

Tuesday, March 20, 2018

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE TEACHING AND LEARNING COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held March 20, 2018, at Bridgeport City Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 5:31 p.m. Present were members Chair Ben Walker and Joseph Sokolovic. Board member Chris Taylor was present. Committee member Maria Pereira arrived subsequently as noted.

Mr. Sokolovic moved approval of the committee's minutes of February 20, 2018. The motion was seconded by Mr. Walker and unanimously approved.

John DiDonato, chief of specialized instructional reform, stated this month there is a new state Department of Education complaint against a Bridgeport charter school. The charter school is responsible for resolving the complaint, but the board has jurisdiction over the delivery of special education services at the school.

Mr. DiDonato said he wrote each of the parents who have children at the charter school who are not receiving special education services now indicating that should they choose to enroll their children in district schools we are prepared to provide the special education services that their children are not receiving. He said the basis of the complaint is because a teacher is no longer available and they have been unable to fill the vacancy.

In response to a question, Mr. DiDonato said the district pays for the special education teacher, however, the charter school has been unable to recruit one. The payments are not made when the position is not filled.

Mr. DiDonato said the way the law is written the district pays for the service, but does not do the hiring. He said this does not speak well

of the charter school and the state does a review of charter schools and this incident will be noted.

In response to a question, Mr. DiDonato said he believed the school had 18 special education students. He said he did not have specific numbers, but said he believes the special education caseload was comparable to the district's. He said the special education children in charter schools are typically moderately disabled, with mild behavioral or learning challenges.

Mr. DiDonato said once the charter school parents receive his letter that may encourage other parents to be engaged on the issue.

Mr. DiDonato then discussed early childhood education and special education in general. He said academic success in the early grades is well documented. Students who are behaviorally or learning challenged do best when we do interventions at an early age.

Michelle Matera, supervisor of preschool special education and Skane School, thanked the committee members for visiting the school. Ms. Matera said Skane School has 250 students, fifty percent of whom are children with special needs.

Ms. Matera said, in 2016-17, 498 children from ages three to five were referred to the Consultation Center from doctors, parents, a teacher or DCF or other agencies. Once the referral is made, the district has to investigate the student. She said there are very strict timelines. The entire process must be completed with children in the Birth to Three transition on or before their third birthday. Children from the Consultation Center have a 45-day timeline in which services have to be ready to go.

Ms. Matera said there are smaller, self-contained classes for children who are suspected to be on the autism spectrum or medically fragile. Four teachers go out to the community preschools to deliver special education services. There is also a parent-child program for children that have behavioral challenges, especially in the home.

Ms. Matera said the biggest challenge in special education is we're not mirroring what general education is doing in terms of a full-day

program. Students with significant challenges are only given a half day. She said these students do need a full day, but it often ends up with a parent wanting an out-of-district program, which can cost up to \$86,000.

Ms. Matera gave the example of a medically fragile student who has autism and has several reports indicating he needs out-of-district programs. Through discussions with the parent, an additional hour a day at Skane was offered and the parent decided to keep the child in Skane.

Mr. DiDonato said Skane is a very special place, which makes the one hour very valuable. He said we are providing the child with programs comparable to that which he would receive in Greenwich.

Ms. Matera said we know how to educate these children, but there is a challenge of not having a full day when all other four year-olds in the district get full-day preschool. She said this is a constant battle at the table at PPTs with attorneys and advocates. They're not knocking our programs, but the availability of only two and a half hours compared to six hours and twenty minutes.

Ms. Matera said there is not one opening for a three- year-old due to a lack of programming and resources. She said there are problems with speech and language services and occupational therapy. She noted the incidence of autism has increased; all autistic children receive speech and language services. Mr. DiDonato said we're able to maintain the mandated speech services that are described by IEPs, however, we haven't created a language-based program for students who need that kind of program in terms of good practice.

Ms. Matera said once children transition to kindergarten they may struggle due to the lack of highly trained teachers. In the case of the charter school it could be there was just no one out there to fill the position. She said the district runs into the same problem; there is a very small pool of potential teachers. She said we fill the most challenging classrooms with the least experienced teachers.

Ms. Matera said the children who go outside of the district for services are typically lost until they turn 21. She said this is frustrating because we know how to provide the services they need.

Ms. Pereira arrived at the meeting.

Mr. DiDonato said we're competing with other communities and they can offer better salaries to teachers. Recently, a school psychologist who was doing a fine job was offered \$35,000 more to move to another district. He said we need to be competitive in what we're offering teachers. He said it's not just the money, but also the working conditions, caseload, and the supportive nature of the school.

In response to a question, Mr. DiDonato said the main grant is the federal IDEA grant, which funds between 17 to 18 percent of special education. The federal grant does not fund a major portion of the mandates that are required. The remainder of the funding is through the state.

Mr. DiDonato said this is not just a Bridgeport issue; the prevalence rate for special education in the state is approaching a very critical level in large urban areas. He said other large cities have higher prevalence rates than Bridgeport. He said he didn't know if that is a good thing or a bad thing.

Mr. DiDonato said something has to change in Connecticut or else we're going to have school systems where 30 percent of the students are identified as special education. This will divert pre-referral services like literacy coaches, math coaches, and interventionists.

Ms. Pereira said what she hears breaks her heart

Mr. Taylor said there should be approaches to the state legislative delegation for new legislation. He said after his visited he saw that Skane School was held together by Scotch tape and Band-Aids and that Ms. Matera was utilizing every ounce of real estate in the school. He said Ms. Matera should get a new school before Classical Studies gets a new school.

Ms. Pereira said a lot of special education laws are federal.

Ms. Pereira left the meeting.

Mr. Walker said it breaks his heart to see our most needy students being shortchanged. He said the problem needs to be solved at the state legislature.

Supt. Aresta L. Johnson, Ed.D., arrived at the meeting.

Mr. Sokolovic moved that item four be moved up to consideration next. The motion was seconded by Mr. Walker and unanimously approved.

The agenda item was discussion on educating our children to interact with the police and other authority figures.

Mr. Taylor said finance was his specialty, not education. He said if he's out of line, he apologizes, but it is from the warmth of his heart.

Mr. Taylor said he had had many controversies with the police and has been beaten up by the police, as well as beating some police officers up. He said his life became easier after he learned how the system worked after a presentation by Officer Dave Daniels. He said he lives in a predominantly African-American community and was often pulled over by the police. He said once his demeanor changed, the officers' demeanors changed a little bit. He said he learned when he escalated the situation one step, the police take it ten steps. He said he also learned in court case after court case that nothing will ever happen to the police officer.

Mr. Taylor said officers in the academy are shoot to kill; they're not looking to wound you when they draw their weapon. He said he came to learn that he was fighting a contest he was not going to win. He said our youth of Bridgeport and people of color have been suffering with this.

Mr. Taylor said nowhere is it punishable by death to be driving a car without a license or possibly a stolen vehicle. He said in light of Jayson Negrón's death, we need teach children at a young age how to deal with the police and avoid problems. He said he would love it if

the education could begin in first grade. He said it will alleviate a lot of tension once you understand how the system works.

Mr. Taylor said he just wanted to share what he had experienced and indicated he left it to the board and the administrators to figure how to do it best.

Dr. Johnson said years ago this fell under the science department when we had additional grants of funding for science and health, including the DARE program, which has the police officers interacting with the students in the elementary grades. This program is no longer funded.

Dr. Johnson said there is a Junior Responders program that is very active at Discover Magnet School. She said Bridgeport officers provide workshops in the high schools to prevent negative interactions.

Dr. Johnson said there is a planned Learn to Live initiative at Housatonic Community college about to interacting with police officers.

Dr. Johnson said conversations would have to continue about long-term goals, but this is what exists in pockets across the district.

Mr. Taylor said his interaction with the police department began in fifth grade. He said he didn't know if the police were the right ones to provide the instruction given the Latino and African-American history. He said he only sees men of color being shot, although he was not trying to put a race card in. He said at some point it has to stop with the brutality in the police department.

Dr. Johnson said the police also present at Beardsley School, an elementary school. She said teachers don't have a law enforcement background and it is important that students develop relationships with police that are positive. She said she has three brothers and raised a son and she understands the different challenges. She said community policing can be beefed up.

Mr. Taylor said officers like Nick Ortiz, Dave Daniels or Harold Dimbo are not the majority of the police department. He said people like Brian Fitzgerald aren't pro-community. He said his cousin was a patrol officer and had a great relationship with people on Stratford Avenue, but was transferred out of the district the minute she got along with the community.

Dr. Johnson said as a mom and a woman of color Mr. Taylor's experiences are not foreign to her. She said she did not want negative experiences for other children. She said in an effort to be proactive it's important that we work with the police. She said she had been on the receiving end and in no way was she wearing rose-colored glasses. She said she had often worried about her son, as any parent does.

Ms. Pereira returned to the meeting.

Mr. Walker said he would like some more proactive steps. He said Bridgeport is a unique community. He said he would like to see a way of doing more community policing and connection with police officers. He said he can envision in elementary school 3rd grade boys and one police officer sitting around talking. He said if it helps one boy to get through life without getting shot or having a negative interaction with law enforcement it would be valuable. He said he would like to see the staff come up with some creative proactive steps.

Mr. Sokolovic said the police haven't been trained to deal with children, so they may need professional development on how to deal with children in schools.

Ms. Pereira said there was a lot of mistrust in Bridgeport with the police department. She said she finds they're often not very respectful in dealing with students. She said she had had firsthand experience with this.

Ms. Pereira said Ms. Baraka was adamant that the teaching of children should not be done by the Bridgeport Police Department because there is already a lot of tension. She said another possibility is using probation officers, who don't wear uniforms, as facilitators.

She said the police officers could be very intimidating to the students and it might not lead to open dialogue.

Dr. Johnson asked the board members to trust her judgment and her team to come up with some concepts. She said it would have to be a team approach with the police. She said kids feed off of adults; if children perceive the mindset of us against them, they will see that.

Ms. Pereira suggested perhaps the police not use uniformed officers to do the training.

Dr. Johnson said some board members don't know her background, but she is not disconnected from this. She said she understands the challenges our children face. She said we'll work together to have something in place.

Mr. Taylor said he couldn't ask for any more than that.

Dr. Johnson noted there is nothing out there for kids to do after they leave school. She said idle hands and idle minds will be busy and get into something. She said the community needed to see there are programs for students after school.

Mr. Taylor and Dr. Johnson left the meeting.

The next item was a report on curriculum for library and media centers. Assistant Superintendent Dr. Deborah Santacapita said she thought there was someone assigned to do the report, but no one seemed to be present.

Mr. Sokolovic moved to postpone the report on library and media center curriculum to a time to be determined. The motion was seconded by Ms. Pereira and unanimously approved.

Mr. Walker said he would send out again the items he envisioned being on future agendas. He said a report on the performing and visual arts at the last meeting was a nice insight into what is happening in the district in that area. He said future topics included Next General Science Standards and science across the curriculum.

The next two agenda items were on the proposed textbooks (paired with a DVD series) for the Latin/Caribbean American History and African-American history courses that will begin in the fall.

Dr. Santacapita said committee members present included Jay Lipp and Angela Bhushan, director of science. She said research was done, two excellent books were found and vetted by the committee. She said it was challenging to find a book that addressed history through the lenses of different people. She said university experts vetted the books as well.

Dr. Santacapita said both books were published in 2013 and cover a five hundred-year span, right to the present day. She said the vendors of many of our educational material are not caught up to the present.

The two books are *The African Americans: Many Rivers to Cross* by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Donald Yacovone, and *Latino-Americans: The 500-year Legacy that Shaped a Nation* by Ray Suarez.

Dr. Santacapita said Henry L. Gates was very active in our political arena. She said that book encompasses many continents, venues and is transnational, including the experiences of all black people.

Dr. Santacapita said it is hard to remove bias from history, noting history is mostly written by men even though most of us are not. She said the books also encompass differences of opinion. She said PBS is involved in the books and the committee found PBS provides free online services such as lessons and videos.

Dr. Santacapita said the DVD series for each book are six hours long and aligned with the book. She said she was very proud of the efforts to locate the texts with very little money.

Mr. Lipp said college textbooks approached \$150 to \$200, while these books are priced under \$20, but still accomplish what we need to do. The online resources and DVDs supplement it well. Dr. Santacapita said the decision was not made on price; they were the best of what we could find.

Ms. Pereira said it's really important that these books and the curriculum be really honest. She said she read recently a mother found a textbook that described slaves as volunteers. She also cited the changing views of how Columbus is viewed.

Mr. Lipp said we went to a university professor to make sure we had was the best. Dr. David Canton of Connecticut College did training for staff last week and he suggested this book. Mr. Lipp said experts were consulted on the best way to educate the children. He said the less that is spent on textbooks, the more that can be spent on training staff. Dr. Santacapita said she would send Dr. Canton's bio to Mr. Walker.

Mr. Lipp said a recommendation from Dr. Canton coincided with the book the committee had already identified.

Dr. Santacapita said Dr. Canton recommended an expert in Latin American history. This expert, Dr. Elizabeth Garcia of Connecticut College, also recommended two books, one of which was the book had the committee had identified.

Dr. Santacapita said the African-American text costs \$15.46 on Amazon, a price that Barnes & Noble has matched. She said 800 of each book will be ordered. The cost of the Latin American book is \$14.53 each. She said at most a hundred DVDs for the African-American course at \$17.77 will be ordered; while the Latino Americans DVD is \$17.84, and a similar number will be ordered.

Dr. Santacapita said it is hoped to use the \$26,000 savings on textbooks on technology. She noted a lot of students do not have laptops.

JoAnn Kennedy was recognized. She said when the idea of course began it was black history, but the textbook chosen starts here in America. She said we have history before starting here as slaves. She added by not having parents on the committee it was a totally different look. She recommenced the four-part series DVD called *Hidden Colors*, which covers before we got to America. She said the choice was totally unacceptable.

Councilwoman Karen Jackson was recognized. She said since 2008 as a parent she has been pushing two books, including *The Young People's American History* by Howard Zinn. She said she taught the book in Marin School and had no problem with it. She said she had been ignored for ten years after recommending this book.

Ms. Jackson said she recommenced a book by Juan Gonzalez on Latin American history. She said this suggestion was ignored as well.

Ms. Jackson said even though 95 percent of the children at Marin School were Latino, they had no idea who Luis Marin was. She said no one knows who the state heroine, Prudence Crandall, is as well.

Mr. Walker said he read the Howard Zinn book and *Harvest of Empire* and both were excellent. He said he was not sure of their appropriateness for a semester course. Ms. Jackson said Penguin Books would give copies of the Zinn book for free.

Mr. Walker said it's standard practice for a district to have its own curriculum and textbooks committees without parental input. He said he brought the books recommenced by Ms. Jackson to the committee. He said he would trust their decision-making. He noted nothing was permanent and the books could be changed.

Mr. Walker said the committee went to experts in the field. He noted the classes are intended to be introductory, a one-semester class. He said he respected Ms. Kennedy's opinions, but we have to move forward because this is what our experts have told us is best.

Ms. Kennedy urged the course go back to Egypt and Africa. Mr. Walker said we cannot teach the entire course of African-Americans in one semester.

Ms. Pereira suggested plans be considered to take students to the Smithsonian in Washington, including the new museum, or if not, at least to a museum in New York. Dr. Santacapita said the grant had nothing in it about field trips, although it could be requested in a subsequent application.

Mr. Lipp said the course was envisioned as one of a three-part approach, which could be expanded to middle school and then a year-long course in high school.

Dr. Santacapita said the expert felt the Perspectives on Race course would drive the other two books and courses.

Mr. Walker said he and Ms. Baraka had many conversations about this and she wanted to have a full-blown history course, but she understood the tightness of the curriculum and the need to take a step forward. Mr. Walker said it was a huge leap forward because we're one of only two districts in the country that have taken this step.

Ms. Pereira suggested partnership with the NAACP and the Greater Bridgeport Latino Network on potential field trips and/or fundraising. Mr. Lipp said a field trip would be an excellent way to culminate the year and reward students. He described the museum in Washington as incredible. Assistant Superintendent Janet Brown-Clayton said the museum in Washington requires more than a day to take it all in.

Ms. Pereira said she would be willing to chaperone field trips and aid in fundraising efforts.

Mr. Walker said he put the textbooks item on the agenda of the next board meeting and said he would support adoption of them. Dr. Santacapita said she would ask the district committee to be present at the board meeting. She noted it was a multiracial committee.

Mr. Walker said he and Ms. Baraka were very pleased Mr. Lipp spearheaded getting the committee started.

Mr. Lipp said he could ask Ms. Clarke to pursue a grant that might help with the possibility of field trips similar to one submitted for technology.

Ms. Pereira suggested retired firefighter Craig Kelly in Bridgeport as a resource. He posts on Facebook about black history and has a large collection of memorabilia about slavery. He is also a possible guest speaker.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 7:10 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

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