

Monday, May 12, 2025

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held May 12, 2025, at Bridgeport Regional Aquaculture Science and Technology Education Center, 60 St. Stephens Road, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

Present were Chair Jennifer Perez, Vice Chair Joseph Sokolovic, Secretary Albert Benejan Grajales\*\*, Willie Medina\*, Maritza Estremera Jimenez, Akisha Cassermere\*\*, Robert Traber, and Andre Woodson. Christine Baptiste-Perez\* joined the meeting subsequently as noted.

\*remote participation \*\*began the meeting remote and subsequently arrived in person as noted.

Interim Supt. Dr. Royce Avery was present.

The meeting was called to order at 6:35 p.m.

### **STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE REPORTS:**

Christian Bica of Central High reported on his school. Among the items he highlighted were the upcoming prom; the last week of AP testing; graduation on June 13th at Kennedy Stadium; his trip, along with other students, to Hartford to advocate for funding; and spring sports. He also discussed parent conferences; the National Honor

Society's blood drive; upcoming awards ceremonies; and a teacher appreciation week.

Ms. Perez thanked the students who went to Hartford and said she was very proud of them.

### **PUBLIC COMMENT:**

Sujata Gadka-Wilcox, state senator for Bridgeport, Trumbull, and Monroe, said she was an educator at Quinnipiac University. She said the right to an education was a fundamental human right. She thanked the students who came to Hartford to advocate, along with board members, teachers, and educators. She said education was her commitment in the legislature. She said she has heard the cry of special education funding, and an additional \$1.8 million came to Bridgeport. She said she was in favor of the new schools, including the special education school at the Skane site.

Mr. Sokolovic thanked Senator Gadka-Wilcox for hitting the ground running and bringing back funding to the district. He said that he does not often compliment politicians.

### **APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:**

Mr. Sokolovic moved approval of the minutes of the Special Meeting of April 21, 2025. The motion was seconded by Mr. Traber and unanimously approved.

Mr. Sokolovic moved approval of the minutes of the Regular Meeting of April 28, 2025. The motion was seconded by Mr. Traber and unanimously approved.

### **CHAIR REPORT:**

Ms. Perez said a letter was received from the state on the progress of the board training, which she forwarded to the board members. The next board training will be May 19th, and the final session will be on June 2nd.

Principal John Ramos of Discovery Magnet School, along parents and families, were present.

Dr. Avery said everything Mr. Ramos set forth this year has been very instrumental to progress. He said it was all about making sure he does great things for the children in the building, and his own family, and his staff as a first-year principal. He presented a certificate to Mr. Ramos.

Mr. Ramos said he was honored to be the principal Discovery Magnet School, and he said the staff and parents present showed we were a family, and we will never stop fighting for what is right.

Mr. Traber said he wanted the Discovery family to understand what we're fighting for in Bridgeport is to make sure everyone in Bridgeport gets to go to a magic place.

Mr. Sokolovic moved for a five-minute recess. The motion was seconded by Mr. Traber and unanimously approved.

The meeting was recessed at 6:54 p.m.

The meeting resumed at 6:59 p.m.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez\* joined the meeting.

### **COMMITTEE REPORTS:**

Ms. Perez said the Finance Committee would meet on May 21st.

Mr. Sokolovic referred an update to prioritize funds in the unlikely event the district receives more funding.

Mr. Traber said the Instruction & Support Services Committee will meet on May 28th.

Ms. Perez said the Facilities Committee met on May 7th. She said the ed specifications for new construction were discussed and are on tonight's agenda.

Mr. Medina said the Policy & Personnel Committee pushed forward nine policies at the last meeting. The next meeting will be on this Wednesday. State-mandated policies will be worked on.

Ms. Perez announced that Ms. Estremera Jimenez is taking her spot on the Policy & Personnel Committee.

### **SUPERINTENDENT REPORT AND AGENDA:**

Dr. Avery said last Thursday about 40 students joined some board members, himself and his staff, in Hartford for Student Advisory Day. He said it was one of the most

rewarding things in his 30-plus years as a school superintendent to see the kids advocate.

Dr. Avery said May 19th would be Bridgeport Day at the Capitol. Transportation will be provided to community members; the city will provide meals. He said students and parents will be able to advocate with an excused absence. He said community organizations will be in support.

Ms. Cassermere arrived at the meeting in person.

Mr. Sokolovic said he was very happy about the preparations for May 19th, which he described as a call for action. He said there was still time to save children from walking 1.5 miles to school and to save kindergarten paraprofessionals.

Mr. Traber said last week was a great day, with over 200 students in the state in Hartford. He said Bridgeport led the way. He said Bridgeport Day will be a great experience as well for students.

Mr. Benejan Grajales arrived at the meeting in person.

Dr. Avery thanked Reps. Rosario and Felipe for spending quality time with the students, and Mayor Ganim for joining the students.

Mr. Traber said Senator Gadka-Wilcox was in there, too.

Mr. Woodson said he loved to see the kids are advocating on behalf of themselves. He said he hoped the kids know the reason they're advocating for money, which is due to the unfair funding formula based on property values.

Dr. Avery said that was an important point. He said his team spent time with the students explaining the situation, including the formula.

Mr. Benejan Grajales thanked Dr. Avery and his amazing team. He said he was proud of how well the students spoke.

Mr. Sokolovic said Mr. Woodson made an excellent point. He suggested a short document be made for the students for emphasis. Mr. Traber said we need a new explanation about the Education Cost Sharing formula on the website for the general public.

## **NEW BUSINESS:**

The next item was on the ed specification for the construction of the pre-K to 8 East End elementary school.

Ed Arum of the state technical assistance team said he was part of the family in Bridgeport because he has been here for a couple of months. He described his background in education and school building.

Mr. Arum said June 30th is the deadline to submit applications to the state. He said if everything goes

through with the grant, 90 percent will be paid for by the state. He described how the size of the school could potentially be increased due to enrollment.

Jorge Garcia, chief operations officer, thanked Mr. Arum and the technical team. He said the school is proposed for pre-K to 8 with 840 students. The old Harding building would be tun down and the new school built. All vehicular circulation will be on the eight-acre site.

Mr. Sokolovic said he was not against the proposal per se, but he had significant questions. He said it would take a vote of the board to close the three schools named.

In response to a question, Mr. Garcia said over the years we have not had the facts and data to make very strategic, pointed decisions that we're trying to make now. He said the only options in that zip code were at the Remington site and the old Harding High. He said it would be a game-changer for the students in the area. He described the net-zero possibilities of the building and the great need for pre-K seats.

Mr. Sokolovic said he would be more comfortable with this if the facilities master plan was more thoroughly debated, amended and changed because it seems the plan is to just redistrict that area. He said we were told previously we could reverse the plan, but this process led to combining BMA and Bassick, which is a vote he regrets.

He said the students deserve a new school, but we will be replacing a boarded-up Harding with three boarded-up schools in the same area, depressing the property values. He said redistricting will make class sizes in that area go up. He said the district should be right sized by redistricting.

Mr. Garcia said the students will be able to stay in their home schools until the building is complete. He said there is inequity in Bridgeport because some children attend schools in new facilities and then there are schools where they can't even plug in an additional appliance. He said if we had the data from the facilities master plan there probably would have been different decisions about Bassick and BMA.

In response to a question, Mr. Garcia said the names of the schools to be closed had to be included in the application. He said he was sure the state would understand if we had to make minor adjustments. He described costs per student at Hall, Edison, and Beardsley.

Mr. Traber said we have not done an adequate job on reaching out to folks in the neighborhood. He said Rep. Andre Baker said the application could be withdrawn if there is an upswell of outrage. Mr. Traber said he has yet to talk to anyone in his neighborhood who is opposed to building a new school, which he described as anecdotal.



He described how the new school would allow more children to attend school in the neighborhood.

Mr. Garcia said he agreed the community piece was important. He said forums have been held, and we are trying to engage because it is a powerful opportunity for Bridgeport. He said it was time to embrace opportunity.

Peter Karaffa, chief information officer, said there is no guarantee when putting the application in, but we want to sure we don't miss the window. Mr. Traber said the application could be withdrawn if there is neighborhood opposition.

Dr. Avery said this was the first time the district, the city, and the delegation is all rowing in the same direction. He said we have to take this opportunity.

Mr. Benejan Grajales moved *“to approve the educational specification for the construction of a new pre-K to 8 East End elementary school.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Cassermere.

In response to a question, Mr. Garcia said transportation costs could increase or decrease. He said there is time to analyze this during the feasibility study. Mr. Traber noted that until we know the final budget, we don't know how many students will have to walk to school. Mr. Sokolovic said we already know where all the kids live, and a very

rough estimate could be obtained. Mr. Traber said the enrollment at Harding increased because students and parents in the district wanted to go to the brand-new school.

In response to a question, Mr. Karaffa said as of today there are 673 students in Hall, Edison, and Beardsley.

Ms. Cassermere said there would be an election for the board in the future, but she did not like to worry about things she doesn't have control over.

In response to a question, Mr. Garcia said it would cost \$60 million repair the three schools, and they would not be ADA-compliant, and it would not allow them to bring in new programming. He said the vacated buildings would go back to the city. He described the decommissioning process underway at Bassick High. He said he attended Read School, which had the same desks from his years there when the school was remodeled. He said there needs to be change.

Ms. Cassermere thanked Mr. Garcia and Mr. Karaffa. Mr. Benejan Grajales thanked Mr. Arum for his help, along with Mr. Garcia and Mr. Karaffa. He said it was a great opportunity to make a change for the kids.

In response to a question, Mr. Garcia said, understanding the dynamics here, the state would understand if we

needed to make strategic decisions or amendments based on shifts in the district or programs.

Ms. Estremera Jimenez requested we keep in mind anything that can bring money back and to make the schools as sustainable as possible. Mr. Garcia described the plans for net zero at the site.

Mr. Medina said he was in support of the new school, but because the board and the community is watching the process we need to cross every "t" and dot every "i."

Mr. Garcia said the board will be involved once we start talking about programs in the building.

The motion was approved by a 6-2 vote. Voting in favor were members Cassermere, Estremera Jimenez, Perez, Traber, Woodson, Benejan Grajales

Mr. Sokolovic voted no. He said, while new schools and facilities were needed, we might be locking ourselves into a potential problem which could be avoided by more discussions about the facilities master plan until the end of June.

Mr. Medina abstained. He said he needed more information and needed to see every document presented that is going to be what the vote of the board is.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said she voted no because there was enough time to get additional input,

The next agenda item was the ed specification for the construction of a special program school.

Mr. Garcia said it would be for a specialized program on Madison Avenue at the current Skane site. It will be pre-K through 12th grade, for 263 students. He said this is a discussion that has been happening for several years about the potential of stopping the sending of children out of district, including because of the financial impact. He noted Skane and Winthrop will be combined in the future.

Mr. Garcia said there is so much potential on the site to build a state-of-the art facility, with outdoor amenities.

Dr. Avery said we have visited two special education sites in other districts to study programs, with other visits to follow. He said it would be an opportunity to get funds and build a facility in the district.

In response to a question, Michele McKinley, chief of special education, said there are about 252 students out-of-district.

In response to a question, Dr. Avery said PPTs will determine which students will be placed in the facility. Ms. Cassermere noted the least-restrictive environment is used. She said 263 seemed like a low number for a district our size. Dr. Avery said parents have their children

leave the district because they weren't happy with the services and programs in Bridgeport.

In response to a question, Nestor Nkwo, chief financial officer, said about \$51 million is spent on out-of-district placements. He said the total cost of all special education is \$115 million.

Mr. Traber said we're trying to save special education costs long before this school is ever completed.

Mr. Benejan Grajales moved "*to approve the educational specification for the construction of the special program school.*" The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic.

In response to a question, Mr. Garcia said he believed the two schools were in different buckets at the state, and they have different reimbursement rates. He said this program will be reimbursed at 95 percent, which is a tremendous deal for the taxpayers, students, and teachers.

Mr. Benejan Grajales said this would be an amazing school. Dr. Avery said every kid is not going to be returned to the district, but students that qualify will have access to the school. He said the low enrollment is to make sure we really do this thing right, which could lead to expansion.

The motion was unanimously approved.

Mr. Garcia thanked the board, the City Council, the delegation, the cabinet, the technical team, Mr. Nkwo, and everybody.

The next agenda item was on approval of the June 2, 2025, board training. Ms. Perez said CAFE has covered the cost of the board trainings through the district's membership. She said Mr. Caruso said the training in June will have a \$4800 cost for an out-of-state presenter.

Mr. Traber moved "to approve \$4800 for training." The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan Grajales.

Mr. Sokolovic said he found the speaker awesome at the CAFE retreat, but we are in dire, dire straits. He suggested we ask the state to pay for this since the training is an unfunded mandate. Mr. Traber asked the chair to make inquiry with the state.

The motion was approved by an 8-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Perez, Benejan Grajales, Cassermere, Estremera Jimenez, Medina, Traber, Baptiste-Perez, and Woodson. Mr. Sokolovic abstained.

Ms. Perez noted the board members were invited to the adult education graduation,

Ms. Cassermere requested Dr. Avery provide her with the number of board members who have paid for tickets to the districtwide talent show.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:23 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

*Approved by the board on May 27, 2025*