ms. Clemons said when she was superintendent in both districts she had monthly meetings with the mayor and with city council people. She said she had no fear in doing so.

Mr. Taylor said sitting here he was thinking to himself, why would he only want to put Ms. Clemons in for only one year when next year he can put her in for four. He said he would like to see Ms. Clemons withdraw her application and come back for the four-year position. He said it was a waste to put Ms. Clemons here for a year. Ms. Martinez said she agreed.

Mr. Taylor said Ms. Clemons had floored him, as she did the day he met her.

Ms. Clemons said as a taxpayer, why would you waste money when you have me sitting here?

Ms. Clemons said she appreciated the candid questions. She said summarized the written submission she provided. She said her theory of action is based on the district's pillars. Her vision is to provide educational excellence in a respectful and positive learning environment, offering diverse opportunities for all students.

Ms. Clemons said the plan included aligning resources to ensure that all students are college and career ready. She said her transition plan would include meeting with Dr. Johnson, reviewing evaluations of central office administrators and school-based administrators, and to review protocols and procedures for working with the board. She said she believes the superintendent and the board should be a team, not separate, before the public.

Ms. Clemons said we need to review and assess existing methods of communication, including on the website.

Ms. Clemons said her 30-day plan would include visits to schools to hear from staff and students. She said after 60 days she would communicate what has been found, including holding another community forum.

Ms. Clemons said with the deficits Bridgeport is facing you cannot wait until April to start talking about budget.

Ms. Clemons said 90 days in, you communicate everything, update what was had been done, and you move forward.

Ms. Clemons said her philosophy and leadership characteristics are strong, proactive organizational skills to design a structure of distributive leadership. She said administrators had to be grown within the district. She noted the importance of Hispanic administrators with the fifty percent Hispanic student population.

Ms. Clemons said she wrote a paper on professional development that was presented at a conference.

Ms. Clemons said she would use committees to support and enrich the theory of action, inform the work of the district, and engage district advocates.

Ms. Clemons said she wanted to be visible in the community.

Mr. Weldon said the board would hold a community forum hosted by the League of Women Voters for all candidates on June 22. He said the objective was to have the whole process wrapped up and an appointment made by the end of the month.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:37 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod