

Tuesday, November 19, 2019

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE TEACHING AND LEARNING COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held November 19, 2019, at Bridgeport City Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:00 p.m. Present were members Chair Joseph Sokolovic and Joseph Lombard. Board member Maria Pereira was present.

Acting Supt. Michael J. Testani was present.

Mr. Lombard moved to approve the committee's minutes of September 18, 2019. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic. The motion was approved by a 1-0 vote. Mr. Sokolovic vote in favor. Mr. Lombard abstained.

Mr. Lombard moved to consider Item 3 next. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

Dr. Selena Morgan, executive director of elementary education, provided an update on the science department. She said teacher-leader cohorts have been created to run professional development for teachers. She reported last year's test scores were higher than the prior CMT testing. She said she believes this is the result of NGSS (Next Generation Science Standards) requiring students to participate in science.

Dr. Morgan said iQuest and HMH materials were bought for elementary and middle school science. They include digital content which is accessible by all teachers. Teachers provided professional development on NGSS.

Dr. Morgan said the approach to the science fair will be different this year. There will be additional categories for students who do not want to take controlled experiments to state competitions.

Dr. Morgan said the focus for this year will include making sure teachers have pacing guides, textbooks and access to the digital resources. She said the NGSS emphasizes three-dimensional learning.

Mr. Testani said a lot of the current approach stemmed from input from the teachers, especially around the science fair. He said it was a struggle to force every child into the same type of project.

Mr. Testani said he believed the approach would make science more usable and the curriculum more accessible. He added boxes and boxes of science materials stored in school basements have become useless.

Mr. Sokolovic said when he enters K to 5 classrooms he does not see science as a focus on the walls. He said that was because science can be intimidating to teachers. He said students had to be engaged in science when they are young and impressionable.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested Dr. Morgan monitor the placing of science material on the walls of classrooms.

Mr. Testani said the district's science fair would be held on February 11th.

Ms. Pereira said last year she urged Ms. Bhushan to check to see if the science teachers had a request for science kits

on a Donors Choose page because Ray Dalio funded every request in the Bridgeport schools. She suggested this idea be pursued.

Dr. Morgan said of the nine schools she supervises six of them have the science kits.

Mr. Sokolovic noted it was hard for parents to get the curriculum quarterly as provided for in the parent engagement policy. He said some districts provide parents access to the pacing guides on websites, which is valuable for parents in monitoring what their children should be learning.

The next agenda item was a special education update[; Robert Arnold, interim executive director of special education, was present.

Mr. Testani said he and Mr. Arnold are looking at all in-district programs to see where things can be improved or abandoned. He said he did not support the SOAR program.

Ms. Pereira noted in 2017-18 there were 288 district students placed elsewhere in Connecticut at the district's expense. Mr. Arnold said such placements are the result of court activity or DCF.

In response to a question, Mr. Arnold said the district pursues all reimbursements from other districts that it is entitled to.

Ms. Pereira said the figures provided seemed to indicate a reduction in out-of-district special education placements. She said she was concerned about calls that students are being

blocked from out-of-district placements they are entitled to. She said she did not want a repeat of the litigation the district endured under Supt. Vallas. Mr. Arnold said this was not currently the case.

Ms. Pereira noted a lot of residents of the Bronx are moving into the Treeland area of Bridgeport due to the cheaper cost of living. Mr. Arnold said his office received a recent call about medically fragile children who would be moving from New York to Bridgeport.

Ms. Pereira said Mr. Arnold was very competent and knows special education inside out. She said Mr. Testani made a very good decision on him.

Mr. Arnold said when he started in the district in 2002 there were about 2,200 students with IEPs and there were now about 4,600.

In response to a question, Mr. Arnold said he believed the current number of out-of-district placements was 386. He said he was working with the superintendent to develop a program to keep autistic children in the same school through 8th grade.

Mr. Testani said Mr. Oddo gave some misinformation in a prior meeting about homebound students.

Mr. Arnold said the district agreed to send the students in question to out-of-district placements.

Mr. Testani said Mr. Oddo's previous comments about the amount of out-of-district reimbursements the district could obtain was based on information from a sales pitch from a

company even though he had been cautioned about the claims.

Ms. Pereira said she previously suggested the schools with the highest number of PPT referrals receive special training. She asked that Mr. Arnold look at the issue.

Mr. Sokolovic urged following the law in regards to the least-restrictive environment and what is in the child's best interests.

Mr. Testani said he hoped Mr. Arnold would apply for the permanent job. He added he was working with Mr. Arnold to restructure the department.

The next agenda item was an update on the math department. Herminio Planas, executive director of elementary education, was present. He said in 2017 the curriculum that was developed by Dr. Rosa was implemented; it was fully aligned to the Common Core standards. He added the district had ten coaches at this time, but they were eliminated in the summer of 2018. A website for teachers was subsequently developed.

Mr. Planas said a grant was received to purchase a problem-solving program developed by Greg Tang, which is available on the website. He described training that is provided to teachers.

In response to a question, Mr. Planas said Mr. Tang and Cathy Kuhns had done a lot to help out Bridgeport, including donation of time.

Mr. Planas said he has been focusing on math training in K-2 grades in the last two years. He said iReady data for those

students indicates about 7 percent of students are on level and about one-third are raised to level by the end of the year.

Mr. Planas said iReady began as a math program and the correlation with achievement is pretty high, although less so in reading. He described it as diagnostic testing which indicates about twelve areas of student learning.

In response to a question, Mr. Planas described the use of groups of students at different levels in classrooms. Mr. Testani said there is frustration because sometimes teachers forget about students who have received a level of proficiency. Mr. Planas said the state measures the growth of high-performing students also.

Ms. Pereira said Mr. Testani made a good choice in making Mr. Planas an executive director. Mr. Planas thanked Mr. Testani for the opportunity and said he would not have taken the job with any other superintendent.

Mr. Planas said he was working with Dr. Black to make the high school curriculum more like the SAT. He said teachers are being trained on SAT-like problems. He added the statistics curriculum is being revised.

Mr. Planas said revisions to finals and midterms are also underway. A new book committee has been formed for algebra and geometry books.

Ms. Pereira said she had read national articles that indicated Common Core was leading to worse results in math. Mr. Planas said there were mixed views on this. He said he had no choice and had to ensure teachers were teaching Common Core. He said he has urged teachers to teach to

mastery. He said he believed there would be changes to Common Core soon. He added when he was teaching math at Bassick in the 1990s he was teaching what is the current day's 8th curriculum.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said a high school student is required to take three years of math for graduation.

Mr. Planas said the Math Meet 2020 would probably be relocated to Sacred Heart University. Mr. Testani said Sacred Heart's school of education was anxious to partner with the district in several areas.

Mr. Planas said board support was needed for purchase of materials, updating of computer systems, and the return of math coaches. He said Bridgeport was the only district in its DRG that did not have coaches. He said options about lead teachers are being looked at.

In response to a question, Mr. Planas said most districts have one coach in every school.

Mr. Lombard moved to postpone Item 5 until the next meeting. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 7:46 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

*Approved by the committee on February 26, 2020*