

Tuesday, September 18, 2018

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE TEACHING AND LEARNING COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held September 18, 2018, at Bridgeport City Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 5:30 p.m. Present were members Chair Ben Walker and Joseph Sokolovic. Board member Hernan Illingworth was present.

Mr. Sokolovic moved approval of the minutes of June 19, 2018. The motion was seconded by Mr. Walker and unanimously approved.

Mr. Sokolovic moved approval of the minutes of June 25, 2018. The motion was seconded by Mr. Walker and unanimously approved.

John DiDonato, chief of specialized instructional reform, introduced Veronica Lenzen, the district's interim director of planning and placement. He said Ms. Lenzen would report on state Department of Education complaints going forward.

Mr. Walker noted Ms. Lenzen was at Bridgeport Learning Center last year.

Mr. DiDonato said he believed there would be an uptick in special education complaints because in some instances the district is beginning to develop the capacity at schools to enhance their practice and the district will be challenging parental complaints that have no basis in fact.

Mr. DiDonato said the complaint against the New Beginnings charter school named the district in the complaint, but it was the charter school's obligation to develop the remedy. He said the school has provided the state department with a corrective action plan and the complaint was closed in June.

Mr. DiDonato said there was a complaint from a parent at Classical Studies who believed the district had failed to implement their child's IEP. He said the district disagreed, provided documentation, and the state department found no factual foundation for the claim and the complaint was dismissed.

Mr. DiDonato said this case was an example of enhancing the practice in the district.

Mr. DiDonato said there was a complaint by a Waltersville parent who claimed that because of a teacher vacancy the district did not provide for a safe and free and appropriate public education. He said documentation provided by the district demonstrated there was no gap in the child's instruction, and the complaint was closed and no corrective action was required.

Mr. DiDonato said there was a complaint by a Barnum School parent. There was an accurate allegation that because of some failure in practice the district had failed to provide a reading program. The complaint was accepted and a corrective action plan was developed and is being implemented, including compensatory service, through January 2020.

Mr. DiDonato said this was a complicated PPT process and the team for the most part did a really good job, however, the

team did not document their efforts to reach out to the parent when the child failed to show up.

Mr. DiDonato described a challenging PPT today that he observed that was handled by the principal with good practice.

Mr. DiDonato said the last complaint was filed by a parent of a Park City Magnet student who claimed the school had failed to conduct an annual review meeting. It turned that was accurate and a corrective action plan has been implemented.

Mr. DiDonato said Make the Road Connecticut, an advocacy group in Connecticut, had appeared before the board on many occasions. He said disability rights advocates from the Center for Children's Advocacy contacted Dr. Johnson in July on behalf of Make the Road Connecticut. He said he was requested by the superintendent to respond on her behalf, and he met with the attorneys and the director of Make the Road Connecticut. He said the Center of Children's Advocacy is a national organization based in New York City and San Francisco. He said this was a serious matter that needed to be addressed. They are alleging that under federal and state requirements the district is failing to consistently implement its obligation to provide translation services to English-language learners and their parents. He said they suggested a structured settlement agreement as opposed to filing a lawsuit against the district based on noncompliance.

Mr. DiDonato said they believe they have made efforts to engage the district to correct the situation and they believed the district had moved substantially enough to do that. He

said in the meeting they pressed for a legal binding agreement to implement what they see as compliance.

Mr. Walker said the district has to take affirmative steps to ensure that a student with limited English proficiency can meaningfully participate in the educational services. Mr. DiDonato said the district has taken affirmative steps.

Mr. DiDonato said he attended some of the PPT meetings with representatives from Make the Road. They are alleging the way the translation services are provided district-wide is very uneven. He said the biggest challenge regarding interpreters is the concept of ethics, which indicates interpreters should be neutral. One allegation is the district employees and staff such as social workers who are interpreting are not neutral or have inadequate academic knowledge.

Mr. DiDonato said the challenge is to train staff to be able to provide translation services and how we're going to guarantee a level of ethics.

Mr. Walker said the district hired a company called Linguistica, which was going to handle translation services at all PPT and IEP meetings. Mr. DiDonato said we are doing that, however, the allegation is the implementation is uneven across the district.

Mr. Walker said he thought the district had taken affirmative leaps, not affirmative steps, in this area. He said the board went with Linguistica because of the neutrality issue.

Mr. DiDonato said he is willing to work with them to develop a plan that assures we're going to meet their requirements. Mr. Walker said he had a problem with being legally bound

to do what a nonprofit advocacy organization tells the district to do.

Mr. DiDonato said the district's attorneys vetted the proposed agreement and said it was appropriate to avoid litigation.

In response to a question, Mr. DiDonato said information could be gathered on the number of PPTs and number of requests for interpreters. He said this was going to be a costly program. He said we need to demonstrate to the group that we train our staff such that they can do the interpretation. He said he emphasized to Make the Road that every time we expend resources on mandated services it means some non-mandated service is going to be reduced.

Mr. Walker noted Make the Road's efforts about sidewalks, streets and crossing guards are not the responsibility of the board.

Mr. DiDonato said he would prefer using the district's own staff to the Linguistica interpreters because of the dynamics of an IEP meeting. He said he hoped they would allow us to develop a plan to provide internal interpretation.

In response to a question, Mr. DiDonato said this is to address their allegations of noncompliance with existing regulations. He said he believed they're looking for the district to develop a plan that demonstrates our intentionality to be in compliance with the law.

In response to a question, Mr. DiDonato said part of his long-term plan to provide support to school leaders is to establish this year a team to participate in a PPT where formal or informal observations of principals will be done.

Assistant Superintendent Dr. Christiana Otuwa said in most cases the principals are giving support to students in PPTs and we are trying to emphasize and embed support.

Mr. DiDonato said the team approach is going to be the real focus because it is a way to support that is holistic.

Mr. Walker said the bottom line is we want the best for our students. He said it sounded like Dr. Otuwa was going to add an extra layer for PPTs and IEPs.

Mr. Walker said it sounded like this group approached Dr. Johnson and said we're going to hit you over the head with a lawsuit unless you listen to what we're telling you to do, as opposed to coming with suggestions on how to make it better and offering to work with us.

Mr. DiDonato said he told the attorneys involved that he was part of famous cases in New York City about bilingual services that were part of things they learned in law books.

Mr. Walker said the eight-bullet list of what the district has done is incredible.

Mr. DiDonato suggested Ana Souza Martins, director of bilingual education and world languages, make a presentation at the committee next month on the translation issue.

Dr. Otuwa said she believed from working with Make the Road it's an issue of trust with the parents. Mr. Walker noted Ms. Pereira spoke with the Make the Road group at the last meeting. He added sidewalks are not under the jurisdiction of the board.

Mr. Illingworth suggested sitting down with Make the Road and having a dialogue. Mr. Sokolovic said he told Make the Road he would go with them to city hall to bring the issue to the City Council. He said he was not sure they know how to have an ally.

Mr. DiDonato said he believed Make the Road's main focus is to have the district demonstrate its intentionality and professional development for employees to do the right thing. He said he was waiting to be contacted to schedule a meeting with Make the Road.

In response to a question, Mr. DiDonato said he had nothing new to report on obtaining a facility in the district for special education students in out-of-district placements. Mr. Walker said he believed if we do it right we can beat anything they can get out of district.

Mr. DiDonato said as a result of reorganization efforts this year three students are scheduled to return to the district from out-of-district placements. Mr. Walker said there were friends and allies on the City Council who might be helpful to the board in the effort.

Alicia Robinson, director of performing and visual arts, said she had a lot to report. She said a lot of her work is to change the mindset to viewing arts as something that is essential, not special or extra. She said the district's strategic plan includes arts as one goal for parent and community engagement.

Ms. Robinson said the theme for the arts going forward is access, quality and impact. Access is tied into personnel and making sure there are certified art and music teachers in all

schools. She said there are 44 certified music teachers, 51 certified visual arts teachers, a culinary arts teacher at Harding and one certified media arts teacher at Harding. There is a part-time elementary art teacher that is a long-term substitute and a fulltime media arts long-term sub at Fairchild Wheeler.

Ms. Robinson said there is a music vacancy at Bassick and a .2 vacancy at Bridgeport Learning Center. She said a music course at Bassick has been suspended for the fall while recruiting goes on for a fulltime teacher in January. Students are able to take music electives; just not Introduction to Music.

In response to a question, Ms. Robinson said there is a long-term sub at Fairchild Wheeler because the content area is difficult to find a certification in. She said the building leader asked the teacher to return to the school as a long-term sub, even though he doesn't hold a music certification or a tech educational certification. Students do engage in music production, videography, photography and composing their own music. She said the teacher has the qualifications but not the credential.

In response to a question, Ms. Robinson said the teacher seems to be happy being a long-term sub. She added he would have to go back to school for a certification in music or technical education. Mr. Walker suggested investigating alternate routes to certification for this teacher.

Mr. Illingworth said the board wanted to get away from the practice of having certified staff, not long-term subs.



Mr. Walker noted out-of-state certified teachers cannot jump right into Connecticut classrooms due to Connecticut standards.

Ms. Robinson said there are 2.2 arts vacancies. There was an unexpected resignation at Bassick in art, a vacancy at Central and a .2 vacancy at Bridgeport Learning Center. The vacancies are being filled by subs while certified teachers are sought.

Ms. Robinson said there was a arts camp funded by the Bigelow family from July 3 to July 31 which included 78.75 days of art instruction, which is equivalent to about 12 weeks of instruction during the school year. Survey results of parents, staff and parents were positive.

Ms. Robinson said there are area arts organizations that are offering afterschool programming to district schools at no cost. She has also been working with organizations to provide arts-based exposure to students. She said about 2,100 students will be able to attend Act I of a rehearsal of the opera *Aida* at the Klein.

Ms. Robinson said Benny Wallace will be performing a young people's jazz concert in the spring. Schools have signed up to participate in the Meet the Orchestra series put on by the Pequot Library. The Greater Bridgeport Symphony Orchestra's new conductor has been visiting schools to engage students. Students will be invited to open rehearsals as well at the Klein.

Ms. Robinson said the U.S. Marine Corps band that will come to Shelton for the Columbus Day parade are trying to put on a performance/clinic at Central High for students. The

Klein is also offering the district 500 tickets to a show called *Ben*.

Ms. Robinson said Fairfield University's center for the arts is also offering free tickets to performances and considering bringing artists to schools for presentations.

In response to a question, Ms. Robinson said she had spoken to Nadira Clarke about establishing a Go Fund Me for funds for student transportation to these arts opportunities. She noted the cost of a bus is \$144 for a trip.

Mr. Walker said he was excited by all these developments and noted Benny Wallace is big time in the jazz world.

Ms. Robinson distributed the 2018-19 district calendar. She said her office in collaboration with adult education took this over from Delores Mason, whose position was cut.

Ms. Robinson said there are six Turnaround Arts schools. The artist for Bryant School is still to be determined. The Fairchild County Cultural Alliance is working with the Bijou Theater on a fundraising screening of the documentary *Purple Dreams*. She described other upcoming arts events and opportunities for students.

Ms. Robinson said music teacher Sheena Graham of Harding High is a finalist for Connecticut Teacher of the Year.

Mr. Walker asked Ms. Robinson to include him on her email list. Ms. Robinson said she believed Bernie Williams would be making a visit to the district in the fall.

The next agenda item was on the replacement of Lexia and myON. Dr. Melissa Jenkins, director of literacy, said the district discontinued myOn due to budget constraints. She said it was used for K-9 students for the last three years. Students read over a million books over that period.

Dr. Jenkins said a replacement has not been identified yet, but free online text-based programs are being explored with the assessment department, data management and IT. She said over the next two months the pros and cons of the free programs will be looked at. She said it was important to determine if the free use allows free district-level examination of data.

In response to a question, Dr. Jenkins said none of the free programs are as rich in features as myON.

Dr. Jenkins said she applied for a federal grant which included funding for myON for Grades 3 to 6. The grant includes a science component and professional development for media specialists. She said she sees Nadira Clarke frequently and looks on her own for grant opportunities as well.

In response to a question, Dr. Jenkins said the cost of myOn was a total of \$500,000 for three years. She said another grant she is pursuing provides transportation for children to the public libraries.

Mr. Walker described myOn as collateral damage to the budget cuts that we had to endure. He said the biggest thing the software programs do is they're educationally focused and grade-level appropriate, which would not be the case with the public library.

Dr. Jenkins said public librarians are willing to come to the schools and host children at libraries, but there is a fine line with scheduling. She noted some students at schools like Black Rock and Claytor can walk to libraries. She said there was a school-level initiative at Waltersville to get every student a library card.

JoAnn Kennedy was recognized. She said the public library participated in the recent Harding open house.

Mr. Illingworth said the district had to also build its own libraries and have them available to students after school.

Mr. Walker said the cost to upgrade school libraries would be much more than funding myON. He said the budget situation was complicated since there are things that will never be cut because they are state or federally mandated.

Mr. Illingworth said the board may have to revisit its decision to cut myON; he suggested the board keep its eye on the situation.

Mr. Walker said he was proud to see during his tenure on the board growth in reading, math and SAT scores. He said he was still waiting to see the impact of things that were cut such as kindergarten paraprofessionals.

Mr. Walker said the loss of Lexia directly affects some of our most needful children in the area of reading.

Dr. Jenkins said the collaboration concept with the public library is possible, but she could not estimate the timeline right now. She said the former literacy coach and the medial specialist worked together at Waltersville as a family engagement initiative to get all students library cards.

Dr. Jenkins said Lexia was still available through December 31st. MobyMax, which is used to support math, has a phonics component and will be in use until June 2019. She said some schools have begun to purchase it on their own with School Improvement Grants.

Mr. Walker said this committee would like to see both of these back in the budget because they directly affect our students. He noted all education stems from being able to read. He said he would keep the issue on the front burner and if he hears money is available he will suggest it be spent on myON.

Mr. DiDonato said Dr. Johnson asked that he share with the committee the issue of the district's continuing participation with the Council of Great City Schools at the cost of \$31,000.

Mr. Illingworth noted this began under Supt. Vallas. He said he wasn't sure what we had seen from it. Mr. Walker noted Ms. Baraka and her committee put on a successful forum on Males of Color.

Dr. Jenkins said the Males of Color committee has been meeting informally and presented at a summit in Trumbull last year. She said it was previously treated as an ad hoc committee of the board.

Mr. Walker and Mr. Illingworth suggested further research be done on the status of ad hoc committees.

Mr. Walker said continued membership in the Council is a great idea and helps us with the work that has been done.

In response to a question, Dr. Otuwa said Great City Schools offers workshops and forums for boards of education. Mr. Illingworth said he believed the board itself needed professional development.

Mr. Sokolovic said the Great City Schools seemed more of an administrators' type of group. He noted CAFE offered professional development for board members.

Dr. Otuwa said the school districts where she has been have been members of Great City Schools.

Mr. Walker said he was in favor of it because of his support for the work of Ms. Baraka and the makeup of our district. He said someone is going to have to stand in front of the other board members and answer questions as to why we're spending \$31,000.

Mr. Walker recommended someone contact Ms. Baraka and have her speak in favor.

Dr. Otuwa said the interaction from being a member of Great City Schools is valuable.

Mr. DiDonato said he will share with Dr. Johnson that there's an appetite for approval on the part of some board members but there needs to be someone to speak in favor of its efficacy.

Mr. Sokolovic said it seemed the ad hoc committee was unable to come up with any money. Dr. Jenkins said the ad hoc committee had attempted to apply for grants offered through the Council of Great City Schools, but has not been successful. She said Ms. Clarke has been involved in seeking grants.

Dr. Otuwa said membership helps schools on how to structure its programs by looking at programs in other schools.

Mr. Walker said the e-mails he received from Ms. Baraka via the ad hoc committee from Great City Schools were great and informative.

Mr. Illingworth said in principle he supports it, but if we're not using it to its full advantage we may be paying \$30,000 for nothing.

Mr. Walker said he knows that Dr. Johnson supports the expenditure.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 7:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod