

Monday, June 9, 2025

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF THE BRIDGPEORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held June 9, 2025, at Harding High School, 379 Bond Street, 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**.

*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 6:39 p.m.

STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE REPORTS:

Aryan Lachman of Harding reported on his school. He highlighted the Medical Magnet's activities; the senior prom; end-of-year activities; a prank played on Principal Thompson; and final examinations.

Jeronimo Restrepo of the IT School at Fairchild Wheeler highlighted final exams and projects; a school-based supply closet for families in need; a bilingual tutoring club; a film festival; a multicultural night; and the upcoming club fair and balloon launch.

Christian Bica of Central High highlighted Friday's graduation and rehearsals; the National Honor Society's induction ceremony; a celebration of the top 25 seniors and the top four juniors; and celebration of college acceptances.

Daniela Gomez of the Biotech School at Fairchild Wheeler highlighted final exams; Senior Night, a multicultural night; and a visit by Supt. Avery to the school.

Ashley Beckford of the Aerospace School at Fairchild Wheeler highlighted final exams; course selection for next year; Friday's graduation; and Senior Night.

Ms. Perez said the board was presenting certificates of recognition for all the students reps' participation this year. She said they also participated in student advocacy on May 9th in Hartford.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

Jess Resto said she wanted to reflect on the school year with truth. She said tens of thousands was spent to open school this year with a party. She said school start times were started with no notice and families and staff were left to scramble. Teachers protested and the system was unraveling, followed by the superintendent leaving with a golden parachute leaving behind a mess, protected by the board's majority. She said when layoffs hit, those responsible deflected, stayed silent or stirred up the

drama. She thanked Acting Supt. Avery for stepping up and bringing calm.

APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:

Mr. Sokolovic moved approval of the minutes of the Special Meeting of May 19, 2025. The motion was seconded by Mr. Medina and unanimously approved.

Mr. Medina moved approval of the minutes of the Regular Meeting of May 27, 2025. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

CHAIR REPORT:

Ms. Perez said the last training session for the board took place with Chris Horan with the theme of communication. She said an action plan was provided to the state, and the board will hold four community forums throughout the city during the summer.

Ms. Perez thanked the staff of the district for really stepping up in the last six or seven months in trying times.

COMMITTEE REPORTS:

Ms. Perez said the Finance Committee met last week and moved items to tonight's agenda.

Mr. Sokolovic referred creating a list of board priorities in cuts to be rescinded in the event of additional funding. He also referred a legal opinion on the city's attempt to circumvent the MBR.

Mr. Traber said the Instruction & Support Services Committee met on May 28th. Items discussed were Hill for Literacy; the Buddy Jordan Foundation; review and plans for disproportionate suspensions among special education students and black and brown boys; and ELA benchmarks.

Mr. Medina said the Policy and Personnel Committee handled all the state-mandated policies for the full board. Other policies being considered will be looked at.

Ms. Estremera Jimenez said she previously referred language on contracts being contingent on available funding.

Mr. Sokolovic referred the superintendent's evaluation. Ms. Perez said the full board would handle that.

Mr. Benejan Grajales referred city people working with board people and vice versa.

Mr. Sokolovic referred a discussion of the facilities master plan to the Facilities Committee. He said issues such as transportation and potential redistricting should be looked at sooner rather than later. Mr. Traber said community outreach events at Edison and Hall were scheduled, so any action should wait for community input.

Mr. Sokolovic said the CAFE legislative wrap-up was tomorrow in Hartford. The CAFE convention is upcoming,

and he would provide the date. The CABA leadership conference is on August 7th.

SUPERINTENDENT REPORT AND AGENDA:

Dr. Avery extended sincere appreciation to staff, students, families, and the community for the year, and he said he appreciated the hard work.

Dr. Avery said he wanted to highlight the districtwide Math Meet led by Mr. Planas. The first-place school was Black Rock, followed by Multicultural Magnet and Johnson School. The top performer was Christopher R. of Black Rock.

Dr. Avery said there will be a luncheon celebration of teachers and administrators on June 11th. He invited board members.

Dr. Avery said all high school graduations are this Friday at Kennedy Stadium.

Mr. Woodson arrived at the meeting in person.

Dr. Avery said the forthcoming community forums were all about the facilities master plan, and he urged the public to attend.

Dr. Avery described summer open interviews to recruit teachers and other staff.

Dr. Avery said the staff was still trying to unpack the funding the district will receive following the close of the

legislative session. Mr. Traber said he agreed with Dr. Avery, and the exact meaning of the state budget is currently unknown.

NEW BUSINESS:

The next agenda item was on the Hill for Literacy for school year 2025-26.

Margaret Hughes, executive director of school turnaround, said the proposal is to renew the district's contract for this vendor, which was used in 2021-22 and 2022-23. The contract would be a joint venture with state Department of Education. She said the total amount is \$801,000, with the state funding \$364,000.

Darci Burns of the Hill for Literacy said the districtwide literacy model would be reintroduced in K to 6. She noted the program was being used in summer school currently.

In response to a question, Dr. Burns said the facilitators to be used were in the district before and are employees of the Hill for Literacy. She said district assessment tools are used for data and progress monitoring.

Ms. Hughes said Dr. Avery had us talk to principals and teachers, and they unanimously wanted the Hill back in the district.

In response to a question, Dr. Burns said the Hill has been coordinating the Connecticut Literacy Model for twelve

years, which has led to building a team of literacy leaders in the state.

In response to a question, Ms. Hughes said the Hill was not duplicative of other work in the district. She described the training for teachers.

Mr. Traber moved that “*we accept the Hill for Literacy program for the school year 25-26.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic.

The motion was approved by a 7-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Perez, Woodson, Sokolovic, Medina, Traber, Benejan Grajales, and Estremera Jimenez. Ms. Cassermere was opposed.

The next agenda item was on the Buddy Jordan Foundation.

Dr. Cheryl Faga, director of SEL and student affairs, said the foundation has been working in the community for the last twenty years with a focus on mental health, and for the last five years within our schools.

Natasha Noel described the work of the Brothers Table, and partnerships in the district. She said the program was realized as a result of the Board of Education’s work in an ad hoc committee.

Ms. Noel said the program focuses on brotherhood, mentorship and community. She described the programs

at Dunbar and Harding High. She said the program will be at Lighthouse this summer in six schools. The proposal is to go into eight feeder schools that go into Bassick.

Ms. Noel said a group-based mentoring model is used.

Mr. Traber moved that “*we approve the funding for the Buddy Jordan Foundation.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic.

In response to a question, Ms. Noel said a licensed social worker trains the facilitators. There are quarterly trainings. She said the facilitators go through background checks. She said we work with principals to make sure they’re comfortable with the facilitator.

Mr. Traber said the program has proven itself over the years. He said the expansion of the program would help address the suspensions of black and brown boys.

Mr. Sokolovic said he had observed children in the mentoring, and he said it would be an important rung in lowering suspensions.

In response to a question, Dr. Faga said the program would be funded through Title IVa at the cost of \$81,250.

Mr. Traber said he got started in this state by working with juvenile delinquents in New Haven over fifty years ago. He said that one-on-one work is absolutely essential.

The motion was approved by a 7-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Perez, Sokolovic, Medina, Estremera Jimenez, Cassermere, and Woodson. Mr. Benejan Grajales abstained.

The next agenda item was on Grievance 2893. Ms. Perez said an agreement has been reached.

Domenic Costello, chief human resources officer, requested the matter be tabled to work on a settlement.

Mr. Sokolovic moved "*to table Grievance 2893.*" The motion was seconded by Mr. Traber and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was an update on eight to nine central office staff positions eliminated in the 2025-26 proposed budget.

Mr. Traber moved to go into executive session for Items D and E. The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan Grajales.

Mr. Sokolovic said he did not agree that the item was eligible for executive session because we were not discussing individual employees, but elimination of positions and the budget.

Atty. Mark Anastasi of the city attorney's office said he was not aware of any justification for discussing budget matters in general in executive session.

Dr. Avery said some staff have been notified about these positions, but some have not. He said the discussion was intended to try to understand the organization for the most part, and there was nothing to be voted on. He said the purpose was to discuss next steps on the financial side.

Atty. Anastasi said there were issues with discussing employees in executive session without giving notice to the employees. He described proceedings eligible for executive sessions.

Dr. Avery said part of the conversation would be discussing performance of staff. He requested the item be tabled.

Atty. Anastasi suggested agendas with notations on executive sessions should probably identify statutory section being relied on.

Dr. Avery said the focus was strategizing on reorganizing the district. Atty. Anastasi said perhaps a notice could be crafted in the future that would qualify.

Mr. Traber withdrew his motion. Mr. Benejan Grajales withdrew the second.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *“to table items 11D and 11E until we get further guidance.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Cassermere and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on an RFP for BBOE legal services.

Tony Pires of the business office said the current contract expires on June 30th. He said we are seven years into their services.

Atty. Anastasi said City Attorney Tyisha Toms could not be here tonight. He said Atty. Toms has devised a plan to minimize the board's expenditure of funds for outside legal counsel by providing the maximum amount of services in-house through her office. He said Atty. Toms believes the current RFP is too broad and too long in duration. He said the city attorney's office was requesting the item be tabled tonight for further discussions between the city attorney and the superintendent for the purposes of a revised RFP.

Mr. Traber said the RFP had boilerplate language that's been used for years. He said last year we were overly dependent on having an outside counsel sit here. He said it is normal practice for boards to have outside counsel because of the Teacher Negotiation Act, which he described as one of the more unique labor laws in the state. He said the BCAS contract was coming up this fall.

Atty. Anastasi said he had about 17 suggestions for changes to the RFP. He said if it was approved tonight that it be subject to posting in final form satisfactory to the board chair, the superintendent, and the city attorney. He

said he believed the RFP could be refined relatively quickly.

In response to a question, Ms. Perez said Atty. Toms reached out to her on Wednesday about the RFP.

In response to a question, Mr. Pires said the RFP does not require the use of the outside firm for a minimum number of hours, nor is the board bound by an exclusivity contract.

Mr. Sokolovic said he would love to use the city attorney more often. He said there is a city charter revision committee that specifically names the Board of Education, and they may be moving to usurp the board. He noted there are conflicts between the city and the board such as his referral about the MBR.

Atty. Anastasi said we would never attempt to represent the board when there is a conflict between the city and the board. He noted outside counsel was engaged for the WPCA. He said the City Council selected an outside firm when it was in a dispute with the mayor. He said this was not a power grab.

Mr. Sokolovic said in his experience RFPs are broad in scope, and particulars are established when negotiating. Atty. Anastasi said when you ask for too much, you're eliminating firms or people who don't have everything you're asking for. He said there are two firms in the state

that dominate the education representation, and the board has used both Shipman & Goodwin and Berchem Moses.

Mr. Sokolovic said we should move forward with the RFP in the meantime.

In response to a question, Atty. Anastasi said the board's budget pays for outside counsel.

Mr. Traber said it was a great idea to have a member of the city attorney's office more focused on the Board of Education than normal. He said the Techer Negotiation Act had very specific windows for negotiations, which creates the need for someone ASAP. Atty. Anastasi said the two major firms would be ready almost instantaneously. He said the meeting could occur prior to the Special Meeting next Wednesday.

Ms. Perez said the city attorney would like to collaborate with us. She said the bylaws call for the board to consult with the city attorney when we seek out a new law firm. She said as the board chair she did not reach out to the city attorney.

Dr. Avery said the RFP was drafted last year, but not used because there was a one-year extension.

Atty. Anastasi said he believed one of the two major firms declined to participate in the last process. He said he believed if one of those two were selected, it would be a quick negotiation due to their familiarity with the district.

Mr. Sokolovic said the bylaws did not indicate the board chair was responsible for communicating with the city on any RFPs.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *“to approve the RFP subject to final form as approved by the superintendent, the board chair, and the city attorney.”*

The motion was seconded by Ms. Estremera Jimenez and approved by a 7-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Sokolovic, Benejan Grajales, Medina, Woodson, Traber, Cassermere, and Estremera Jimenez. Ms. Perez was opposed.

The next agenda items were on contracts.

Jaimie McCarvill, finance manager of the facilities department, said we’re requesting approval of two projects. She said both projects are capital funded.

Ms. McCarvill said the JFK project is painting of the swimming pool ceiling and walls. It was put out to bid. Four contractors attended the walkthrough; two contractors submitted bids, and the lowest bid was \$99,996. If approved, the project would be done this summer.

Mr. Traber moved *“to approve the Section G-1, BMB037255, JFK Campus painting of swimming pool and ceiling.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan Grajales and unanimously approved.

Ms. McCarvill said the Hallen School renovation of restrooms used a state contract, but we reached out to several contractors. Three attended the walkthrough, and there was one bid submittal. The submittal was over budget, so it is proposed to do the first floor this summer at \$88,788.

Mr. Traber moved “*to approve Item G-2, P23PSX0043 the Hallen School restroom first floor.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Medina and unanimously approved.

The next item was on Relay Hub, student Medicaid billing reimbursement. Mr. Pires said Relay will process our reimbursable claims for all students that are Medicaid-eligible. The goal is to maximize revenue. He said the firm represents over a hundred districts in the state and they’re equipped to do the best job for us.

Mr. Traber moved “*to approve Relay Hub student Medicaid-billing reimbursement.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan Grajales and unanimously approved.

Dr. Avery requested the item on the fiscal year 2025-26 operating budget be tabled. He said a few more days were needed to work through the legislative action for presentation at the Special Meeting on June 18th.

Mr. Benejan Grajales moved “*to table action on the FY25-26 operating budget.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

Mr. Benejan Grajales said the talent show on May 29th at the Klein Memorial was phenomenal. He thanked Dr. Henry and the team.

Mr. Benejan Grajales thanked Ms. Rocha-Reaes and her team for the May 31st community resource fair. He said the team did an amazing job.

Mr. Benejan Grajales said the June 2nd celebration of excellence at Harding High was great and he thanked everyone for their hard work. He said the BEA retirement event was on June 5th, and it was beautiful. He said on June 8th Dominican Coalition did an amazing event for Bridgeport. He also said the Juneteenth event was amazing, and it was the first time the board was there, along with Dr. Avery.

Ms. Estremera Jimenez said the communications department asked us to submit our visions to Dr. Avery and to provide biographies for board members. She said that was suggested as part of the CAFE training. Ms. Perez said board members also need to have their photos taken.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:57 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Approved by the board on June 18, 2025