

Tuesday, November 17, 2020

MINUTES OF THE TEACHING & LEARNING COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held November 17, 2020, by video conference call, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:01 p.m. Present were members Chair Joe Sokolovic, Joseph Lombard, and Sybil Allen. Board chair John Weldon and board member Albert Benejan joined the meeting subsequently as noted.

Superintendent Michael J. Testani was present.

Ms. Allen moved to approve the committee's minutes of October 20, 2020. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was a special education report. Rob Arnold, executive director of specialized education, said in-district resource students who receive special ed transportation went up by three people this month to 148.

Mr. Arnold said the current count of special education students is 4275, but might include an additional 200 students when the final submissions are made to the state.

Mr. Arnold described the amount of evaluations conducted compared to last year. He noted there were a lot of complications to the process in compiling the numbers. He described his communication with the state about the delay in providing the data.

Mr. Weldon joined the meeting.

Mr. Arnold noted the out-of-district placements in The University School are prepaid slots, so there are no additional costs. He said there are no residential placements out of district of the current total of 256 students. He said the total changes on a daily basis, sometimes due to court or DCF placements.

In response to a question, Mr. Arnold said The University School has both special education and expelled students. Supt. Testani said there are no expelled students this year because of the remote option and going forward that will be an option for expelled students.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the Bridgeport juvenile detention center is run by the district, although not all students are Bridgeport residents. He said numbers are way down this year due to COVID. He said the current count is about 21 children receiving education.

Mr. Arnold said there are no open complaints. He said the department is down 17 certified special education teachers and Ms. Siegel has agreed to hire employees at \$38.50 an hour for three hours each day to cover the needed evaluations. A retired bilingual teacher is helping with bilingual evaluations.

In response to a question, Mr. Arnold said special education teachers cannot be found. Some postings result in no applications.

Supt. Testani said the shortened remote days on Wednesdays will provide opportunities to hold more PPTs and to catch up on paperwork.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said he attributed the excellent work of the staff to lack of complaints.

The next agenda item was a review of social-emotional learning. Dementred Young, director of social work , presented a report.

Mr. Young reviewed the work of social workers. He said they do assessments and diagnosis of students for special education services; crisis intervention; navigate systems for students and parents; coordinate with teachers; provide intervention and debriefing for bullying; individual and group counseling with students experiencing difficulties; and they eliminate mental health and social barriers that are impacting learning. He said the main goal of social work is to eliminate any barriers that impact student learning.

Mr. Young said there are 39 social workers in the district, although a whole more are needed. Ten work in the high schools, one is devoted to teen pregnancy, and 75 percent of the social workers cover more than one school.

Mr. Young said the pandemic has led to loss of employment and homelessness among parents. He said there has been a loss of sense of security for some students.

Mr. Young said anxiety, stress, and depression are three key issues facing some students. He said a lot of kids can't wrap their minds around the pandemic. He said often students report having headaches unexplained by any other means. Bedwetting and sleeplessness have also been encountered.

Mr. Young said social workers do cognitive behavioral therapy, which is different from psychotherapy. Cognitive behavioral therapy deals with the here and now. Social

workers receive trauma-informed school training, including on implicit biases.

Mr. Young described the social-emotional learning activities going on. He described the use of guided meditation for students.

Mr. Young said if a social worker feels the needs of a student are not being met, the student is referred to outside services for psychotherapy(which is not available in schools). When there are safety issues, DCF will be called.

In response to a question, Mr.. Young said students seen by social workers often accomplish their goals and some do not require social work anymore. Mr. Young noted he used to work with Ms. Allen at Read School.

Mr. Benejan joined the meeting.

In response to a question, Mr. Young said he would provide numbers on DCF referrals. He said each social worker, teacher or principal can call DCF at any time, but the amount of referrals have never been compiled.

In response to a question, Mr. Young said there has been training on abuse and neglect for the social workers and he would look into the signs that could be seen via remote interactions.

In response to a question, Mr. Young said school social workers and school nurses do not help adults. EAP services are available to employees. Supt. Testani said the Dailo foundation has paid for a ten-part series for teachers and staff members to receive social-emotional support throughout the school year.

In response to a question, Mr. Young said students dealing with someone with COVID is categorized as an acute trauma, which social workers work on. He said social workers should not work on pervasive or chronic trauma, which is something that is addressed outside of school in psychotherapy. Students with that issue would be referred out.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said the district could use an easy dozen additional social workers in the district, along with more school counselors. He said he described it as operating on a shoestring in a state meeting today when a life raft is needed. He said additional issues may be uncovered when full in-person school resumes.

In response to a question, Mr. Young said employees are trained that DCF should only be contacted if there are serious allegations of abuse and neglect. He said in the past the “serious” aspect of this was not always present.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 6:49 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod