

Wednesday, May 22, 2019

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE TEACHING AND LEARNING COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held May 22, 2019, at Bridgeport City Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 5:15 p.m. Present were members Chair Joseph Sokolovic and Joseph Lombard. Board member Maria Pereira was present. Committee member LaMar Kennedy arrived subsequently as noted.

Mr. Lombard moved approval of the minutes of April 24 , 2019. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic. Corrections were noted. The motion was unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on the College Board SAT expenditure.

Assistant Superintendent Dr. Christiana Otuwa said the price quote referred to SAT testing for 12th graders She said 1,211 students took the test this year. She said the College Board is only the entity that administers the SAT and the price quote is \$39,357.

Ms. Pereira noted the SAT testing replaced CAPT. She said the legislature passed a law to utilize the SAT and forced the districts to pay for the testing.

In response to a question, Dr. Otuwa said the district does not pay for juniors, only seniors. The state pays for SAT for juniors and the Alliance District pays for PSAT.

Dr. Otuwa noted Dr. Johnson made it a priority to have SAT prep classes in high schools.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *“to approve for presentation to the full board the College Board SAT quote.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Lombard and unanimously approved.

Mr. Sokolovic moved to handle Item 4 next. The motion was seconded by Mr. Lombard and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on the ABCD Harding High School contract extension.

Dementred Young, director of social work, introduced Barbara Baldwin and Nellie Morgan of ABCD. He said a two-year extension was being requested.

Ms. Baldwin said this year had been a wonderful experience. She said there were 16 children of students in the fall, plus two children of staff parents. The other six slots went to community members. She said according to the grant the center has to be fully enrolled within each month.

Ms. Baldwin said there has been growth in the children and the parents. She said Ms. Vidal from the district does counseling with the parents and the teachers encourage parents to participate in the classroom. She said she observed the parents by now being able to speak up for themselves and for their child.

Ms. Baldwin said the teachers all have four-year degrees and one speaks six languages. There is a case worker that does home visits and helps to make goals for the parents.

Ms. Baldwin said children older than three years old are placed at another ABCD location.

Ms. Morgan noted free diapers, formula and baby food are offered for children under twelve months.

Mr. Kennedy arrived at the meeting.

Ms. Morgan described other features of the program.

In response to a question, Ms. Baldwin said 18 to 20 teen parents had been served this year. She said there had been no bumps in the road based on the criteria for entry the board put in place.

In response to a question, Ms. Morgan said community parents will continue to attend during the summer along with the teen parents. This will help the parents work if they have employment.

In response to a question, Alan Wallack said the building closes at 3:30 in the summer, but custodians will be staggered to cover the program.

In response to a question, Ms. Baldwin said teen parents who just give birth are a little skeptical, so they are invited to visit the program and watch it.

In response to a question, Ms. Baldwin said the community parents come from all areas of the city. Ms. Pereira noted the JFK area didn't have a single accredited daycare.

Ms. Pereira said there is a state law that students not vaccinated can be enrolled if they have a religious or medical exemption. She said she did not agree with the law,

but she wanted to be sure the law was complied with. Ms. Baldwin said this was the case.

Ms. Pereira emphasized the slots in the program must be prioritized for district students over community parents. Mr. Young said that is being abided by. He knew of a staff member who had children bumped because the slots were needed.

Ms. Pereira said the dates of the contract should be July 1, 2019 to June 30, 2021.

Mr. Young said the main goal of the program is no repeat pregnancies and graduation. He said caps and gowns have purchased for teen mothers and fathers that have graduated.

Mr. Sokolovic said the discussion would cover the summer program as well.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *“to approve the contract extension with ABCD for early learning child care at Harding High School, to take effect from July 1st, 2019, to continue to June 30th, 2021, to encompass summer school as well as long as there’s no cost to the district.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Lombard and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on special education internal program planning and presentation.

John DiDonato, chief of specialized education reform, was present. He said information was presented to the committee on the state Department of Education complaint. He said the complaint was the result of an incident at Bassick High. A student who had a one-to-one paraprofessional became separated from the para during an incident involving a bomb

scare and an evacuation. The student became disoriented and went home. The parent filed a complaint and corrective actions have taken place. The principal has met with the parent and the safety plan has been revised to ensure continuous supervision. He said this information has been provided to the state.

In response to a question, Mr. DiDonato said the student was returned to the classroom in a lockdown and the para was outside the building on a break.

Mr. DiDonato said he did not know if the parents were the first to notify the school that the child went home on his own. He said he could provide the information to the committee.

Ms. Pereira said the largest payout the board ever had to make in her tenure on the board was because paras did not do their job.

In response to a question, Mr. DiDonato said he expected the complaint to be resolved before the end of the month.

Mr. DiDonato said he provided information on special education referral data. He said the data covers three years and lists each school's referrals as a percentage of the district referral pattern. He said referrals come about by someone's suspicion that a student's inability to learn or behave is related to a disability. The PPT team meets with the person who made the referral, and makes a determination of whether to go forward with assessments to gather information. He said PPTs are handled by the planning and placement team at each school, composed of multi-disciplinary staff. He said he would be interested to know how many referrals were from parents as opposed to teachers. After assessments are made, the PPT team

meets to determine eligibility and the development of an IEP for the student, if necessary.

Mr. DiDonato said the referral process is mandated under law and there is no way the central office could indicate to a school that their referral rates are too high.

Mr. DiDonato said he included data on referral patterns from Hartford, New Haven, New Britain and Waterbury. He said only New Haven has a lower referral rate than Bridgeport. He said referral rates are an issue for urban school districts that have historically been underfunded. He said referrals are the result of the lack of Tier I services to students.

In response to a question, Mr. DiDonato said a referral does not necessarily mean the student will receive special education services.

Mr. DiDonato said what this data should tell the board is that the cumulative effect of cuts to the school district is impacting the referral rate to special education. He said he was not being defensive because he had been doing this for 51 years. He said the major portion of identified special education students are learning-disabled.

Mr. DiDonato said a low referral rate could be a good or a bad thing, depending on the circumstances. Mr. Sokolovic said we have to be concerned with accuracy, not whether the numbers are going up or down.

Mr. DiDonato said a retroactive review was done this year to explore how a school's PPT went about their decision-making. He said only one such review could be done because of the lack of capacity.

Mr. DiDonato noted the former special education director left the district to supervise special education in two high schools and makes as much as our assistant superintendents. He said he has been working with principals over the last two years to enhance their capacity to be managers of the process.

Mr. Kennedy noted there were 171 referrals at Harding over the last three years, and 13 percent of the students were identified. He said it seemed like a lot of referrals at the high school level.

Mr. DiDonato described a situation where he met with the Harding team over an individual student.

In response to a question, Mr. DiDonato said prior to this year there was a director and three supervisors of special education. This year the structure was changed to create a strong director, Ms. Lenzen, who later left, and identify three coaches whose primary responsibility would be to provide direct services into classrooms to impact teacher practice. He said the administrator position to monitor the four hundred-plus out-of-district placements was cut this year. The coaches picked up this caseload.

Ms. Pereira said it was national outrage that the vast majority of students who are labeled disabled are black and brown boys. She said the vast majority of special education students in the district don't have cognitive disabilities, but are learning disabled. She said teachers often refer disruptive students for PPTs.

Ms. Pereira said the five elementary magnet schools never broke a five percent referral rate. She said Columbus had an outrageous percentage, with 17 percent of their students referred for a PPT in one year. Barnum had 10 percent and

Curiale 11 percent. She said nobody is going to tell her 17 percent of Columbus students qualify for special education. She said she agreed that you can't tell a school they can't refer, which is what Supt. Vallas did. She said the data can be used to identify the schools to provide comprehensive training.

Mr. DiDonato said it was a disservice to over-identify children.

Mr. Young noted one reason for a high referral rate at Harding might be because of attendance. PPTs are required for students with extraordinary absences.

Mr. DiDonato said if he had to develop a plan his idea would be to pair schools that had similar demographics and have a conversation about why referral rates vary. He said the district is not resourced to do that, particularly in the clinical supervision required to effect change. Ms. Pereira suggested intensive training be provided to the eight schools with the highest referral rates. She said she understood that everybody was overwhelmed and she was not calling for anyone to be disciplined.

Mr. DiDonato noted his contract was suggested for non-renewal and he is at the end of his career. He said his plea to the board was to understand that anyone who takes this position is going to be in a reactive mode every single day and the kind of work that is necessary takes a backseat. He described an incident with a special education student at Six to Six Magnet. He said he resolved the situation even though there were competent two principals that could have corrected the situation except for the culture that special education issues should be sent to the central office.



Ms. Pereira said it was not normal to have 17 percent of your children referred for a PPT. She said a plan had to be made to address it. She said often students are referred because teachers are overwhelmed.

In response to a question, Mr. DiDonato said special education is used as an off-ramp for students who are not being successful.

Mr. DiDonato said there are groups that come together to steer children towards special education. He noted 71 percent of referrals are determined not to need service.

Mr. Sokolovic said Mr. DiDonato had been very good for the district and his information is always on point. He said he would feel the loss of Mr. DiDonato.

Mr. DiDonato said Dr. Johnson made a determination to no longer enter into an agreement with The University School for special education. He said a number of the years ago The University School acted as an approved special education program. He said the current contract is 40 seats for \$1 million. He said Dr. Johnson charged a team with developing an alternative program utilizing the \$1 million sum to create an in-district team.

Mr. DiDonato said the team included folks from clinical services, the coaches, facilities and security people. He said Central High has a very well defined space of four classrooms with a separate entrance that would be appropriate.

Mr. DiDonato said the team worked on a program to adhere to the spirit of special education law which talks about the least restrictive environment. He said the team developed

the kind of supports that would be necessary. He said Ms. Rivera and Mr. Young participated as team members.

In response to a question, Mr. DiDonato said Ms. Siegel developed the budget. He said he believed the cost of the program would be close to a wash with The University School program. He said the Bridgeport Learning Center was a very rich program for a reason, noting it requires a lot of resources.

Mr. Young said the program would include a special education supervisor, four core teachers with additional certifications in special education, a fulltime social worker with a background in behavior, a fulltime behavioral interventionist, a psychologist two days a week, and four support specialists(one for each class).

Ms. Rivera said PPTs will be scheduled to discuss the program itself and the change of placement. She said the home schools will coordinate the PPTs as the LEA representative.

Mr. Young said parents can disagree with the placement to the new program and seek an out-of-district placement. He said possible costs would result from mediation or due process.

Mr. Young said it would have a push-in services approach, where the social worker goes in and runs psycho-educational groups, which includes teaching about disabilities. He said behavioral support interventionists will be trained in the Boys' Town model, which is currently used at Bridgeport Learning Center, including deescalating, providing emotional support, and mediating disputes between students. He said the Boys' Town model teaches

life skills, social skills, how administrators should speak to students, and how students should speak to each other.

In response to a question, Mr. Young said the psychologist does testing of the children. He said two-day-a-week schedule recommendation came from the director of psychology.

In response to a question, Mr. DiDonato said the parents chose The University School as a decision during the PPT process. He said as the LEA the district believed it has an in-district program to implement IEPs in a less-restrictive environment. He said Dr. Johnson plans on holding an open house for the parents and is confident when parents see the program they will be favorable.

In response to a question, Mr. Wallack described the space that would be used. He said the students will have lunch in the Central cafeteria. Mr. DiDonato said the supervisors will have to make determinations about when they will eat. Mr. Young noted the school will have a different start and end time than Central High.

Ms. Pereira said she received calls from University School parents about someone trying to push students into Central via PPTs.

Ms. Pereira said Supt. Ramos, when Max Medina was the board chair, made an agreement with The University School to take the district's students if they stopped serving other districts. She said when Supt. Vallas tried to not renew the agreement in 2012 there was intense opposition. She said Rev. Moales, the chair of the board, said the contract would continue.

In response to a question, Mr. DiDonato said he believed there were 25 or 27 children in the current program with The University School because ten will graduate this year.

Ms. Pereira said she didn't think a single parent would agree to the change, and they have a right to appeal the decision, which would incur legal fees. She said The University School by contract could charge the district per student instead of the current flat fee.

Ms. Pereira said the setting of these types of schools in large schools is not good for children. She said the environment at Central would be much different than at The University School. She noted that Central High students are not given city bus passes and it would not be fair if the children in this program were not provided buses like the other Central students.

Mr. DiDonato said almost every school district that he knows of has alternative programs located in their schools. He said the students' use of the gymnasium can be isolated.

Mr. DiDonato said he has asked the coaches who manage the PPT process as part of the annual review to look at students at CES or ACES or other out-of-district students who may be available to re-enter the district. He said the majority of the students assigned to The University School are other health-impaired, which is a catch-all category. He added an administrator from Central High is going to be the administrator at the PPTs. The special education coordinator from the home school will participate, with the PPT held at Central.

Mr. Kennedy said he liked the plan and it makes a lot of sense. He said there are programs in other districts that run

exactly like this. He said where he works there are two classrooms with fifteen students in each classroom, with one teacher teaching English and history, the other teaching science and math.

Ms. Pereira said we have a new precedent that if a contract is not renewed that that person gets to come meet with the board committee. She said she believed The University School representatives here would like to make a presentation to the committee.

Mr. Sokolovic said he does not conduct himself in the manner described by Ms. Pereira. He said that was not a precedent; that was a misstep.

In response to a question, Mr. Young said the new special education supervisor had not started work with the district yet so they could not participate in the PPTs. Mr. DiDonato said the PPTs had to be held right away.

Mr. DiDonato said Dr. Johnson reminded him that her view is we're not seeking board action because it is as if we're opening another class or another program. He said Dr. Johnson's view is we're providing this informationally, but not looking for action.

Mr. Sokolovic said if staff wants him to put the renewal of the contract on the committee's agenda he will take his direction from the educational professionals. Ms. Pereira asked that parents' views be considered.

The next agenda item was on reverse suspensions.

Dr. Otuwa said Michael Testani, director of adult education, is present because he was involved in the meetings with

stakeholders, including parents and teachers, and administrators.

Dr. Otuwa asked Mr. Testani to give his perspective. Mr. Testani said there were immediate concerns from the teachers' perspective around the idea of having parents in the classroom.

Mr. Testani said we have not explored other options that would be in place of in-school or out-of-school suspensions that would be a more natural progression, including Saturday half-day and full-day detentions. He said Fairfield finds Saturday detentions very effective because it doesn't remove students from the educational setting for minor offenses. He said he didn't think embarrassing a child should be a deterrent to a child's behavior. He added most teachers would not object to parents being present as an observer, however, there could be some distractions created by what the parent might do.

Mr. Testani said there were potential complications if parents have issues with other parents and their children. He said he didn't think it was going to have an effect on behavior.

Mr. Sokolovic said he sensed the direction of the committee leaning against doing it. He said he brought the matter forward because he didn't think it was given a fair hearing prior. He noted the educational community makes changes very, very slowly and very carefully.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested finding willing administrators to collect data and to explore whether this would be feasible. He said brown and black students are being disproportionately suspended and time out of the classroom doesn't come back.

Mr. Testani said he did not find any example where this had been implemented in an urban setting. He said at the high school level you have to be careful about having adult males around young ladies.

Mr. Sokolovic said he was very active in his son's school and he hoped he would be able to do the same in high school.

Mr. Testani said there are equity issues because parents who cannot afford to take time off are at a disadvantage. He added that in his career he had dealt with some difficult children who had some of the finest parents.

Mr. Sokolovic requested Mr. Testani present some alternatives at the next committee meeting.

Ms. Pereira said she spoke to Ms. Soares at BMA. who was open to the concept at her school. She said she also spoke to Ms. Fernandes at Hall School about the idea. She said these would be good places to start because they are not large schools.

Mr. Testani said the group convened could not find any research on a large scale that this has been effective. In response to a question, he said he saw some research out of a middle school in West Virginia indicated it worked. Ms. Pereira said Maine was also considering the concept.

Mr. Sokolovic said he tends to support the idea, but he is only one person on the committee. He noted staff seems to be against it.

Mr. Testani said teachers on the committee were opposed. Ms. Pereira said Mr. Peluchette did not seem to have an issue with it when they talked.

Mr. Kennedy said recently a colleague had a parent observing in a classroom where the parent addressed another child. He said there are going to be parents who cannot control themselves and say things to other people's children. He said that cemented his no vote.

Mr. Lombard said it was a novel idea and some middle school parents he spoke to were favorable. He said he was not against looking into it further, although it was too early to do it at a test school.

Mr. Testani said we have not done a great job with intense training of what we expect of a new administrator. He said as a new assistant principal 17 years ago the only tool he had at his disposal is suspension, but as you grow and learn you discover other strategies.

Ms. Pereira said Ms. Soares and Ms. Fernandes are seasoned administrators. She added there are no costs associated with the approach. She said she has a very good relationship with the BEA and she has not sensed a disagreement with the leadership about this.

Mr. Sokolovic said parents are allowed to shadow their children in school. He said if the staff and the committee is against it he's not going to shove it down anybody's throat.

Ms. Pereira said she was concerned about how it was presented. She said Dr. Otuwa did not present it properly.

Dr. Otuwa said the district has social-emotional learning tools that are being used such as RULER which gives alternative instruments. She said Saturday schools were effective with her daughter.



Mr. Testani said after-school detention is not used because teachers are not willing to stay beyond the ten-minute contractual time. He noted the majority of our parents cannot afford to take a day off from work.

Mr. Sokolovic said if he wasn't opposed by the other committee members he might move forward with it over the objection of the staff. Ms. Pereira said she would just do it with the school.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said after-school detention only takes place if a teacher wanted to assign the detention and stay themselves. Mr. Kennedy asked if a stipend could be offered to a teacher willing to stay after school if the BEA membership would support it. Dr. Otuwa said she believed they would. Mr. Sokolovic said that might create issues with equity because of the students who stay anyway for Lighthouse.

Ms. Pereira said Mr. Sokolovic was refusing to recognize her and she was the only one who knows what she's talking about. Mr. Sokolovic said Ms. Pereira had been speaking without being recognized.

Mr. Lombard said he believed a lot of the opposition was rooted in fear. He said that was not a reason enough to avoid exploring something.. He said he was not ready to say move forward until we're presented with other options.

Mr. Sokolovic said Ms. Pereira was not recognizing that Mr. Lombard was agreeing with her.

Mr. Lombard noted there would be costs with Saturday school or after-school detention. He said if something is

pushed over opposition it would cause backs to go up and make people not receive it very well.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested leaving the option of reverse suspensions on the table for further exploration along with any options. Mr. Lombard said it was a good thing that the idea had been brought forward, however, the research doesn't give much confidence in moving forward.

Mr. Sokolovic asked Mr. Testani as a union leader if he would dissuade a principal from trying the concept out. Mr. Testani said he would be part of a larger group deciding that. He said anything that reduces the time kids spend out of the classroom he is all for.

Mr. Testani said adults are just as irresponsible as children in posting things on social media. He said he worried about a parent posting something about a child that they witnessed in a classroom.

Ms. Pereira said parents are allowed to shadow their children if they want to. She said this was not anything different. Mr. Testani said the context and intention was different. He said a parent observing a child is going there out of free will.

Ms. Pereira said what she was suggesting was optional and parents would have the right to decide for themselves

Ms. Pereira said after the last committee meeting she expressed concern in writing to Dr. Johnson about who was going to be leading this meeting with parents and teachers and about crazy things being said about parents having to go through background checks. She said concepts can be

introduced through a negative fashion to cause friction and fear or you can just lay out the facts.

Ms. Pereira said the minutes of the last meeting indicated Dr. Otuwa said parents and students didn't have a problem with it.

Ms. Pereira said she would go ahead and speak with the principals because they're interested in it and she has relationships in those schools.

In response to a question, Mr. Testani said in his 17 years the amount of parents that have asked to shadow their students could be counted on one hand. He said it did not create problems. The majority of the time it happened in elementary school and parents typically did not stay the entire day. He said he believed in one instance the parent was there to cause some sort of intimidation to students in the lunch room.

Mr. Sokolovic said he knew of an instance where a parent shadowed a child for an entire day and there were no issues. He said it led to the student getting on track.

Mr. Lombard said when it comes right down to it we're talking about embarrassment and shame which will be preventive for the student. He said that may or may not be a reason to do it.

Mr. Sokolovic said he believed students who were suspended would rather be at home than in a school setting.

Mr. Testani said an after-school detention was utilized a few years ago at Central High that Mr. Graf found effective. Mr. Sokolovic said the topic deserved a longer conversation. Mr.

Testani said he would be willing to bring some ideas to the next meeting.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 7:47 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

*Approved by the committee on June 17, 2019*