

Wednesday, March 26, 2024

MINUTES OF THE OF THE INSTRUCTION AND SUPPORT SERVICES COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held March 26, 2024, at City Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 5:35 p.m. Present were members Chair Robert Traber and Albert Benejan Grajales, and Andre Woodson*. Board member Willie Medina* was present. Board members Akisha Cassermere* and Jennifer Perez* joined the meeting subsequently as noted

*remote participation

Mr. Benejan Grajales moved to approve the minutes of the meeting of March 6, 2025. The motion was seconded by Mr. Traber and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on High Horizons Magnet School's out-of-state fieldtrip to Washington, D.C.

Francine Carbone, principal, was present. The trip is scheduled from June 3rd to June 6th. She said it is our ninth trip to D.C. Trips are alternated each year between Philadelphia and Washington. She said there are four students to a hotel room with a security guard on duty, who coordinates with the lead

chaperone. She described the sites to be visited. She said all meals except for the first lunch are included in the cost of the trip.

In response to a question, Ms. Carbone said 86 students are scheduled to participate. She said she provides assurance to parents that if a child needs to come home, she will come and get them via train.

Mr. Benejan Grajales expressed concerns about immigration enforcement while on the trip. Ms. Carbone described the precautions in effect.

Mr. Traber moved “*to approve to the full board the High Horizons Magnet School out-of-state field trip to Washington, D.C., June 3rd to 6th, 2025.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan Grajales and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was an overnight trip for Discovery Magnet. Alicia Romatzick, science teacher, said we have been attending Outdoor Classroom, formerly known as Nature’s Classroom, for over fifteen years at the school. She said she this will be her tenth year. She described it is a multiday educational trip, focused on science, teamwork, nature, and personal growth.

The trip is scheduled for May 14th to May 16th in Lakeside, Connecticut. The cost is \$331 per student; fundraising reduced the cost to \$260 per student.

She described the housing of the students and the presence of chaperones. She described emergency procedures.

Principal John Ramos II said he was excited to see the trip happen.

In response to a question, Ms. Romatzick said she would seek counsel on immigration issues.

In response to a question, Ms. Romatzick said 35 students and seven adults would be on the trip.

Mr. Traber moved that “we approve and move to the full board the approval of the Discovery Magnet School’s overnight field trip to Nature’s Classroom in Washington, Connecticut, on May 14th through 16th, 2025.” The motion was seconded Mr. Benejan Grajales.

Ms. Romatzick said the name was changed to Outdoor Classroom about a month ago.

Mr. Traber withdrew his motion. He made a friendly amendment to his motion

Mr. Traber moved “*to approve and move to the full board the approval of the Discovery Magnet School’s overnight field trip to the Outdoor Classroom in Lakeside, Connecticut, on May 14th through 16th, 2025.*” The motion was seconded Mr. Benejan

Grajales and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on Discovery Magnet's field trip overnight to Washington, D.C., May 14th to 16th. Teacher Careen Derise presented. Just the 8th graders would be participating. She described the sites to be visited. Sixteen students and four chaperones will be on the trip. She described security arrangements and records and training on medication.

Mr. Ramos said there will be intense adult supervision because of the ratio of adults to students, which would help with any negative interactions that might come up with people trying to approach our students.

Mr. Benejan Grajales expressed concern about the cleanliness of rooms. The procedures were described.

Mr. Medina said hie looked forward to hearing more about the trip later.

Mr. Benejan Grajales moved "*to approve and send to the full approval the Interdistrict Magnet School's overnight field trip to Washington, D.C., May 14th to 16th, 2025.*" The motion was seconded by Mr. Traber and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on a purchase to subscribe to online resources for library refresh.

Albert Sackey, assistant superintendent, said there had been three major purchases for this round, and there will be more coming.

Lisette Valle, library at Park City Magnet School, and Teresa Welch of ITS were present. Ms. Valle said they have been a team from when the federal grant was awarded. There is no financial impact on the district.

Ms. Valle said this is Phase 2 of the library refresh, which is getting electronic resources for high schools and special needs students. She said students will be able to access the resources from home or on district devices.

Ms. Valle described Bookelicious A total of \$170,000 is being spent for the high schools, including the residential center on Housatonic Avenue. She said the funds have to be used for this purpose per the grant. Ms. Valle said Dr. Melissa Jenkins worked to get this grant for school libraries. Ms. Welch said it is geared towards gauging students' interests, so we get books kids want to read.

In response to a question, Ms. Valle said these are all hard copies of books.

Ms. Valle said the Encyclopedia Britannica is a digital resource that students will be able to access through

the MyBPS portal. She said their collection is very diverse. She described it as a go-to resource for classrooms as well as libraries. She described the digital library, Britannica School, which includes different levels for elementary, middle school, and high school. She said resources are available in several languages. Users are able to change reading levels.

Ms. Valle described other features available in the platform.

Ms. Valle said professional development for staff districtwide is also included.

Ms. Valle said the cost of Britannica is \$175,750, including professional development, for five years.

There was a discussion of the allocation of books.

Ms. Cassermere* joined the meeting.

Ms. Cassermere said the school librarians she has talked to co-sign with Bookelicious.

Mr. Traber said he was old enough to remember when door-to-door sales of vacuum cleaners and encyclopedias took place. He said he also remembered the first version of computerized encyclopedias.

Ms. Valle said part of the library refresh is to include digital access to newspapers. *The New York Times* will be available to students aged 13 and up. The subscription total is \$25,989.60 for five years. She said the packet shows what the access covers, which will be available through the student portal. Ms. Welch said the newspaper can also be used by content area teachers.

Ms. Cassermere said the *New York Times* is a good resource especially for students who are good readers. Mr. Traber said he believed most newspapers are written at a fourth grade reading level. He said some of the topics will be difficult to digest, including world news.

Mr. Benejan Grajales moved “*to approve and move to the full board library refresh to purchase to subscribe to online resources.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Traber and unanimously approved.

Mr. Benejan Grajales said kids don’t read books and don’t want to go to the library because of technology. He said he appreciated the work on the libraries. Ms. Valle described the use of technological resources to help students.

The next agenda item was on in-school (ISS) and out-of-school suspension (OSS) of SPED students in light of the code of conduct.

Mr. Traber said Mr. Benejan Grajales and Mr. Resto met with members of the administration on this subject, which involved the disproportionate suspensions of special education students. Mr. Traber said he also participated in the meeting.

Dr. Sackey said it was a great conversation.

Cheryl Faga, director of SEL and student affairs, said it was a very productive meeting, which included discussions of the code of conduct and the student handbook. She said we talked about adding housing insecurity as a consideration in determination of OSS and ISS. She said the appeal process was also discussed, and adding information on this when a suspension letter is sent out.

Ms. McKinley said our parents receive their notice of their rights as a parent of child with disabilities.

Dr. Faga said there was also discussion of making sure information is easily accessible on the website and professional development. She said re-entry meetings were also discussed, and the transition of children back into classrooms.

Ms. McKinley said when special education students are in ISS, they are still to receive their services. She said if that does not take place, it will be reported to the state.

Dr. Faga said we talked about students in ISS are also seen by mental health staff.

Margaret Hughes, executive director of school turnaround, said we are going to reinforce the Tier I interventions that we can do in the regular education classroom before we escalate a child.

Mr. Benejan Grajales said everything was very clear in the meeting.

In response to a question, Ms. McKinley said this would be conveyed to administrators at our March administrative council meeting. Mr. Traber said we should think about how to implement systemic change in the fall, while seeing what we can do this spring.

Ms. McKinley said she shared the presentation that Dr. Sackey made with the district supervisors of specialized instruction and highlighted the campuses that they are specifically assigned to where deep-dive conversations with administrators are needed.

Sangeeta Bella, executive director of school leadership, said we are reminding principals that when students with special needs are in ISS and OSS that they have a plan in place and to document the service hours being provided to the students.

Ms. McKinley said our first intervention should not be ISS or OSS, and other options should be considered

for students with disabilities.

Dr. Faga said we also discussed where the infraction occurs. Something that happened in the cafeteria or the hallway may not apply to what is going on in the classroom.

Dr. Sackey said there are several layers here, and the administrators have been working hard.

In response to a question, Dr. Sackey said the data is the total of the number of suspensions, not individuals. Mr. Traber said it was important to determine if incidents are the same individuals being suspended multiple times or multiple individuals being suspended. He asked if data could be provided on whether African American suspensions are across the board or not.

Dr. Sackey said the data would be gathered.

Ms. McKinley said it goes back to training and possible implicit bias. She said that we have to look at what we have in place to provide administrators with a toolbox for other options than ISS and OSS.

Dr. Faga said the data at each grade level would be important, along with monthly data.

Mr. Traber said the data presented the last time showed numbers that were not surprising at 9th

grade, along with 8th and 10th grades. He said we have to isolate why we are looking at African American population and males within that.

Ms. Hughes said teachers may need more support in dealing with student behavior.

Ms. Bella said we should also look at systems that are in place at various campuses. Dr. Faga said we have to look at relationships with 9th grade students.

Mr. Traber said it appears we have our work cut out for us.

Mr. Woodson said he hoped there was some type of mechanism to observe teachers and principals. He said there are some that may be a little quick to discipline kids. He said he hoped there was a way to identify if a teacher or principal is recommending suspensions at a higher level. He said a few years ago there was a principal at Bassick with a high level of suspensions, and he is being returned to Bassick this year.

Mr. Traber said we were just talking about taking a deep dive into the data by school.

Mr. Woodson said the numbers could not only identify a problem with a principal, but also a problem with the kid. He noted a 14-year-old kid was recently shot on the East End.

Ms. Cassermere described work with foster children who receive out-of-school suspension. Dr. Sackey said there should be a packet of work that is sent home to students in OSS. He said over time there might have been different approaches and expectations. He said now there is a heavy push on social-emotional learning and restorative work. He said numbers over time will be valuable to see what trends are occurring.

Mr. Traber said there are the full spectrum of individuals as to how they think they should deal with students, and there is an issue of getting the staff people to understand what the system wants them to do. He noted the turnover of leadership in the district.

Mr. Traber said the first data indicates special education students were being suspended at a disproportionate rate, and it was noted that African American boys were disproportionately suspended also. He said there was a discussion on the special education issue and now we want to look more closely at the African American boys to see if there are administrators or students who are not following the discipline plan that we're currently trying to use in the district.

Mr. Traber said we have a high proportion of new teachers, and the hardest thing for new teachers is classroom management. He said Bridgeport still has a

high percentage of white teachers not understanding Bridgeport. He said if we can provide support and trainings, the more people we can recruit from Bridgeport to be teachers.

The next agenda item was on PAC/PTSO year-to-date expenditure report.

Dr. Sackey said Dr. Faga will be sharing the breakdowns. He said executive directors will be following up with schools where the majority of the money has not been spent.

Dr. Faga said 98 percent of the action plans have been turned in at this point. In elementary schools. She said there are six schools that have spent 89 percent or more in spending budgets; seven schools are between 50 and 75 percent; and seven schools that are between 49 and 25. There are ten schools that are between 25 and 49, and six schools that are 24 percent or less. She said we have been working with the executive directors and principals about the schools that are 24 or less.

Dr. Faga said at the high school level there are two schools with 70 percent spending; one at 48; one at 22; one at 10; and two that are at zero. One of the schools at zero did not have an action plan in and they now, so that money is being processed. There is one high school without an action plan.

Dr. Faga said there was one-on-one training with all of the PAC presidents this year with the community liaison. She described the training.

Dr. Faga said the emphasis is on making sure funds are encumbered in the next two weeks. Ms. Bella said there an extension was granted to April 21st by Mr. Nkwo.

Dr. Sackey said Mr. Nkwo had allowed an additional week for the money to be encumbered.

In response to a question, Ms. Hughes said the city has deadlines on purchase orders to expend funds, which are determined in-house. It was April 9th, and an extension was requested and granted to April 21st.

Dr. Faga said there have been planning meetings of the PAC convention, but the date has not been finalized. She said the PAC presidents have been meeting for the convention.

In response to a question, Dr. Faga said there were six PAC presidents at the last meeting, although all were invited. The next meeting is Thursday.

Mr. Traber said that gave him pause because that is less than 25 percent of the schools. Dr. Faga described efforts to engage the PAC presidents.

Dr. Faga said the schools themselves are running

events as well. She said she has attended some well-attended PAC events.

Presented In response to a question, Dr. Faga said the data was as of March 18th. Mr. Traber said he cannot believe Bassick is at zero because he attended an event there. Dr. Sackey said the issue may be entry of information.

Mr. Traber said he did not believe Classical Studies has spent zero percent. Dr. Faga said sometimes signoffs is the issue. Dr. Sackey said there is a definite disconnect on inputting information.

Mr. Benejan Grajales said this is something he has been doing for twenty years. He said he was very surprised about everything. He said sometimes the school secretary does not send the form in. He described the use of the P10 form, which requires signatures by the principal and the PAC president. He described his use of the form in the past as a PAC president.

Mr. Benejan Grajales said the parent convention has to be planned by a committee, and is a big, huge job. He said he did it twice as PAC president at Bassick. He said we're talking about 300 parents and people from the state and the city. He said he had often asked how much money is left to hold the convention.

Mr. Benejan Grajales described the use of funds to

buy food because parents often come from work, and this often led to friction with principals on whether food was needed.

Ms. Perez joined the meeting. *

Mr. Benejan Grajales said there were new parent leaders in the district, and he always offered to help them. He said he was not here to take someone's job or tell them how to do their job. He said he was here to help parent leaders.

Dr. Sackey said Ms. Herron has been providing support to the PACs. He said he would work with Dr. Faga on strengthening the collaboration.

Mr. Benejan Grajales said he sent an e-mail to PAC leaders last night offering to meet with them. He said he had the passion for PAC/PTSO for many years and would like to work to help. He said he would be willing to join meetings that are held.

Dr. Sackey said some of it is just reminding principals when it comes to PAC funding. Mr. Benejan Grajales suggested having a workshop for the parents. He said that you have to be careful how you spend money with vendors. He gave the example of things that should not be ordered.

Dr. Sackey said this is working well in a majority of our schools. He said support was needed at buildings

where there are specific problems. He said he would be charging Dr. Faga with collaborating and to tap into Mr. Benejan Grajales's experience.

Mr. Benejan Grajales said he was here to support and help. He said it was important that every school have a Title I book to document the parent activities, because the state can request to view it. He described the need for the District PAC and having a District PAC president.

Mr. Medina said he would be sending some e-mails with inquiries.

Ms. Cassermere said she agreed with Mr. Benejan Grajales to be sure that PAC presidents are the ones that are in control of the money and how to spend it.

In response to a question, Dr. Faga said we have talked about creating a district calendar with the many PAC events listed. She said it is hoped to have this for next year.

Ms. Cassermere suggested we ask the principals to update the school websites. Dr. Sackey and Dr. Faga said that could be done.

Ms. Bella said she believed some schools might still be updating because it was the expectation to put the agendas and meeting minutes on the website. She said some of the school calendars listed PAC events

and meetings.

Ms. Cassermere said not every single school updates their websites.

Mr. Traber said he would like to continue the discussion at the next meeting, with a report on the health of the schools in spending their money. He said he was interested to hear from Ms. Herron on the training that was done with PAC presidents and how many have been attending.

Mr. Benejan Grajales said principals need to send announcements on what is going on in the school. He said the announcements should not be sent two or three weeks in advance because parents are very busy, and people forget.

Mr. Traber suggested advance notice is good for people who put it in their calendar and reminders the day before is also good.

Mr. Benejan Grajales said he was here to help. Mr. Traber said we should do something before the year ends to let people know there will be elections when school reopens.

Mr. Benejan Grajales moved to adjourn the meeting. The motion was seconded by Mr. Traber and unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 7:43 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Approved by the committee on April 23, 2025