

Tuesday, January 16, 2018

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE TEACHING AND LEARNING COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held January 16, 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, Joseph Sokolovic and Maria Pereira. Board member Hernan Illingworth was present. Board members Jessica Martinez, Sybil Allen and John Weldon arrived subsequently as noted.

Supt. Aresta L. Johnson, Ed.D., was present.

Ms. Pereira moved to approve the committee's minutes of November 16, 2017. The motion was seconded by Mr. Walker. The motion was approved by a 1-0. Voting in favor was Mr. Walker. Ms. Pereira and Mr. Sokolovic abstained.

John DiDonato, director of specialized instruction reform, reported on special education compliance and programming. He said a formal complaint resolution document from the state Department of Education was received in December regarding the systemic complaint which was discussed last year.

Mr. DiDonato said a state Department of Education complaint from October that related to services at a high school was also resolved in December.

Mr. DiDonato then discussed the complaint process. He said complaints are created through the IEPs that are developed by the district. Each year in October the district uploads all of our IEPs to the state. This year 3,984 IEPs were submitted. About 3,300 of the IEPs were found to be in compliance. Of the remaining records, there were 666 that were problematic that had to be reviewed carefully by the district's staff. After amendments to clerical errors, 500 were accepted by the state, leaving 166 that had significant non-

compliance. Every record represents a potential complaint by the state or a parent.

Mr. DiDonato said as we think about reorganizing special instruction we have to consider how we support schools such that we don't have this level of non-compliance. A noncompliant IEP has consequences beyond a state complaint. A parent who contests specialized instructions has to receive what is called due process. The parents have to show that the district doesn't have the ability to implement the IEP and is requesting state intervention. The first step of that process is mediation.

Mr. DiDonato said there was a mediation in the district last week where the IEP had significant noncompliance, so if the mediation was unsuccessful a state hearing officer would probably find on behalf of the parent. In this case, there was successful mediation by offering an alternative program to the parent.

In response to a question, Mr. DiDonato said the hundred or so noncompliant IEPs have issues with timeliness of the evaluation and the provision of transition services for high school-level students. He said he anticipated requests from the state for corrective action regarding the noncompliant IEPs. He said he would report to the committee on that process.

Mr. DiDonato said last year the focus was on building up capacity at the school level. He said back in 2014 the district entered into an agreement with CREC to do a review of specialized instruction. He said the majority of challenges that were identified in the report remain. He said greater support for teachers was needed as opposed to an administrative model from the central office.

Mr. DiDonato said he could probably report at the next meeting on the status of his plans. He said the CREC report contained a model of supervision that is well beyond the current resources of the district. He said he had a philosophical difference with their approach; he said central office works best when it supports school and has certain expectations, but running programs from central office doesn't work.

Mr. Walker said he read the CREC report. He said CES did a similar report on Greenwich. He said he agrees it looks very much top-down. He added that he was totally in support of Mr. DiDonato's efforts to turn things around and said he was on the right track.

Mr. Walker said in his report he would say we see a better way to address the district's needs than the CREC report.

In response to a question, Mr. DiDonato said greater support for teachers includes support during PPTs, looking at how teachers develop IEPs, and continuing to check in with them during school visits.

In response to a question, Mr. DiDonato said he believed the person most responsible for seeing IEPs are compliant is the school principal. He said it can be as simple as the principal meeting with the special education staff once week and asking if the IEPs are in compliance.

Ms. Pereira said ultimately whether schools run well are a reflection on the principal and they need to be held accountable. She said they make substantial sums of money, but the accountability they are held to has been lacking for a long time.

Ms. Pereira said Mr. DiDonato inherited an absolute mess. She said she has seen the situation has claimed down since Mr. DiDonato took over. Mr. DiDonato said he had put his finger in the dike, but the situation still needs to be fixed.

Mr. DiDonato noted under Dr. Johnson's leadership there are IEP audits done on a regular basis, where a sample of IEPs are pulled on school visits. Supt. Johnson said during the visits noted in the District at a Glance five files are inspected at random. Additionally, there is an external audit team that goes out from the special education department.

Mr. Walker said he knows Mr. DiDonato does not have a magic wand.

The next item was on progress on the creation African-American and Caribbean-Latin American studies courses.

Assistant Superintendent Dr. Deborah Santacapita and Jay Lipp were present.

Mr. Lipp said the new courses have gone through the administrative process. Ms. Siegel has allocated funds for a stipend for professors to consult on the curriculum. He said there is a good outline for three courses. There will be two meetings in the next month to prepare for selecting textbooks and materials. He said there had been good energy in the group and we're on track to offer courses in the next coming year.

Ms. Martinez arrived at the meeting.

Mr. Lipp said one of the professors from Hunter College has joined one of the meetings. He said people have reached out to the committee because the courses were publicized in the newspaper.

Mr. Lipp said course descriptions have been created and the next step will be the materials to be used. Mr. Walker said he would be very interested in reading the books that are considered for use in the courses.

In response to a question, Mr. Lipp said the high school principals have been requested to suggest instructors who they want to have trained this summer. He said ideally someone who is going to teach the course would help write the curriculum.

Mr. Lipp said the group that Dr. Santacapita has brought together has broadened what we started with. He added he was an engineer by trade and did not have a history or social studies background. He said Mr. Graf, who is a former history teacher, is on the committee as well.

Dr. Santacapita said Dr. Jenkins, director of literacy, had found some texts that were excellent. Alicia Robinson, director of performing arts and visual arts, said the committee was composed of people with different backgrounds, as are the individuals being reached out to. Literacy teachers or those with experience from college are being sought to write the curriculum.

Mr. Lipp said the material will encompass art, literature, poetry, and music, but will be taught by a social studies teacher to align with current graduation requirements for 30 hours in social studies, five hours in civics and ten hours in U.S. history. He said as it evolves consideration can be given to a course on African-American or Latin American literature.

Mr. Walker said he found the organic genesis of this thing exciting. He said administrators should be feel excited by creating something that had not been here.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested there be a science component because African-American and Caribbean-Latin American students have been shortchanged in science and engineering. He said their accomplishments through history could be highlighted.

Mr. Illingworth said he was very excited about this much-needed curriculum. He asked about the budget.

Dr. Santacapita said we were given a very lean budget for texts, online resources and consultation fees. She said we're trying to get the best for the least cost. She said we're trying to do a lot of foundational work before an expert has to be hired.

Mr. Illingworth that this was a big deal for the district, especially since so much is being done in-house.

Dr. Santacapita said there are middle school teachers in the district who are quite anxious to bring the courses to middle school.

Ms. Pereira noted the adoption of the course requirement made it to *Education Week*. She said it could be those working on it in the district could be leading the charge in Connecticut.

Dr. Santacapita noted Ms. Robinson had just been written up in The Huffington Post. Ms. Robinson said the article was linked on the district's website.

Mr. Walker asked that Dr. Santacapita forward to him the current makeup of the committee.

The next item on the agenda was planning for the committee's work.

Mr. Walker said last year the focus was on the course requirement just discussed and special education programming.

Mr. Walker said there would be a monthly agenda item on special education by Mr. DiDonato. He said the goal was to hear surprises or issues before they appear in the newspaper or in Ms. Lambeck's Twitter feed.

Mr. Walker said he would like to have a report from Ms. Robinson on our fine arts department. He said there was a Bassick student who made the all-region choir and will also audition for the all-state competition. He said as a musician he was going to take Ms. Robinson under his wing. He said he wanted to learn more about the music and art in the district.

Mr. Walker said there may be a report in the next month or two on the library and media curriculum. He added he would like to see STEM or STEAM across the curriculum as there was with reading and writing.

Mr. Sokolovic said the focus on improving reading and writing across the curriculum had been effective. He said there was a science position paper that indicated science should have the same emphasis as literacy and mathematics. He said it could be an easy, cheaper fix to integrate it into all subjects

Mr. Illingworth said he had concerns and questions about the language arts curriculum, and asked Mr. Walker to schedule something during the course of the year.

Ms. Pereira said we're continuing to hear from teachers that they don't have paper, consumables, and basic supplies. She said teachers are complaining that they're wasting valuable time at copiers. She said Ms. Siegel has a tough job and sees numbers, but you have to see the human aspect and the face of students and staff. She said the formulas that are used should be looked at. She added

there had been complaints about replacement light bulbs for Smart Boards.

Dr. Santacapita said this had been going on for 25 years and she had often bought her own paper. She said she was not discounting consumables, but the world is not going to ask if you have a worksheet or a consumable in your career. She said as a principal and a teacher she emphasized a workbook portfolio, and now an electronic version.

Dr. Santacapita said we find from cohort groups that if students stay with us, there are substantial gains, but No Child Left Behind didn't track the same children.

In response to a question, Dr. Santacapita said she was opposed to consumables where you write it and they all look the same. She said she prefers interactive workbooks, which lends itself for group work and collaborations.

Mr. Walker said there would be further conversation about this at a future meeting.

Mr. Walker said other things of interest to him and other board members in the past were curriculum work, the state of textbooks and supplies, and reinvigorating efforts to trim down assessment time so it can be allotted back to classroom teaching.

Mr. Weldon arrived at the meeting.

Mr. Walker said his predecessor as chair, Ms. Baraka, had started a cohort study of pre-K through 3rd grade. He said he'd like to see the study regenerated, even though we have a very transient district. He said if anyone can help us with this it's Dr. Santacapita.

Ms. Allen arrived at the meeting.

Dr. Santacapita said Tina Peloso-Ulreich is doing pre-K to 2 and Dr. Jenkins is doing Grades 3 to 12 in this area.

Mr. Walker said he appreciated the contributions from the board members and the staff. He said he liked things as positive as can be.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 6:33 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

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