

Tuesday, April 5, 2022

MINUTES OF THE TEACHING AND LEARNING COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held April 5, 2022, at Central High School, 1 Lincoln Boulevard, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:35 p.m. Present were members Chair Christine Baptiste-Perez, Joseph Sokolovic, and Joe Lombard*. Board member Albert Benejan was present. (*Remote participation.)

Supt. Michael J. Testani was present.

Mr. Sokolovic moved to approve the minutes of the meeting of March 15, 2022. The motion was seconded by Mr. Lombard and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on a field trip to Nature's Classroom by Discovery Magnet.

Teacher Mary Servino said the proposed trip was to Ivoryton, Connecticut, was for the four days after Memorial Day. She said it was a unique educational experience for the students. She said there are specific Covid protocols that will be in place, including negative tests and masks for indoor activities.

Principal Sangeeta Bella said 44 students from 6th grade will be on the trip, along with chaperones. She said it gives the students to learn about teamwork and collaboration.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested asking if a PCR test is required by Nature's Classroom. The superintendent said the district can

hand out tests for all the students so they will not incur costs. Ms. Servino said a teacher would be able to stay back with a student who tested positive prior to the bus trip home. She said proof of vaccination was not required by Nature's Classroom.

Mr. Sokolovic moved "*to approve the Interdistrict Discovery Magnet School field trip on May 31st, 2022, to June 3rd, to Nature's Classroom, Ivoryton, Connecticut.*" The motion was seconded by Mr. Lombard.

Mr. Sokolovic moved "*to amend the motion to submit to the full board the field trip to Nature's Classroom, May 31st, 2022, to June 3rd, 2022, to the full board for approval.*" The amendment was seconded by Mr. Lombard and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on a field trip by Winthrop School to Washington, D.C. The proposed dates are June 20th to June 22nd, the last three days of the school year. There will be Covid tests three days prior and on the day of the trip. The company World Strides is providing the trip and has medical personnel as part of the package. Students will be required to wear masks on the bus trip and indoor locations.

Jennifer Russell, 7th grade teacher, said it was an awesome opportunity for students to see the places that they're learning about. They will be exposed to experienced people who know Washington, D.C.

Carrie Ramanauskas said the trip was originally planned for the spring of 2020 and has been pushed back. She said the school community was looking forward to the children having the experience. She said World Strides indicated the testing was either PCR or rapid.

Ms. Russell said sites to be visited include the Smithsonian, Mount Vernon, possibly the African-American History Museum, the Holocaust Museum, the Museum of American History, and walk-bys of the Capitol and White House.

Ms. Ramanauskas said students are provided with journals that they are prompted use at the various sites. There will be eight chaperones for 39 students.

Mr. Lombard moved “*to submit to the full board for approval Winthrop School’s field trip to Washington, D.C., at the end of June.*” The motion as seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on student sports participation, grade requirements, and enforcement.

Supt. Testani said he asked schools to submit rosters and grades for middle-school basketball. He distributed data summaries for 175 boys and 145 girls. He said the report included the number of students removed for academics or disciplinary reasons. The season started in late January and the provider was Caribe, with the season finishing last weekend.

The superintendent said we want to engage as many middle school students as possible in after-school activities such as this. He said a hard-nosed policy making it hard to play leaves students with the only other option of leaving the building at the end of the day to play video games or be on the streets. He said this year the basketball program was expanded to 6th graders.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said middle-school students are not held back unless they fail English or math. He said about 57 8th graders have been targeted for a summer school program in order to be promoted to 9th grade.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said there appears to be no academic policy for middle-school students. She said information on high schools will have to be provided later.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said middle school is where we can capture kids who may be off to a bad start and reengage them. He said an athletic handbook was needed, particularly so the academic standards are made clear.

The superintendent said the middle schools have standards to participate in athletics. He said the students removed from teams were likely those that did not heed earnings about discipline and attendance.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said her biggest concern was allowing students to play who are failing all their courses and who have unrealistic expectations. Supt. Testani said there was not one child with multiple F's that was able to stay on their teams.

In response to a question, the superintendent said he believed the coaches would be more than willing to participate in creating the athletic handbook. He said a document would make their jobs easier, particularly in regard to the NCAA Clearing House. He said he knows of Bridgeport students in the past who missed out on college opportunities from academic issues that began in the freshman year.

Mr. Sokolovic said one of his saddest days on the board was when a student said sports was his only way out. He said in fact education will almost guarantee you a way out.

Mr. Sokolovic said it would be interested to see the GPAs of students participating in sports versus those not in sports. Mr. Lombard said in many ways that would be like comparing apples to oranges. Mr. Sokolovic questioned giving scrutiny of students competing in athletics if the same standards are not applied to those in participating in other after-school activities.

Supt. Testani questioned holding twelve- and thirteen-year-olds to standards that are too high. He said the bigger issue is AAU and other programs that have no standards for kids playing sports. He said this is why he objected to CIAC prohibitions against having coaches involved with student-athletes year-round.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said from her teaching experience, although one student made it to professional sports, the rest of the students in the district did not. She said the approach should be to show the way out is through academics. She said the student part of student-athlete should be emphasized.

The superintendent said the basketball coaches at Central, Harding, and Bassick deserve credit for trying to build a program, not just win games, but that process takes time. He said perhaps the coaches could appear before the committee to talk about the policies.

Supt. Testani said prior to Ms. Baptiste-Perez bringing it to his attention he believed the district's academic standards to

play sports had been overturned, since it had not been used in about a decade. He said the academic eligibility in high school is determined by the prior marking period, so change was needed to align seasons, marking periods, and eligibility.

The superintendent distributed a copy of the CIAC regulations governing high school sports, which is over 200 pages long. James Denton said we're bound by the handbook, which outlines policies regarding eligibility, grades, and residency. The CIAC regulations were described as the floor, but districts can make more stringent requirements. The superintendent said the new block schedules increase the standard of student-athletics automatically.

Mr. Denton said the history behind the written policies were the result of an exceptional high school athlete who got a full athletic scholarship but could not pass the NCAA Clearing House. That student went to a prep school, subsequently to college, and then played professionally. This led to the requirement that athletes must pass the four core classes, along with a tutoring requirement with a hardship exception. He noted most colleges no longer require SAT scores.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said the vision is to prepare students for the real world. Mr. Sokolovic said the CIAC rules for the high schools can't be changed. He said they should be the ceiling, not the floor, but there should be less stringent requirements for middle school sports participation.

The superintendent suggested mandatory workshops for parents and students playing sports in 7th grade could be helpful. He said he never had an attendance or discipline issue in seven years at Bassick with basketball players.

Mr. Lombard said he agreed with the idea of informing middle school students about the upcoming standards in high school. He said behavioral standards should be looked at as a separate element because athletes are in the spotlight.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said holding students to high academic standards will be beneficial to them.

Mr. Sokolovic said there are behavioral standards in the CIAC regulations. He said if Bridgeport had more stringent academic standards to play sports than other towns it would eliminate a potential leg up for a district student to get into college.

The superintendent said a standard was needed that pushed the students, but did not hurt them, especially compared to other towns.

Clayton Wilson, a middle-school coach, was recognized. He said no one is kicked off his team, but no one plays until the grades are what they are supposed to be. The superintendent said parents have to be part of the process.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said there are a lot of benefits to sports, but she did not want students to lose sight of the quality of education for their future.

In response to a question, Supt. Testani said there is informal use of tutoring by coaches, but nothing is formalized. He said the requirements in the policy to attend tutoring have not been enforced in a decade.

In response to a question, Mr. Denton said a principal could make a student ineligible at any point for a behavior issue regardless of CIAC regulations.

Mr. Lombard noted that an external standard, the CIAC, makes sports the only activity that has any standards whatsoever. He said he was hard pressed to think of how to justify creating any standards beyond what we have to for athletics.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said she would like to look into graduation rates and dropout rates as a separate issue.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested we revise the policy to match the CIAC policy. He said reassignment out of district magnet schools requires a D, while the policies as written require a C- for sports teams. He said he was not necessarily a sports guy, but he was very cognizant of equity.

The superintendent said the handbook could cover the academic, behavioral, and attendance expectations.

Mr. Sokolovic said this was a tough, serious decision that would affect lives going down the line.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez suggested continuing the discussion upon request of some additional information such as magnet policies and focusing in on high school at the next committee meeting, along with an evaluation of the current athletic academic eligibility for high school students in comparison to the CIAC and other magnet schools for student sport participation grade requirement and enforcement. She said there could be a roundtable with high schools to create a handbook.

The superintendent said he would get high school coaches and athletic directors involved, as well as Dr. Graf, who sat on the board of the CIAC.

Mr. Sokolovic moved “*to convene a committee to develop a handbook for Teaching & Learning to approve and then submit to the full board for approval.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Lombard and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on benefits and drawbacks of later school start times.

Supt. Testani said there have been studies done on the subject. He said there is a public document created by Hanover Research that he can provide to the committee. He said Norwalk changed start times and then reverted back to original start times because of issues with delays and busing that they did not foresee. He said the change was made more quickly than the longer process in other neighboring districts.

The superintendent asked if the committee would like to survey students and parents. Mr. Sokolovic suggested holding off on a survey even though he personally supported later start times. Supt. Testani said New Jersey was looking at state-level action on high school start times. Mr. Sokolovic said he worried about getting so much pushback that we can't implement it. He said the fall might be a good time for surveys. He suggested moving a piece at a time, in a tiered approach.

Mr. Lombard said we owe to our ourselves as a board to act when we think in an educated way it would be a good idea. He said this would be huge thing because of the impacts on people's schedules.

Mr. Sokolovic and Ms. Baptiste-Perez noted the work in this area would be time-consuming.

Supt. Testani said he would look into the situation with the bus company and the impacts such a change would have bus usage as part of the presentation for the next meeting.

In response to a question, the superintendent said the first period in high schools starts at 7:53 a.m. Fairchild Wheeler and BMA end the day at 2:10 p.m.; the other high schools dismiss at 2:30 p.m. Elementary schools start at 8:40 a.m.

There was a discussion of the costs of bus transportation.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *“for further consideration based off the research that will be submitted by Mr. Testani for the next Teaching & Learning Committee meeting in two weeks.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Lombard and unanimously approved.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:36 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Approved by the committee on May 5, 2022