

Thursday, April 10, 2025

MINUTES OF THE FINANCE COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held April 10, 2025, at Bridgeport City Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:30 p.m.

Committee members present were Chair Jennifer Perez, Willie Medina and Maritza Estremera Jimenez*. Board members Albert Benejan Grajales and Joseph Sokolovic were present. Board members Andre Woodson* and Robert Traber joined subsequently as noted.

*remote participation

Interim Supt. Royce Avery was present.

Mr. Medina moved to approve the minutes of the meeting of March 20, 2025. The motion was seconded by Ms. Perez and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on possible referral to the full board of additional eliminations to reduce the budgetary need for the fiscal year 2025-26.

Dr. Avery said we were charged to come up with up to \$30 million worth of possible cuts for consideration for next year's budget. He said he gathered different

perspectives from staff members and cabinet members, along with Nestor Nkwo, chief financial officer.

Mr. Woodson* joined the meeting.

Mr. Nkwo discussed revenue increases and expenditure reductions, which are reliefs to the budget gap.

Mr. Nkwo said the mayor has proposed a budget increase of an additional \$3 million for the board. He said we hope it will be approved by the City Council. Dr. Avery said May 7th is the date of the vote.

Mr. Nkwo said city allocations go towards the minimum education requirement, which bounds the city to maintain that amount as long as Bridgeport is an Alliance District.

Mr. Nkwo discussed the elimination of two-to-one kindergarten paras, which were reinstated with ESSER money. He said the service should have ended September 30th, 2024, when the ESSER money ended.

Mr. Nkwo said the administration is asking for concessions from all employees. He said if every employee agrees to the five days of furlough, it will reduce the budget deficit by \$4.5 million. He said one day is equivalent to \$914,000. He noted this would be

a one-time funding source and not reoccur in the next year.

Mr. Nkwo said three climate specialist positions would save \$100,000. The increase of 1,256 elementary students' walking distance would save about \$2.4 million per year, which would be permanent savings. Increasing the walking distance for 453 Bridgeport high school students would save about \$860,000. Increasing 514 elementary charter school students' walking distance saves \$970,000. Increasing 176 charter high school students' walking distance saves \$336,000. He said the distances for charter school students are the same as our in-house students.

Mr. Nkwo said the reduction of four more social workers would leave 39 in the district. He said it was a severe cut, but the total number is slightly higher than prior to ESSER money and would save \$340,000. Reducing an additional four school counselors would save \$379,000.

Mr. Nkwo discussed the elimination of 18 assistant principals that the board deferred into the next fiscal year. He described the effect on the assistant principals going into the classroom and reducing the need for Kelly long-term substitutes. He said the net savings are about \$841,000.

Mr. Nkwo said removing or reassigning three principals on special assignment will save \$570,000.

The elimination of five additional central office positions will save \$585,000.

Mr. Nkwo said elimination of performing visual arts, theatre, and the FAME program would save \$406,000.

Mr. Nkwo said as a result of teacher allocation conferences with principals, about 31 teachers will be excessed based on class sizes. There will be savings on long-term substitutes of about \$1.4 million.

Mr. Nkwo said cancellation of some curriculum and the use of free programs from the state will save \$900,000. Margaret Hughes, executive director of school turnaround, said these were items that were planned to be purchased this year.

Mr. Nkwo said the Dynamics software purchase will save \$560,000.

Mr. Nkwo said the reduction of the use of outside counsel will save \$300,000. He said calling a lawyer is not cheap. Moving one of two teachers in the HR Department to the classroom will save \$46,700. He said a review of all stipend payments will save \$300,000.

Mr. Nkwo said review of a special education, nonmedical students and IEP update will save \$2.5 million. He said the projected expenditure for special

education at the end of this year will be \$120 million. He said we have to cut costs and do things more efficiently, while not depriving children of their needs.

Mr. Nkwo said scrutinizing district cellphone utilization is scheduled to save \$50,000. He said we have to start nickel and diming to save money.

Mr. Nkwo said the elimination of fifteen media/library specialist positions will total \$1.7 million. Elimination of five additional principal positions will save \$238,685 by savings from Kelly long-term subs, although Mr. Nkwo noted the full benefit will kick in in the third year.

Mr. Nkwo said the elimination of 40 teacher positions will save \$3.4 million.

Mr. Sokolovic noted state law requires us to have a balanced budget, and it is the state that put us in this position. He said no one on the board wants to get rid of teachers.

Mr. Nkwo said he listed \$1.8 million in tentative state special education FY26 increased reimbursement. He said legislators brought this up for this year's budget and the governor reluctantly signed it, but it is not carved out in the state budget next year. However, it is budgeted in 2027.

In response to a question, Mr. Nkwo said the \$3 million from the city is in addition to the \$3 million from

last year, which has to be maintained while Bridgeport is an Alliance District. He noted the board requested \$25 million from the city.

In response to a question, Mr. Nkwo described the number of teachers leaving and joining the district as a revolving door. He said the concern should be on the net reduction.

Domenic Costello, chief human resource officer, said every spring and early summer there is a hiring blitz for the teachers we lose by attrition. He said we typically lose more than forty teachers.

Ms. Estremera Jimenez said we have a fiscal responsibility to balance the budget, but the options we have to take are atrocious and horrible for our children. She said parents should use this list and begin advocating. She requested the list be posted online. Dr. Avery said the options were intended to move to the full board for consideration, and there may be additional items based on the board's recommendations. He said there will probably be news articles about it soon.

Ms. Estremera Jimenez said if Senate Bill 1511 passes we have the opportunity to withdraw items from the list. She asked if a list of priorities could be made. Dr. Avery said he submitted a letter to the legislators on how to use additional dollars.

In response to a question, Mr. Nkwo said the amount in central office staff to be eliminated was based on the average salary. He said when positions are eliminated, there is the cost of unemployment that has to be factored in. He added that you also have to pay accumulated vacation and sick time, along with COBRA for six months.

Dr. Avery said the actual positions we cut is going to be based on give and take. He said we have already cut in central office, so he has to be strategic in making additional cuts.

Mr. Sokolovic said the positions were like an average of \$92,000 in salaries, plus health insurance. He said these were midlevel positions, and there is nowhere on the line to discuss upper-level positions. He said there are several contracts that are currently illegal and were supposed to be negotiated for potential savings.

Ms. Estremera Jimenez requested when positions are cut that they are at least the estimated average and not fall under that. Dr. Avery said that could be done.

Mr. Woodson said the state was keeping an eye on administrative positions.

In response to a question, Ms. Hughes said the curriculum savings were presented at the committee level. They included iXL social studies curriculum.

She said the state has K to 8 curriculum programs, and many teachers prefer generating the curriculum internally. She said Carnegie Learning and Discovery Education was also included. Ms. Perez said there was a packet on this in the portal. She said the presentation indicated some curriculum resources were being saved in this year's budget and some in next year's budget.

Mr. Medina said the item on outside counsel indicates we're spending about \$953,000, and the goal is to reduce it to \$653,000. He said he was surprised we're spending close \$1 million in lawyer's fees. Ms. Perez said that is why you haven't seen Mr. Dugas in a while. She said we should have been using the city attorney's office first, not Berchem Moses, which will be the practice going forward.

In response to a question, Mr. Nkwo said legal settlements are also paid out of this line, but we're talking about counsel fees here. Ms. Perez noted Berchem Moses is the board's attorney. Mr. Costello said there are things attorneys will be needed for such as lawsuits and CHRO. Mr. Medina requested the breakdown of hours for legal services. Mr. Traber said we need to see a statement of billing, and he said he thought we'll see an excess dependence on Berchem Moses in 2024. He noted board members can't call Berchem Moses, which has to be done through the chair; nor should any administrator be calling them. He said union negotiations also involve

legal expenses. Mr. Costello said there would be negotiations with BCAS in the summer.

Dr. Avery said attorneys are also involved in litigation with special education. Ms. Perez said she has been talking to the city attorney's office to make sure we're using them as much as we can.

Mr. Sokolovic said we haven't had a review of the legal costs in three or four years. He said a review of ongoing cases may have to take place in executive session. He suggested Berchem Moses join the meeting at specified times to reduce costs.

Mr. Nkwo said the legal bills are sent in once a month.

In response to a question, Mr. Nkwo said Dr. Avery has decided to implement a program to audit all cellphone inventory and turn off every IP address that hasn't been used in a year. He said \$200,000 was saved by doing this on the city side. Dr. Avery said there should be savings from renegotiating a cellphone contract. He said the savings might well be more than \$50,000. He said he just received a list of cellphones and devices issued to staff. He said the mobile phone companies will compete to reduce the cost. Mr. Nkwo said the city received iPhones free of charge from Verizon with several steps down from the newest version.

In response to a question, Mr. Traber said the

elimination proposed is of teacher positions, not actual human beings, due to turnover. Dr. Avery said we have to put items where we can get a large amount of money on the option list.

In response to a question, Dr. Avery said the furloughs proposed have not been negotiated yet. He said he provided a courtesy notification to the unions involved. He said if the concessions are not received, the amounts would mean other cuts would have to occur.

Mr. Sokolovic noted the furloughs by district teachers would have to be filled by a Kelly substitute. Mr. Nkwo said administratively you can't let all the teachers take the same days off. He said there are some costs associated with some of the programs and he said a million dollars should be deducted from the \$28 million savings.

In response to a question, Dr. Avery said principals were surveyed about potential savings, the second time with anonymous responses, and the survey ended this afternoon.

Mr. Traber said the last time a furlough was requested in the district it was denied by the unions. He said Mayor Finch forced it on the smaller unions on the city and board side such as AFSCME and NAGE. He said he believed the furloughs were two weeks, and those unions were furious that the big unions did not

sacrifice. He said the city ended up with a surplus and the district had to give money back to the city because they had read their books wrong. He said this was a different circumstance because we're facing \$30 million.

Mr. Traber said we need to push, call, and talk to our legislators. He said SB1511 was pushed into appropriations. He noted the speaker of house agreed that the guardrails should be bent because it is an emergency. He said the projected surplus this year is \$1.9 billion. He said the \$30 million we're projecting to cut would all be restored, and the list we sent to the legislators would be added if 1511 passed. He said 1511 would also help the suburbs because of the added money for special education.

Mr. Traber recommended a review of insurance costs to make sure we're not paying for someone we should not be.

Mr. Traber said in the summer of 2023 the board passed a motion to identify an ideal staffing level as New Haven did, which did not go forward because we changed leadership. He said the cutting we're doing today is sort of the opposite.

Dr. Avery said the district is going to have to reorganize everything that we do, including with further automation. He said streamlining departments would mean the need for less personnel. He said an

audit will find inefficiencies, and it will take consistency and getting people to think outside the box. He said there are departments don't want to help other departments.

In response to a question, Dr. Avery said the cuts to arts are positions, FAME, and a lot of different things. He said FAME costs about \$35,000. Mr. Nkwo said there will still be music and art teachers, with the cut falling on drama and theater.

Mr. Sokolovic said we can find inefficiencies, but they're not going to be of a material amount to affect the underfunding problems that we have. He said the district office's staff in 2022 was the leanest in the state. He said the current central office staff was lower than Greenwich's staff in a town that has far less students.

Mr. Sokolovic said we still have time to advocate for the state budget as Mr. Traber indicated. He said the city budget was also not set, but even an extra \$500,000 could eliminate some potential cuts. He said that even if we received \$28 million, nothing would be added to the budget.

Mr. Sokolovic said we have not discussed additional revenues. He said the Lighthouse Program has been underpaying rent and funds for decades. He said the last time he believed it was in the range of \$300,000 which could eliminate one of these lines. He said the

argument will be they service our children, but other programs that serve children are charged.

Mr. Sokolovic said the board has to have its priorities listed with what we want back first. He said if additional funds are received, Dr. Avery will have those marching orders.

Mr. Sokolovic said we need to lobby the state to get the charter schools to pay their own transportation costs, especially in light of the bill passed to give the same amount of ECS per student as we get.

Ms. Perez said it is going to sound evil, but she asked if we can up the mileage for charter school students even more. Mr. Sokolovic said as the law is written right now, we've got to provide them with the same transportation. Dr. Avery said they're still our kids. Mr. Medina said they're receiving more money from the state, but they're not doing anything more for the kids. Mr. Traber said no one here disagrees, but there is no specific legislation to address it this year, just minor pieces to make charter schools more accountable.

In response to a question, Mr. Costello described the bumping rights of assistant principals. He said they would bump down to open positions first, which would be Kelly positions. He said the district had already lost two assistant principals since the board's vote, which would lead to the savings of the entire salary.

Dr. Avery said most teachers that moved up to administrator don't want to go back to being a teacher, so they will probably end up leaving.

Mr. Sokolovic said good luck on your job search and we're sorry we had to let you go.

In response to a question, Mr. Costello said administrators have to be notified by June 30th of layoffs.

Mr. Sokolovic said the figures indicated teachers will be excessed in FY2026 by maximizing out class sizes. Mr. Nkwo and Dr. Avery described the process to be used. Mr. Sokolovic said it sounded like redistricting. Mr. Nkwo and Dr. Avery said that was not the case. Dr. Avery said Mr. Karaffa came up with the data that resulted in the 31 positions. He said he would provide further clarity.

In response to a question, Mr. Nkwo said every student would stay in the same school. Mr. Costello said we excess teachers every single year, so this is nothing new.

Sangeeta Bella, executive director of school leadership, described the process used in a school.

Ms. Hughes said many classes only have thirteen or less students. She said we met with every school and every principal, looking at projected enrollment, which

is how the decisions are made.

Mr. Sokolovic asked if it would be more feasible to redistrict. He noted distaste to the suggestion. Dr. Avery said that was an option under the facilities study. Mr. Sokolovic said some of our districts are set up to insulate neighborhoods, and it was high time to look at redistricting.

Mr. Traber said he can remember hearing stories over the years from parents who wonder why they're living a block away from Madison and they're going to Cross. He said there were unjustifiable reasons for some of the districts that were done in the past by people who are no longer here.

Mr. Traber said savings from being more efficient can only be done in big schools. He said when teaching in a large school he saw how the number of classes in each grade could be adjusted. He said this was less the case in smaller schools, where you're forced to move children and/or staff to other schools. He said last year it was unprofessionally done because some teachers weren't told they would be moved to other buildings before the middle of August.

Dr. Avery said we understand how the process works, and we don't want to disrupt teachers and kids and classrooms. Mr. Medina said it was shocking to see the reaction to the word "redistricting." Dr. Avery said he would love to spend more time having

conversations with board members outside a board meeting to provide greater clarity. He said that was healthy for the board-superintendent relationship. Mr. Sokolovic said he was in favor of discussions, but the questions he asks are those he would like the public to know the question was asked and the answer.

In response to a question, Mr. Nkwo said class sizes are set by contract. Mr. Sokolovic asked if we could look at that in negotiations for certain circumstances.

Mr. Sokolovic said he had a concern about state curriculum because most of the districts in the state are heavily Caucasian, and he asked if the curriculum is diverse enough. Ms. Hughes said that would be part of the curriculum writing team's job. She said meeting the standards for the grade level is the key, which includes diversity. Mr. Sokolovic said we've done a lot of work to include diversity in the last five or six years.

Ms. Hughes said teachers have expressed that they want themes to the curriculum.

In response to a question, Mr. Costello said the teachers in the human resources department mentor new teachers, which is a state program, and they also run the cross-certification and residency programs. He said they provide professional development and new teacher orientation. He said their work is amazing, with two people doing the work of four

people. He described the partnerships with universities.

Mr. Sokolovic said he had concerns about the projected savings in special education because the district has gotten in trouble before. He said strictly enforcing financial controls would be illegal under state statute on special education placements. He noted Mr. DiDonato got us out of the fire the last time we were under the gun because the financial team was making decisions on IEPs. He said he wanted to ensure we should not block anyone's IEP due to financial concerns.

Dr. Avery said he would not allow that to happen on his watch. He said there were opportunities to look at how we service and evaluate kids. He said the state technical assistance team is helping in this area.

Mr. Sokolovic asked why flip phones could not be used for district business. He said flip phones were still available.

In response to a question, Dr. Avery and Ms. Hughes said they did not believe there was written curriculum for media/library. Mr. Sokolovic said these are horrible cuts, but there is no curriculum attached to the positions.

In response to a question, Dr. Avery said different staff members can assist in the libraries. He said he

would need some time to work with principals on how we do that.

Mr. Costello said there are 39 schools currently and there are only 15 library/media specialists, so 24 libraries are already operating without this position.

Mr. Sokolovic said this is an unkind cut and is horrible because every job adds value to the district.

Mr. Medina noted a grant for \$1 million for libraries recently came before the board. Ms. Hughes said that would fall under the literacy area and is something that principals will coordinate. Ms. Bella said in schools without specialists, the principals have managed the distribution of books in the past with the support of the director of literacy.

In response to a question, Mr. Costello said the next five assistant principal positions eliminated would be based on seniority, and transfers will take place with the final list. He discussed the process that must be used, which he said was done when six clerical assistants were reduced.

Mr. Sokolovic said he wanted the assignment of assistant principals to schools to be equity-based and not to hit one side of town disproportionately. He said the last time this was done the board reversed its decision to remove an assistant principal in a magnet school due to public pressure at the expense of an

inner-city school, where there was no parental pressure.

Mr. Nkwo said the allocations would be formula-based on the number of students.

Mr. Sokolovic asked about the 40 teachers, which is in addition to the 31 positions. Mr. Nkwo said it was not really the elimination of positions but backfilling vacant positions. Mr. Costello said he did not know what the 40 positions are. Mr. Nkwo said it was based on student population and curriculum.

In response to a question, Mr. Nkwo said the balance in the Internal Service Fund (ISF) after 2026 will be \$5 million. He said prior to Covid, there were never withdrawals from the ISF to cover deficits. Mr. Sokolovic said there is \$5 million in the ISF that could be used to save \$2.5 million in cuts.

Mr. Nkwo said \$5 million is the bare minimum the city would like to be retained. Mr. Sokolovic said the effect of retaining the money is hurting our children because kindergarten paras could be removed from the list. He said the city has no say over how we spend our money once it's allocated to us.

In response to a question, Mr. Nkwo said there is no law requiring that money be retained in the ISF, but it is financially prudent that we keep money in reserve for health insurance increases. He noted next year it

is going up 11 percent. He said using the reserve on a one-time fix such as paras is something that would not be able to be continued to be provided going down the road.

Mr. Traber said there is a long list of things that we don't like in front of us. He said he understood Mr. Nkwo does not want to give up the \$5 million in reserve. He said we had these arguments last year, and we didn't like spending the \$34 million.

Mr. Traber said you should have seen the turnout about the Lighthouse Program; hundreds of people came out at Johnson School screaming at us. He said there is nothing pleasant about this. He said we have to pray and push. He said Lighthouse is a source we will have to look at it. He said it has been a good discussion tonight, unpleasant as it is.

Mr. Benejan Grajales said he did not like a lot of the things here, but we have to do layoffs and cuts to save money. He said he would not agree to items 9, 10, 11, 12, and 14. He said item 17 was needed in our district.

In response to a question, Mr. Nkwo said number 21 would not break the law; it is operational efficiency. Mr. Benejan Grajales said he did not agree with number 23 due to the support they provide.

In response to a question, Mr. Nkwo said the board

already took action on item 11 to move assistant principals into the classroom, with savings from not hiring Kelly employees.

Mr. Benejan Grajales said charter schools had a lot of support, and they receive millions, and they can pay for their own transportation.

Mr. Benejan Grajales said the state knows what we need. He said we have to support our staff so they can trust us. He said trust was important. He said he never agreed to layoffs, but we have no choice. He said other districts in Connecticut also have financial issues. He said the public, students and staff have to be ready to go to Hartford with the board

Mr. Woodson said as we advocate, we have to speak to people respectfully.

Mr. Traber requested that the working document note which items were previously passed by the board and which are new proposals.

Ms. Perez said the city public hearing for the board's budget will be on May 1st.

Mr. Traber said the superintendent's office has been helpful to the public in providing contact information for lobbying efforts. Dr. Avery said we're looking at trying to get some students up to Hartford as well. He said the city is trying to coordinate a Bridgeport day in

Hartford as well in the upcoming weeks. He said five urban districts are also talking about getting students up for Senate Bill 1511.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 9:26 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Approved by the committee on May 21, 2025