

Tuesday, October 20, 2020

MINUTES OF THE TEACHING & LEARNING COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held October 20, 2020, by video conference call, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 5:32 p.m. Present were members Chair Joe Sokolovic and Joseph Lombard. Board member Albert Benejan joined subsequently as noted.

Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

Mr. Lombard moved to approve the committee's minutes of August 25, 2020. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

Mr. Lombard moved to move up Item 5 to next on the agenda. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

Supt. Testani provided an update on distance learning. The district has about 9,000 students that are working fully remote and 10,000 participating in in-person learning.

The superintendent said there are challenges with remote students not having their cameras turned on. He said teachers cannot engage with students effectively without the camera being on. He said Teams has the option of a blurred or virtual backgrounds for those students that need it. He said students should prepare every morning to engage in the remote learning. He said this needed to be communicated at the school level.

Supt. Testani said the district is working with families with connectivity issues. Regarding free internet access, Altice is behind in the process and has not reached out to the 1900 family names submitted by the district. He said current customers are not eligible for the program. He said eligible families will be contacted soon by Altice. He said the district can provide some hot spots to families in need, although the state wanted the first option to be the agreement negotiated by Gov. Lamont with Altice.

The superintendent said with the end of the first marking period it seems we have settled in and are getting better every day. He said this is not a traditional method of learning.

Supt. Testani said the district will move to a hybrid model in the winter months to reduce density within the buildings and to limit the disruptions as cases have popped up across the district. He said this is new territory for everybody.

In response to a question, the superintendent said he believed in another week or two there would be a better handle on what the number of disengaged students was. Mr. Sokolovic said he found it strange that school enrollment was down statewide. The superintendent said he was told parochial and charter school enrollments have increased.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said he can provide the number on homeschooling. He said he believed there has been a significant increase in the amount this year. Mr. Sokolovic said he believed a lot of those students would return to the district because the programs do not have certified teachers.

In response to a question, the superintendent said some teachers have indicated frustration with the remote learning. He said the district has provided support on time management in this area. He said principals are being encouraged to identify exemplary teachers who can support others. He said remote learning is especially challenging at the pre-K to 3 levels.

Mr. Lombard said he had heard teachers in other districts describe the difficulties in teaching students who are in remote learning. Supt. Testani said the district would flexibility in scheduling some teachers to focus on in-person learning, while others do remote teaching.

Mr. Sokolovic said he wanted to give a shoutout to our teachers, speaking as a parent who has experienced both models. He said the teachers have got to be exhausted and noted his son's teachers often send graded papers late at night. He said he had listened to a few online classes and the teachers were effective at interacting with remote students. He said he believed due to difficulties in other districts our students may be able to close gaps during this period.

The superintendent said the teachers and administrators had done an amazing job. He said Bridgeport was one of less than a handful of districts that has not allowed teachers to teach remotely unless they have quarantined and their students are home as well. Students are getting the in-person experience they've asked for from certified teachers.

Mr. Benejan joined the meeting.

Mr. Benejan said he did not agree with opening schools, but he had to give credit to the principals and staff for their amazing work.

The next agenda item was a curriculum review and cultural relevancy check on social studies. Mr. Sokolovic said he wanted to make it clear this was not an attack on teachers and what they're doing.

Supt. Testani said the district was at the end of a six-year social studies cycle. There has not been a director of social studies for at least a decade or more. He said he has convened a committee for social studies review and renewal for middle school and high school. Teachers will participate along with administrators.

The superintendent said currently African-American and Latin American studies are offered in high school, as well as a course on perspectives on race. He said he believed we can do a better job on cultural relevancy and a deeper dive in the history curriculum. He said given the new state graduation requirements it is a good opportunity to review the Grades 7 to 12 curriculum.

Mr. Sokolovic said his son is currently using a book that is six years old and is Eurocentric. He said a secondary book is used that covers Native American history. He said the removal of Native Americans from their lands isn't really covered. He objected to the description of the conflicts in New England between Americans and native peoples.

Mr. Sokolovic said due to the state requirements on the Holocaust and genocide his son can describe the Holocaust, but not one other real genocide. He said what happened to Native Americans was a genocide.

Mr. Sokolovic said our children identify with the subject matter they're learning and they would be more engaged if they received more relevant education and more about the people that look like them.

Supt. Testani said this was the perfect opportunity in the renewal cycle. He said before the committee settles on anything, the board will have input and vetting through the Teaching & Learning Committee.

The superintendent said he'd like to get this done and in place for the next school year, including new textbooks. He said he could provide updates to the committee by December.

Mr. Sokolovic said he wanted to go through the cultural relevancy of all disciplines going forward.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said civics classes in high school covers current events. He said the committee would look at how current events are handled. Mr. Sokolovic said current events had been touched on in 6th grade in his son's experience. The superintendent said project-based learning will also include current events.

Mr. Sokolovic urged that skill building exercises in analyzing photos use photos of people that look like them. He said this was an example of something that didn't need curriculum renewal. Supt. Testani said the point was well taken.

The next agenda item was a curriculum and cultural relevance check in the arts.

Alicia Robinson, director of performing and visual arts, said last school year the department goals focused on high-quality arts instruction, culturally responsive teaching, and equity and access. She said this year culturally responsive teaching has moved to cultural competence and SEL, and the intersectionality between the two.

Ms. Robinson said the shift came from sessions she attended on cultural competence, antiracism and abolitionist teaching. She said cultural responsiveness is being aware of cultural diversity and responding to it. Strategies would include incorporating diverse imagery in the classroom, with teachers looking at and dismantling systemic practices that push out marginalized populations.

Ms. Robinson said the arts curriculum is national core arts standards-aligned, which engages students in the four artistic processes. She said there is no scope or sequence to the curriculum because materials are not standardized across the district. Teachers have autonomy based on available resources. She said modifications include explicitly identifying and categorizing diverse artists and musicians.

Ms. Robinson said the four artistic processes and eleven anchor standards are threaded throughout all aspects of the arts in the district.

Ms. Robinson said in 2019-20 professional development included culturally responsive teaching, conversations on bias and privilege, microaggressions, and redlining. She said quotes were used to spark conversations about the mindset teachers might have coming into an urban district.

Ms. Robinson said this year she has modeled how all of this intersects with the work the teachers are already doing. The

focus of this year's professional development is social-emotional learning, curriculum, and equity. She said she was very intentional about including diverse imagery of student artwork that was represented from students of different cultures. She said there was a discussion about the importance of teaching about diverse artists.

Ms. Robinson said cultural competence has been reflected through district programs. Partnerships with outside organizations also reflect cultural competence. City Lights provides artists' residencies at no cost to the district, both in person and now digitally. She said she is very proud of the partnership with the Quick Center entitled Arts for All, which includes exposure to diverse arts experiences. The program includes mentorships and educational programs for teachers. She said teachers will have access to performances and panel discussions.

Mr. Sokolovic said Ms. Robinson's presentation was awesome.

In response to a question, Ms. Robinson said all music and art teachers were required to attend the professional development. Some PE and library/media teachers also attended because they don't have a department head.

In response to a question, Ms. Robinson said the department starting using Teams last September to engage in ongoing discussions about the content that was presented in the professional development. She said when she visits classrooms she looks for and provides feedback on the themes presented.

In response to a question, Ms. Robinson said she uses *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* by Zaretta

Hammond. She said also attended presentations hosted by the National Education Association, Turnaround Arts, and the Kennedy Center. She said she could provide the list of PD sessions she had attended. She also mentioned *We Want to Do More Than Survive* by Bettina Love and *How to be an Antiracist* by Ibram Kendi.

Mr. Lombard and Mr. Benejan said Ms. Robinson made an amazing presentation. Mr. Benejan praised Ms. Robinson's passion.

Ms. Robinson said she is actively engaged in hiring for the department and she asks questions around cultural competence.

In response to a question, Ms. Robinson said the Turnaround Arts schools have licenses for plays, and teachers are trying to figure out how to do it with social distancing.

The next agenda item was the special education update. Rob Arnold, director of specialized education, said the district is providing special education transportation to about fifty less students than last year.

Mr. Arnold said due to COVID and a Supreme Court ruling school districts have to retain students until their 22nd birthday.

Mr. Arnold said there were about 3,200 evaluations to complete this year, which is being accomplished by having special education teachers work extra hours.

Mr. Arnold said last year there were 545 initial evaluations, which is a low number because assessments stopped on

March 13th. The requirement is that all evaluations be completed according to state reporting by December 5th.

Mr. Arnold said there are eleven new out-of-district placements so far this year. The University School has 23 students out of 34 slots. There are 40 students at Disability Resource Network(DRN). A total of 337 students are out of district.

In response to a question, Mr. Arnold said out of district placements often result from mediations between the state and the district. He said they are often because the students were not educated properly at the school level.

Mr. Arnold said the district is focusing on providing data at PPTs to convince parents students do not have to go out of district. Mr. Arnold said the students at DRN go there because that is where they do the best.

In response to a question, Mr. Arnold said calls have been received from parents who want their children to stay in school until they're 22. These students are most often at out-of-district placements. He said Ms. Siegel would have information on the extra costs.

Mr. Arnold said there are 16 certified special education vacancies in Bridgeport now. He said he calls the state every week to inform them of the job openings. He said he has hired a retiree to do PPTs.

Mr. Arnold said a new transition academy has been opened in the Central High basement, which saved the \$38,000 cost to use the Wakeman Center. There are 34 students and two teachers.

Mr. Arnold said an RFP was sent out for transition programs, but the responses were at very high prices. The Central facility includes a kitchen that has never been used. It has its own separate entrance.

Mr. Arnold said the lack of special education teachers is his biggest concern. Only certified teachers can do IEPs. He said he is working on the teacher shortage; two employees just returned from Norwalk.

Mr. Sokolovic said special education is always a shortage area and with the pandemic every district is competing for the teachers.

Mr. Arnold said one case went to due process recently, but the applicant failed to follow certain procedures. There have been a lot of complaints, but when data is provided there has been no corrective action imposed.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 6:48 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod