

Thursday, March 20, 2025

MINUTES OF THE FINANCE COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held March 20, 2025, at Bridgeport City Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 5:31 p.m. Committee members present were Chair Joseph Sokolovic, Willie Medina, and Maritza Estremera Jimenez. Board members Jennifer Perez and Akisha Cassermere* joined the meeting subsequently as noted. *

Interim Supt. Royce Avery was present.

*remote participation

Mr. Medina moved to approve the minutes of the meeting of March 3, 2025. The motion was seconded by Ms. Estremera Jimenez and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on extension of the current agreement for the advanced alternate route to certification and special education agreement.

Dr. Avery said in April of last year the board approved ten positions for paraprofessionals to be DSAPed for special education positions in the district. (He later indicated he misspoke, and the program is for current

teachers.) He said the district pays a portion of their tuition. He said it would be a great opportunity to open it up for ten additional individuals. He said the cost will be about \$100,000.

Michael Brosnan said this has been a successful program. He said the program is through the state Department of Education, which involves cross certifying current teachers in special education. He said it is run through CREC at cost of about \$10,000 per candidate. He said that previously veteran teachers have become cross-endorsed into special education. He said they have been mostly midcareer teachers.

Mr. Brosnan said last year we were late on the timeline in recruiting, so we only have five in the program right now. He said he was reassured by the large number of teachers expressing interest.

In response to a question, Mr. Brosnan said the program runs on an annual basis beginning in June. He said 22 people expressed interest in January. He said the five in the program are serving as special education teachers right now. He said we're requesting up to twenty teachers for next school year based on the interest.

Mr. Brosnan said teachers in the program receive a two-step payroll enhancement, along with the application fee, which is \$9,950 per candidate, and

they commit to remaining in the special education role for three years beyond. Teachers must complete the program and be successful on the credentialing exams.

In response to a question, Mr. Brosnan said the promissory note and the MOU includes a prorated repayment that will be made should someone leave prior to the end of the commitment. He said in the four years that he has coordinated program, only one individual left the district, who paid the difference of what she was paid.

In response to a question, Mr. Brosnan said he believed the three-year commitment is beyond the training year. Dr. Avery said he believed that was correct. Mr. Brosnan said he would doublecheck on this.

Mr. Sokolovic said that we're in the midst of cutting \$20 million to \$23 million in existing positions, and there's a suggestion to add \$266,000 in additional costs to our budget. Dr. Avery said the program was successful and the state suggested it be expanded. Mr. Sokolovic said every one of these positrons has value.

In response to a question, Mr. Brosnan said the two-step enhancement would begin in the next school year, and it would effectively be a three-step jump from their current level because they receive one step

without the program. Dr. Avery said there is also a substitute cost savings as well.

Mr. Medina said the district would lose twenty regular education teachers while it is already about a hundred teachers short. Mr. Brosnan said it was naïve to think to expect that we could get twenty new special education teachers next year to fill the vacancies we currently have and expect to pay them at the lowest end of the salary scale. He said there is a severe shortage of special education teachers, while there is a surplus of elementary certified teachers.

Mr. Sokolovic said he was concerned about adding expenditures. He said prior to 2020 we split nurses between two or three schools. He asked, where is the corresponding cut going to come from. He said we were trying to carry out state mandates that they don't fund. He asked if the state could be approached to waive these tuition fees.

Nestor Nkwo, chief financial officer, said he has the same concern, but from a business perspective the district needs qualified special education teachers and to provide services for children, so parents don't exercise their open choice to go out of the district.

Ms. Estremera Jimenez said she was a big supporter of special education. She suggested tabling the discussion until Mr. Nkwo brings suggested cuts to pay for the program.

Mr. Brosnan said the applications are due to CREC by March 31st. He said CREC has been a good partner, and we can ask them to go through their interview process and hold tight until June.

Mr. Sokolovic said the solution to all our problems is money, not management. Mr. Nkwo said this was a future cost-avoidance for the district because of the number of special education students.

Dr. Avery requested the matter be moved to the full board for discussion. He said it was a huge challenge to get certified teachers in classrooms in the district. He said he appreciated the financial concern, but he is dealing with parents every single day who are saying they don't have a teacher in their children's classroom.

Mr. Sokolovic said Ms. Perez as chair had the ability to place the item on the agenda regardless of the committee's action.

In response to a question, Mr. Nkwo said the five slots in the budget for 2024-25 are leftover and are somewhat cost neutral.

Ms. Estremera Jimenez said if we can go to the board and say we found the money to fund this, it's a no-brainer. She said the program is very much needed right now.

Mr. Medina said he wanted to be sure everything that gets to the full board is done with every thought and all data possible to make sure. Mr. Brosnan said Mr. Nkwo can complete a more sophisticated cost analysis on hiring new teachers to replace those who go into special education. Mr. Medina said we're responsible for every dollar we spend, and he wanted to be sure the board has all the information.

Dr. Avery said it was important to understand that we've analyzed this before we bring it to the board. He noted the cost of paying substitutes. Mr. Nkwo said special education teaching is very challenging and not many want to go into it. He said the board could extend the length of the contract to four years and get greater return on the investment.

Mr. Sokolovic said he would like to bring the matter back to the committee. He said he was definitely not opposed to the program, which is greatly needed. He said he was bound by state statutes and by the state overlords watching this meeting to see if we're spending responsibly. He said the state is starving us for funds and threatening to take over. He said we still don't know where we're cutting \$20 million to \$23 million. He said he sees the children suffering. He said that all these things have to be in our heads at the same time.

In response to a question, Mr. Nkwo said he could

provide more detailed information by Monday's meeting.

Mr. Sokolovic said he would like to postpone the matter and bring it back to committee.

Ms. Perez* joined the meeting.

In response to a question, Mr. Brosnan said the applications are due statewide on March 31st. He said he knew of four teachers who have completed an application.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested moving five positions that are already budgeted for Monday, to get those locked in, and bring the fifteen back to committee later on. Mr. Nkwo said the five are already approved from last year.

Ms. Estremera Sanchez asked if Mr. Nkwo can get us the numbers by noon on Monday, if we can have a special meeting on Monday to work through what he's presenting.

Dr. Avery suggested moving it to the full board, and if we don't get the funds, we don't get the funds. Mr. Nkwo said he can guarantee regular education teachers hired will come in at a lower rate to offset the cost of the training of the special education teachers. He said the district was way ahead of finding math and science teachers compared to special education

teachers.

In response to a question, Mr. Brosnan said without the guaranteed tuition fee, some candidates would still be interested. He questioned whether they could be held to any commitment to the district.

In response to a question, Mr. Nkwo said high school teachers are also eligible to apply for the program.

In response to a question, Mr. Brosnan said it was a valid question that teachers don't apply for the program because they don't know if they'll be accepted, or the program will go through. He said this is about the best deal you can get in the state to certify special education teachers, and there are costs associated to it but it's really nominal compared to trying hire external candidates. He said he believed moving the program forward would show people the board is committed to the idea of this.

Mr. Medina said there was no guarantee anytime you apply for a position. He said he believed this topic should have been brought up previously due to the March 31st deadline.

There was a discussion of when a meeting on this subject should be held.

Mr. Medina moved *"to move to the full board discussion and possible referral to the extension of*

the CREC agreement for the 2024-25 advancement of alternative route to certification in sped agreement.”

The motion was seconded by Ms. Estremera Jimenez and approved by 2-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Estremera Jimenez and Medina. Mr. Sokolovic was opposed.

The next agenda item was a financial report, February 28th update.

Mr. Nkwo discussed the gap-closing measures. He said thank God the governor approved the special education funding of \$1.8 million for this year. He said additional layoffs would result in only \$300,000 in savings because there are only three months left in the school year. The full effect would take place next year.

Mr. Nkwo said the current year's budget is in balance, however, \$22 million of the Internal Service Fund will be used. He said this is non-replenishable money, and it will be the beginning deficit for the next fiscal year. He said in a given year the district's budget goes up by twelve to fourteen million dollars, of which eight million is for salary increases and pension contributions. Health insurance adds four to five million dollars. He said special education has gone up \$30 million in six years. The average annual increase in all funding the district has received is \$3.8 million, which is not even able to cover the salary increases.

Mr. Nkwo said the district survived the last four years by supplementing with the ESSER grant money, which has ended. He said the compounded effect is what we're facing today.

In response to a question, Mr. Nkwo said he would put the report up on the website. He said he did not want to put things on the website that were not approved by the board. Mr. Sokolovic said the quarterly financial condition reports are required to be posted online.

Mr. Sokolovic said knowing the district has fixed increases of ten to twelve million dollars each year, the state and the city have given an average of \$3.8 million to maintain the status quo. Mr. Nkwo said Bridgeport had the most students in the state as of October numbers, yet the ECS gave Hartford more money with less students.

Ms. Estremera Jimenez noted everyone is dealing with inflation and this is a huge problem. She said we need to try to make decisions that are sustainable. She asked if we could go to other school districts and partner in hopes having the state take action. She said not being properly funded was unfair to our kids.

Mr. Medina said state funding has not kept pace with inflation between 2017 and 2024. He said this should not be acceptable to any parent, student or educator.

He said over \$674 million less has been given to us compared to the other districts, which are predominantly white. He said our kids have more needs than other districts, yet we do not get compensation. He said he wanted the community to know this is why we have to make hard decisions. He said money is the only way.

Mr. Nkwo said the additional special education funds received of \$1.6 million this year is not in next year's state budget; however, it is repeated in the governor 2027 budget, which means there is a gap.

In response to a question, Mr. Nkwo said layoffs the board authorized totaled \$10 million but you can only get \$2.1 million this year after vacation time and unemployment payment.

Mr. Nkwo and Dr. Avery said they would provide the breakdown requested by Mr. Medina. Mr. Sokolovic said we can't advocate properly unless we understand the budget numbers.

The next agenda item was on the elimination of kindergarten paras. Mr. Nkwo said the two-to-one paras in kindergarten classes were reinstated when ESSER was in place. He said they are 44 Delta T employees, not city employees. He said no district employee is losing their job with this action. He said the contract with the agency will be terminated and the district will not have to pay unemployment or

health insurance.

In response to a question, Dr. Avery explained the support paraprofessionals provide to classroom kindergarten teachers.

Mr. Sokolovic said he joined the board the year after the board eliminated the kindergarten paraprofessionals. He said it was understood when we brought them back that it was temporary, although gut-wrenching. He said in this city many students cannot afford to go to preschool, so they are often in need of greater attention in kindergarten on things such as tying shoes or needing assistance in bathroom visits. He said this was a disgusting cut that he was going to have to vote for because of what the state and the local government is forcing upon our children.

In response to a question, Mr. Nkwo said he would recommend the action on the paras take effect at the beginning of the next school year.

Ms. Estremera Jimenez asked if we could go back on some budget eliminations if we get more funding than expected. Mr. Nkwo said that was correct. He said we could utilize the Delta T paras per the contract if funds are found.

Dr. Avery said he wanted to emphasize it was going to be very impactful to the classroom because our

kids are coming into the classroom with more immediate needs.

In response to a question, Mr. Nkwo said every two classrooms shares one para. Mr. Sokolovic said around 2015 we went from one to one to two to one.

In response to a question, Domenic Costello, chief human resource officer, said all other paras in the district are assigned through AFSCME 1522, although some are not union-paying dues members. He said we are constantly hiring paras because it is a high-need position. Mr. Sokolovic said in a well-funded district we would have stable paras working with our children. Mr. Costello said many do stay and they are not lost like teachers.

Mr. Sokolovic said we can assign values and priorities to items to bring back in the event of more funding being received.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *“to refer to the full board the elimination of two-to-one kindergarten paraprofessionals from Delta T that was reinstated with ESSER funds.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Medina.

Ms. Estremera Jimenez said this decision truly troubles her. She said she suggested cutting back not in the classroom first. She asked if we have looked at every possible overtime cost. She said she was

surprised from looking at the budget that the majority of the things we cannot do anything about.

Mr. Nkwo said he has gone through this budget and only about \$100,000 in overtime can be saved this year. He said the overtime expenditures are seasonal due to things such as snow removal. He said a lot of work was done with ESSER money, including capital improvements. He said we have to streamline now.

Mr. Sokolovic said he was assuming \$3 million in funding from the city. He said we have to go through the budget with a fine-tooth comb and go department by department, line by line. He said it would be a long road.

Ms. Estremera Jimenez said she was trying to take Solution 1 off the books if we can find savings elsewhere. She noted an expenditure of \$15,000 for postage. She said she would provide a list of items to Mr. Nkwo because every penny counts.

Mr. Sokolovic said we have to find \$23 million after this is done. He said \$24.9 million would be needed to bring back the paras. He said if the pay for paras was increased, we could consider having permanent paras like surrounding districts.

The motion was unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on elimination of eleven

restorative practice positions that were funded through ESSER funds.

Dr. Avery said these positions were switched from in-school suspension (ISS) positions under the prior administration in the 2023-24 school year. The monies were used to hire nine restorative practice facilitators that are currently in the district. Last year, the state sanctioned the district and said the ISS positions were required. Additional dollars were found from ESSER to reinstate ISS officers. He said next year we will not have money to fund the restorative positions.

Dr. Avery said this will not result in savings because we are required by the state to have ISS in our buildings. He said some campuses will use ISS more than others.

Mr. Medina questioned listing the item as a budget cut because it was not a savings.

In response to a question, Mr. Costello said we currently have no ISS officers, and everything is the restorative practice specialists, and we have to put the ISS officers back in through NAGE. He said a grievance was filed against the district by the bargaining unit.

Dr. Avery said the state gave us some wiggle room, and we have Delta subs doing ISS. Next year, we

have to give the positions back to the union. The funding is being found through the restorative practice specialists.

In response to a question, Mr. Costello said we believe we need nine ISS officers to meet the state requirement, which he said would be the bare minimum. He said the average salary is about \$42,000. He said the salary of the restorative practice positions is about the same, and they are not bargaining unit members.

In response to a question, Mr. Costello said the Delta employees in the district are not necessarily trained in restorative practices. Dr. Avery described the duties of the restorative practice specialists; he added that they also help teachers with deescalating skills.

Dr. Albert Sackey, assistant superintendent, said the restorative practice facilitators help mend conflicts that arise in a building. He said Connecticut is one of the first states to implement restorative practices as a mandate. He said the training on restorative practices has been provided to staff, and it is hoped to train all staff to give restorative support.

In response to a question, Dr. Sackey said consequences for behavior still have to be given, but it helps to restore from whatever the infraction was, including between a student and a teacher.

In response to a question, Mr. Costello said we're currently in negotiations with the union on whether ISS officers can engage in restorative practices so we cannot disclose too much. Dr. Avery said he believed the restorative practice mandate is more about training. Mr. Sokolovic said he was trying to expose what we were losing. He said all the positions we are losing are valued. He said each one of these professionals deserve the respect of knowing they're still valued even though we can't afford to pay them their value.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *"to the full board the elimination of eleven restorative practice positions and transfer the \$936,480 to be used to reinstate in-school suspension officers."* The motion was seconded by Mr. Medina and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on elimination of additional carryover positions that were funded with ESSER funds in 2025 of \$2.5 million.

Mr. Nkwo said the \$2.5 million was a net number. He said he did not have positions today. He said if the board approves, Dr. Avery has to agree on the positions that will be eliminated.

Dr. Avery said this is something the board asked for, and we will take the lowest hanging fruit that we can find if this is something the board wants us to do. He said we are getting to tapping into the classrooms.

Mr. Sokolovic said he was asking that \$23 million be found, not \$2.5 million, in eliminations because that is our gap. He said he wanted to go position by position, step by step. The administration had to bring recommendations, and we have to either approve, modify or deny them. He said we need a menu to choose from.

Mr. Sokolovic said we cannot keep putting off cuts, and we have to make the hard decisions. He said the superintendent has the whole global picture and he knows what we need to operate.

Mr. Nkwo asked if the board and the committee is ready to close schools. Mr. Sokolovic said he was just told that closing schools was not on the table for next year. He said if schools are going to be closed, somebody has to say yes or no.

Dr. Avery said recommendations were given for board approval and we're in that process right now. Mr. Sokolovic said he heard there would be no school closures through 2026-27.

Ms. Estremera Jimenez said we have to follow an entire policy to close schools, which includes a committee and community involvement. She said it could not get done to make an impact in 2025-26. Mr. Sokolovic said Mr. Nkwo brought up school closures in relation to the 2025-26 budget. He said we need

\$23 million in suggested cuts to bring our budget into balance.

Dr. Avery said we made recommendations to the board, and everything has been done very strategically. He said the elimination of the assistant principals was paused until the end of the school year. He said \$23 million in recommendations would absolutely turn the district upside down, and there would be unheard of panic.

Mr. Sokolovic asked how we were going to balance the budget and not have the state take us over. He said the assistant principal amount was less than ten percent of the total budget cuts we need to make. He said \$23 million in cuts was needed in the next 90 days.

Ms. Estremera Jimenez said school closures will not help in 2025-26 because of the lack of time. She suggested, based on the facilities master plan, making cuts that make sense for the 2026-27 budget. Mr. Sokolovic said he agreed. Ms. Estremera Jimenez said she wanted to know exactly what cuts she's voting on.

Mr. Sokolovic said we have to find \$23 million in cuts for 2025-26 without a single school closure.

Mr. Nkwo said time is money, and every delay adds costs. Mr. Sokolovic said he agreed. He said the cuts

still have to be brought before the board sooner than later. He said he spoke with state officials the other day who said they were watching. He said if the state wants us to move slowly and kick the can down the road, they should let us know.

In response to a question, Mr. Nkwo said the \$2.5 million cut has to be done this year with the full-blown savings coming into play the next fiscal year. He said as of April 1, employees laid off have to be paid their vacation time.

In response to a question, Mr. Nkwo said it was not easy to identify the positions because they are mainly in the operating budget. He said we would have to scale back counselors and social workers.

Ms. Estremera Jimenez said it would be helpful to know exactly the positions to be cut because it would be great for advocacy efforts to get dollars from the state and those funding us.

Mr. Sokolovic said we may have to have a reduction in force. He said the larger turnover might mean we don't have to resort to layoffs. He said we don't have 90 days, because the bargaining unit requires the district to inform staff whether their contract is being renewed as of May 1st. He said we could be penalized for not following collective bargaining.

Mr. Sokolovic said we are mandated by the state to

have a balanced budget and that is what the superintendent is hired to do. Mr. Nkwo said to get to closing the gap of close to \$28 million, you're going to have to do a cut of \$35 million to \$36 million.

Mr. Sokolovic said the only other option is for us to break the law, go into deficit spending, keep every position, not panicking the public, meet payroll until about March 2026, and then have no money to pay anybody.

Mr. Nkwo said he wanted people watching to know the magnitude of the situation.

The next agenda item was on reducing facilities overtime to 2024 spending of \$950,000 levels versus the 2025 projection of \$1.2 million

In response to a question, Mr. Nkwo said custodians take vacation and they have to be backfilled, which leads to overtime. Ms. Estremera Jimenez asked if the overtime can be reduced further. Mr. Nkwo said the calculation of overtime percentages over the years is affected by wage increases. Mr. Medina said the amount of staff in the facilities department would impact the use of overtime.

Ms. Perez said facilities overtime includes programming offered at schools and board meetings. She said that we have to make sure programs are covering the cost of the use of the buildings.

Mr. Nkwo said when a program comes before the board, we have to ask who is paying for the overtime and standard custodial work.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *“to approve for referral to the full board reducing the public facilities overtime fiscal year 2024-25 spending for a savings of \$350,000.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Medina.

Mr. Sokolovic said during last year’s spending spree facilities was the only department that was cut, and it is one of the few departments that generates some revenue in the form of grants. He said our buildings are in horrendous shape and we are potentially closing schools in the 2026-27 school year because we have not maintained them. He said if we had the money to maintain our schools, nobody would be talking about the facilities master plan and what we do next. He noted the shortage of trades workers in the district. He said the impact of this will be monumental.

The motion was unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on the expenditure report for fiscal year 2023-24 for a list of schools.

Mr. Nkwo said the data was located on page 8. He said the numbers were audited for fiscal year 2023-24 and is broken down by categories.

Hall was \$2.8 million; Edison was \$2.9 million; Beardsley was \$4.8 million; Dunbar was \$6.7 million; Bridgeport Learning Center was \$3.2 million; Bryant was \$4.8 million; Wilbur Cross was \$5 million.

Mr. Sokolovic said we should look at the financial impact of these schools sooner rather than later. He added there is misinformation out there about the prior superintendent's plan that we would not have to lay off any employees. He said if the schools were closed, we would save \$25 million if every single employee and every program and expenditure was removed, without accounting for additional expenses or bumping rights, we would be short of a balanced budget. He said this is how much trouble we are in as a district. He said this was not a sustainable model for education.

Ms. Perez said the cuts would not total the amount at each school because some of the teachers would go to other schools and services would still be provided to the students no matter what school they're in. She said there would be some salary cuts, but for the most part you're looking at operating costs. Special education services would continue. She said savings would be maintenance costs and utilities.

Mr. Sokolovic said there would be some staff and security savings if we're consolidating schools into a new building.

Ms. Perez said the recommendation is to build a 750-seat building, and four schools could not fit into that space. If four schools were closed, redistricting would take place.

Mr. Sokolovic said the number of administrators and teachers would be reduced.

Ms. Cassermere* joined the meeting on Teams. She indicated she had been watching the meeting on YouTube.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:46 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Approved by the committee on April 10, 2025