

Wednesday, October 9, 2024

MINUTES OF THE INSTRUCTION AND SUPPORT  
SERVICES COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT  
BOARD OF EDUCATION, held October 9, 2024, at  
City Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 5:05 p.m. Present were members Chair Jennifer Perez, Willie Medina, and Andre Woodson\*.

Board members Joe Sokolovic and Albert Benejan Grajales\* were present.

(\*remote participation)

Mr. Medina moved to approve the minutes of the meeting of May 21, 2024. The motion was seconded by Ms. Perez and unanimously approved.

Mr. Medina moved to approve the minutes of the meeting of September 11, 2024. The motion was seconded by Ms. Perez and unanimously approved.

Michele McKinley, chief of special education, presented an update on special education.

Ms. McKinley described the vision statement of the department. She said she realized the department is facing significant challenges, including staff vacancies, programming that leads to out-of-district placement, supplemental instructional materials, and an increase in students with autism.

Ms. McKinley said there are over 4,100 students identified as requiring special education services, of which 1,476 have a specific learning disability. There are 658 students with autism.

Ms. McKinley said the RISE program serves children from pre-K to 12th grade, with 45 programs at 18 campuses. The class sizes are twelve to fourteen students, primarily for students with autism. There is one teacher and two paraprofessionals that are typically allocated to the classrooms. The SOAR program serves K to 8 students with behavioral challenges through ten programs at four campuses. Class sizes are typically ten to twelve students.

Ms. McKinley said the AIMS program is for students in Grades 9 to 12 who still need support after leaving the SOAR program. There are six programs at three campuses.

Ms. McKinley said the LEAP program for K to 12 grades has 25 programs at eight campuses. This is for students receiving functional academics. She described the LEAP component for medically fragile students, consisting of three programs at two campuses. She said the Bridgeport Learning Center provides services to students with a variety of disabilities. She said BLC is currently being used as a bridge to keep students from going to out-of-district placements and for students transitioning back into the district.

Ms. McKinley said the five top priorities have been identified, including Child Find, Tier 1 instructional support, equity in evaluations, and IEP implementation.

Ms. McKinley said there is a concern on how we identify children for specialized transportation and one-to-one paraprofessional requests. She said data is used to make the decisions.

Ms. McKinley said it is important in special education that when students are identified that we are beginning with the end in mind and communicating expectations to parents.

Ms. McKinley said she is trying to locate where curriculum that was ordered for special education is before we identify that any additional curriculum is needed. She said a priority is research-based reading programs because many students struggle to read.

Ms. McKinley described transition assessment tools to help students identify what they want to do after graduating, including creating a work-based or internship program for students.

Ms. McKinley described struggles to have staff vacancies filled. She said someone attended a University of Connecticut job fair today. She said the professional development plan includes speech language pathologists and evaluators.

Ms. McKinley said caseloads and student-staff ratios are high. She said we are looking at each campus and program to identify the appropriate student-to-teacher ratio.

Ms. McKinley said supervisors provide support for out-of-district placements.

Ms. McKinley said everything in special education is driven by data. She said a policy and procedures manual needs to

be developed to have written down what is being communicated orally.

Ms. McKinley said there are small group meetings in the department as part of strategic planning. She said input would be gathered from teachers and parents. Small action plans will be developed to take this into phases. She said we're working with the BEA and CEA to come up with an agreement to compensate the teachers who have an additional caseload.

Ms. McKinley said she has spoken to Dr. Avery about sensory classrooms for students with neurodiverse learning needs. She said there are interagency agreements with community and adult service agencies.

Ms. McKinley said there is a lot of work to be done, but she has an awesome team. She said she looked forward to providing updates each month.

In response to a question, Ms. McKinley said when she indicated the number of programs it was the number of classrooms.

In response to a question, Ms. McKinley said the teachers include certified teachers and long-term subs. Some of the paras are obtained through Kelly and Delta T.

In response to a question, Ms. McKinley said the classroom ratios of teachers and paras were set when she came in. She said some of the ratios were high and we're assessing if adjustments need to be made.

In response to a question, Ms. McKinley said her executive director is working with campus administrators and

supervisors on compensatory services, and she did not have that information today. She said the district is 98 percent compliant with PPTs. She said there zero state complaints, four mediation requests, and one due process hearing.

In response to a question, Ms. McKinley described the challenges of monitoring IEP compliance. She said there is a system to provide observations and conduct meetings with the campus before we move to a one-to-one paraprofessional. She said once a student has a one-to-one paraprofessional, they rarely no longer need that service. She described the use of the checklist.

Mr. Sokolovic said he did not like the SWAT acronym. Ms. McKinley said that was a standard term that was used.

Dr. Royce Avery, deputy superintendent, said we have to set up special education protocols that every campus has to utilize. Systematic ways of looking at the PPTs are needed with the same process across the board. He said that the district is not currently doing that. He said other districts around us are being looked at to see what works.

Dr. Avery noted the teacher shortage and the phenomenon of teachers who begin in the district and then leave it for another district making more money. He said MOUs with the union would help us pay current teachers more, which is much cheaper than payments that have to be made when the district does not provide services.

Mr. Medina said he needed the administration to look at Wilbur Cross School. He said he was available to join a tour of the school this week as soon as possible. He said he was hearing from parents about the school.

Mr. Medina said we would either pay the teachers what we need to get them into the district or we're going to pay for missing services. He said students should not be collateral damage for what's going on. He indicated there were also issues at Hooker School.

Ms. McKinley said she spoke with the Cross principal. She said we're waiting for Kelly to release a teacher in pre-K to go to the RISE classroom. She said she doubted whether this was a certified special education teacher. She said currently there is a para in the pre-K classroom who will be certified in November. She said the principal has a handle on the situation with the RISE and pre-K classrooms.

Mr. Medina said the gentleman who contacted him indicated a lack of furniture in the classroom at Wilbur Cross. Dr. Avery said new furniture was coming in and he would take care of that issue and divert it to the classroom at Wilbur Cross. He said Columbus recently had its furniture refreshed, so there was new furniture available for the special education classroom.

Mr. Medina said Thomas Hooker was in his district and he had received calls from City Council people on this issue. Dr. Avery said he would put his eyes on the situation at Hooker as well.

The next agenda item was an update on academics from Jennifer Murchison, chief academic officer.

Ms. Murchison said she recently met with Ms. Perez to discuss priorities for academics and to address concerns she had heard from the community.

Ms. Murchison discussed assessments. The state math assessment is SBAC. She said a universal math screener is also given to identify students in need of additional support prior to referral to special education. She said this is federally required assessment that is given three times a year. The math assessment is called NWE. She said the Tier I math instructional material is from HMH, and the Tier II and Tier III instructional material is from Dream Box.

Ms. Murchison said the mandated state assessment for ELA is SBAC. The federal universal screener for students in K to 6 is DIBELS; pre-K students take Brigance; and students in 7 to 12 take Reading Plus. The data has to be used to create intervention plans for students. She said the Tier I instructional products are World of Wonders (pre-K) and Wonders (K to 6). She said the license for Wonders expires in 2025. Grades 7 and 8 use Study Synch. Lenses on Literature is used in Grades 9 to 12. She said Lenses on Literature is only new product the district is using; the other products were in place when she arrived in Bridgeport.

Ms. Murchison said Grades 9 to 12 were supposed to be using Active Learning, but that is not a Tier I product. It is a supplemental product primarily for informational texts, and it is not a curriculum.

Ms. Murchison said Tier II and Tier III products for K to 6 are Lexia; in Grades 7 to 12, Reading Plus is used.

Ms. Murchison said the state science assessment is NGSS. There is no federally required assessment for science. The Tier I product for K to 12 is Discovery Education, which has two components and two platforms.

Ms. Murchison said when she arrived the district did not have anything for social studies. For Grades K to 6 I Excel is used. She said the company was kind enough to add on all subject areas, which can supplement math, ELA, and science. A consultant wrote curriculum for Grades 7 to 12 social studies to make it semester based.

Ms. Murchison said Dr Sarah-Jane Henry is the author of all the visual and performing arts curriculum, and she is a department of one person. There is an also advisory council of 15 to 18 members, which supports Dr. Henry with reviewing curriculum.

Ms. Murchison said some schools are implementing components of MTSS. She said she is working with the school leaders to review their systems and to revitalize the MTSS system in Bridgeport. She said Power School, the district's information system, also has a platform for MTSS.

Ms. Murchison said the idea that we are asking teachers to deliver a scripted curriculum is a myth. She said every campus should be engaging in intellectual prep at some point during the week, which she compared to sports teams practicing plays before a game.

Ms. Murchison described reviewing an assessment from Discovery Education with Portia Scott-Thiam, elementary science director, which would have required intellectual prep on the concept of photosynthesis.

Ms. Murchison described why Teachers Pay Teachers should not be used. She added that teachers are being told this. She said anyone can become a vendor on that site and sell things without any vetting.



Ms. Murchison said treating the curriculum like a script would not give students what they need.

Ms. Murchison said there are two Commissioner's Network schools: Columbus and Barnum. She said the state dictates the process used in the schools during their bi-monthly visits.

Ms. Murchison said the last state visit was October 1st. She said identified strengths at the schools were curricular implementation and task design. She said about seven or eight classrooms were visited in total. She said the standards drive what we teach in the Common Core standards.

Ms. Murchison said the classrooms were set up in structures to encourage students to engage in discourse.

The growth areas identified were the use of baseline questions. She said the state said the schools should be using deeper thinking questions. She said there were also missed opportunities for student discourse. She said the LAS Links test assesses listening and speaking. It was noted that teachers should be intentionally planning for discourse opportunities when designing tasks for learning.

Ms. Murchison described issues around the pacing of instruction. Additional flex days will be given to teachers.

In response to a question, Ms. Murchison said the academic councils are broken up into elementary math; secondary math; elementary ELA; secondary ELA; elementary science; and secondary science. There is one council for pre-K, one for multilingual learners; and one for visual and performing arts.

In response to a question, Ms. Murchison said the first school schedule produced providing planning time every day, but it was not popular. She said the schedule was adjusted by leaders, and some principals kept the planning time every day, others allocated one time per week for 25 minutes. She said some principals left only the BEA contractual time.

In response to a question, Ms. Murchison said she accompanied Ms. Hughes, the executive director for the two Commissioner's Network schools, because it drives the support that she deploys to the campus. She said support has already been deployed in response to the state visit. She said we will be inviting two board members to participate in the next state visit.

In response to a question, Ms. Murchison said the directors have been creating micro PDs, which are professional learning videos that take about 20 minutes.

In response to a question, Ms. Murchison said she did the presentation off of her head and she would send a written report to the board.

In response to a question, Ms. Murchison said the teacher Mr. Woodson spoke to her about declined to meet with her. She noted the pacing calendar is being adjusted for the second quarter to provide more flex days.

In response to a question, Ms. Murchison described the PSAT and SAT schedule.

Mr. Sokolovic said he has been doing walk-throughs of schools. He said he had observed synchronization going on. He said he had seen arrows pointing to curriculum binders pointing to the same spot. He said he has seen posted schedules with every class having the same bathroom break time. He said some of these things seemed like scripting.

Ms. Murchison said the synchronized bathroom opportunities is a campus-based decision on class schedules and doesn't have anything to do with academics. She said the learning targets are defined by Common Core state standards, so they would be the same in every classroom. She said due to the high mobility of students in the district we have to be synchronized in instruction. If units are taught at different points in each school, students who move to another school could potentially miss content. She said her division have not been told to penalize any leader or teacher for not teaching the same thing on the same exact day, but we can't be thirty days behind because we're required to expose the student to all the grade-level content by the end of the year.

Ms. Murchison said historically the district has not covered all of the material by the time students take the SBAC test. She said much of the results can be attributed to the fact that students have not even seen all the material.

Mr. Sokolovic said some schools have deficits that are more global in nature. Ms. Murchison said she disagreed because we no longer use an intervention or remediation model. She said we are required by the state to use an acceleration model. By law, a fifth grader performing at a pre-K level must be provided with fifth grade curriculum, along with scaffolds and support to access the curriculum. She described the use of WIN (What I Need) blocks. She said

building principals were encouraged to set aside WIN time for math and ELA.

Ms. Murchison said the campuses were told that both WIN blocks were strongly preferred and encouraged, but it was not mandatory. She said the original schedule, which was not popular, gave that opportunity. Some campuses choose to keep the blocks, some did not.

In response to a question, Ms. Murchison said she will work with Mr. Karaffa to present retention data, which might require an executive session.

In response to a question, Ms. Hughes said Bassick applied for the Commissioner's Network, but they weren't ready to move forward. The superintendent subsequently withdrew the application. She said Principal Padro would like to move forward with it for the upcoming year. She said Ms. Padro was a former Commissioner's Network principal in Hartford. She said the principal is also working on a functioning School Governance Council.

Mr. Sokolovic described a Reading Plus assessment being given in his son's mathematics class. Ms. Murchison said that would be a campus-based decision on a testing plan for state or federal assessments. She said each campus has a testing coordinator to create the plan, so that would not be a districtwide practice. She said it was encouraged to do it during ELA or humanities classrooms.

Mr. Sokolovic said he believed literacy tests should be taken during literacy classrooms. Ms. Murchison said she agreed, but in high school with semester-based scheduling, students don't take English every semester. She said the example

provided could be because the student was not enrolled in an English class this semester.

The next agenda item was a pre-K presentation by Lindsey Davis, director of early childhood.

Ms. Davis said there are 23 school sites that have pre-K-3 and pre-K-4 programs. There are 20 School Readiness sites, funded by a grant; four Smart Start sites, also grant funded; and six magnet grant classes at Discovery School. She said there are a total of 37 classes with about 689 seats available.

Ms. Davis said Discovery is a lottery-based program, but the other magnet schools are not.

Ms. Davis said currently there are 12 full-day seats open for pre-K-4; there are no open seats for pre-K-3. She said she has developed a plan with the communications department regarding the open 27 part-day seats at Skane School.

Ms. Davis said the main goals are to focus on school readiness, holistic development, and family engagement. She described the World of Wonders curriculum and its features, which includes family engagement.

Ms. Davis said the priorities are high-quality experiences and professional development. She said parents can choose any pre-K site that has availability.

Ms. Davis described the seven domains to the Connecticut Early Learning Development standards that are integrated into the curriculum documents.

Ms. Davis said all sites are NAEYC accredited, with six sites undergoing reaccreditation this year.

Ms. Davis said the 37 classrooms have 37 certified classroom teachers. There are 39 pre-K paras. The paras are required to have 12 early childhood credits to be eligible to be hired fulltime.

Ms. Davis said the programs are all fee-based. Families are asked for proof of income and family size, and the fee is calculated for each individual family. The calculation comes directly from the state. The fees fund some operations and supplies needed for pre-K.

Ms. Davis described the Kickoff for Kindergarten program. The program was expanded this year and is primarily focused on engaging families prior to entering kindergarten if they've had little or no experience in pre-K. A partnership with Carver increased the program from 14 days to 19 days. About fifty children were served. The Brigance screener was used, which demonstrated growth in all students.

In response to a question, Ms. Davis said the parent fees come to the department of early childhood, and they go directly back into the school sites. She said she takes into consideration what the programs and the teachers need, as well as instructional materials and playground repairs. She said parents can pay online or via money orders. She said the amount collected varies by year and is managed by the business office.

The next agenda item was a presentation by Sarah-Jane Henry, director of performing and visual arts.

Dr. Henry said there are currently 51 visual arts teachers, 48 music teachers, six theater teachers, and one dance teacher. In January 2024, a theater teacher was added to Fairchild Wheeler, and at the beginning of this academic year a music teacher was added to BMA and an art teacher to Fairchild Wheeler. A music teacher at Fairchild Wheeler is being hired. There are 24 high school positions and 82 teachers for pre-K to 8.

Dr. Henry presented the department's mission statement. She said the state standards require students to earn at least one credit in fine arts to graduate.

Dr. Henry displayed the courses that are offered, although each course is not available in every semester. She said there are fifteen different courses in visual arts and ten different options in music. She said theater returned to the district in 2022.

In response to a question, Dr. Henry said theater is not offered at Bassick due to a vacancy.

Dr. Henry said in addition to the standard curriculum, there are four advanced placement courses for college credit. Last year, 97 students were enrolled in the courses, with a 94 percent pass rate.

Dr. Henry said all the curriculum and the classes are based on national standards developed by the Consortium of National Arts Education Association. She displayed the four pillars that are included.

Dr. Henry said the curriculum documents were developed over the summer under the guidance of Ms. Murchison.

Dr. Henry said the data from EdSight indicate a marked increase in district high school students participating in arts, although there is still room for growth. The state is at a 55 percent average and the target is 60 percent.

Dr. Henry said we are in pretty good shape in terms of the staff. There are currently 16 art positions and 29 music positions available in the state. The district has four art vacancies, five music vacancies, and one theater vacancy. These positions are currently covered by long-term subs.

Dr. Henry displayed a list of community partners, who help bridge some of the resource gaps by offering specialized programs and performances.

In response to a question, Mr. Karaffa said there are 78 students in the RCA program. Ms. Murchison said the performances will be advertised through Parent Square

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

The meeting was adjourned at 7:08 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

*Approved by the committee on January 29, 2025*