

Wednesday, June 18, 2025

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held June 18, 2025, at Bridgeport City Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

Present were Chair Jennifer Perez, Vice Chair Joseph Sokolovic, Maritza Estremera Jimenez, Andre Woodson, Akisha Cassermere*, Robert Traber, and Christine Baptiste-Perez*. Secretary Albert Benejan Grajales** joined 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 began at 6:34 p.m.

Mr. Traber moved to approve the minutes of the Special Meeting of June 2, 2025. The motion was seconded by Ms. Estremera Jimenez and unanimously approved.

Mr. Traber moved to approve the minutes of the Regular Meeting of June 9, 2025. The motion was seconded by Ms. Estremera Jimenez and approved by a 7-1 vote.

Voting in favor were members Perez, Traber, Estremera Jimenez, Cassermere, Baptiste-Perez, and Woodson. Mr. Sokolovic abstained.

The next agenda items were on approval of contracts.

Jaimie McCarvill, finance manager of the facilities department, said the Central High floor replacement and work on the bleachers was capital-funded. Seven contractors attended the walk-through and one bid. The amount of the contract is \$388,000.

Mr. Benejan Grajales** joined the meeting online.

Mr. Traber moved “*to approve contract BMB047256 Central High school gym floor replacement.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

Ms. McCarvill said the paving of the Beardsley School parking lot attracted ten contractors at the walk-through. Five contractors bid, with the lowest being \$80,820. She said it is also capital-funded.

Mr. Traber moved “*to approve contract BMB0482056 Beardsley School paving.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic.

Mr. Sokolovic noted Beardsley School is slated for closure in the facilities master plan. Jorge Garcia, chief operations officer, said because it was capital-funded and would revert to the city if no longer used by the board as it is still a city asset. He said the current condition is unsafe.

The motion was approved by a 5-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Perez, Traber, Benejan Grajales, Estremera Jimenez, and Woodson. Members Cassermere, Baptiste-Perez, and Sokolovic abstained.

The next agenda item was on a continued contract with Effective School Solutions.

Duncan Young, CEO of Effective School Solutions (ESS), said we're in the fourth year of partnering with the district to provide high acuity mental health and emotional and behavioral support. He said the renewal was for \$1,363,000, which is a reduction of \$200,000 versus the current year. He said the reductions are the result of a state grant and Medicaid billing.

Mr. Young said we've provided direct clinical care to over 425 of the district's highest acuity students and has also built educator capacity. There has also been consultation with the special education team, technical assistance on mental program enhancements, and helping to provide exposure to statewide mental health best practices. He said there has been cost avoidance of the need for higher levels of care for students being supported. He said this has totaled \$2 million

Mr. Young described the care provided and coaching support provided. Jessica Gaffney, project director,

described her team. Mr. Young described the improvement in students who were in the program.

In response to a question, Ms. Gaffney said the schools chosen for the program are based on need. Mr. Young said if the contract is renewed, we would sit down with Dr. Avery and Ms. McKinley to determine where to place resources.

In response to a question, Nestor Nkwo, chief financial officer, said the program is paid through the operating budget.

In response to a question, Ms. Gaffney said the main difference in the work of our clinicians and school social workers is we have smaller caseloads and provide more intense wraparound services. Mr. Young said we provide more of a medical model for the needs of higher acuity students. Dr. Avery said that we have to build capacity in the district, which will be enhanced through the contract. Ms. Gaffney discussed the professional development ESS has provided.

Mr. Young said the goal for care at this level is we want it to pay for itself by tracing students we are helping to avoid placement in out-of-district settings.

In response to a question, Mr. Young described ESS's ability to direct bill Medicaid for services. He said the

contract fee was reduced by the \$100,000 due to anticipated revenue from Medicaid this year.

Mr. Woodson moved *“to approve this item.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Estremera Jimenez. The motion was approved by 6-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Perez, Benejan Grajales, Estremera Jimenez, Woodson, Traber, and Cassermere.

Mr. Sokolovic and Ms. Baptiste-Perez abstained.

The next agenda items were on second reads of policies.

Dr. Albert Sackey, deputy superintendent, said Policy 5145.511 on sexual abuse prevention and education program, gives the definition of various terms. He said the policy includes a sample opt-out for parents who do not want their child to participate.

Mr. Traver moved *“to adopt the sexual abuse prevention and education program policy.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Estremera Jimenez and unanimously approved.

Ms. Perez said there was some question about Policy 6161.3 on comparability of services – Title I, and Mr. Sokolovic spoke to CAGE about it and material that was missing has been added to the portal. Ms. Perez said CAGE recommended it be adopted due to state statutes.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *“to approve and adopt the second read of Policy number 6161.3, comparability of services.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Traber and unanimously approved.

Dr. Sackey said Policy 0200, statement of education goals and student objectives, is based on student achievement and it would allow the board to incorporate its own goals.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *“to approve the statement of education goals and student objectives second read, Policy 0200.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Estremera Jimenez and unanimously approved.

Dr. Sackey said Policy 5144.2 was on the use of exclusionary time-out settings.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *“to suspend Bylaw 9310 for the purpose of immediate implementation of Policy 5144.2, recognizing that we didn’t do it at the second board meeting.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Traber and unanimous approved.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *“to approve the exclusionary time-out settings, Policy 5144.2, for immediate implementation.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Traber and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on suspending Bylaw 9310 for the purpose of immediate implementation of Policy Title

IX, sexual harassment, 4000.1. Dr. Sackey said the policy applied to staff members.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *“to suspend Policy 9310 for immediate implementation of Policy Title IX, sexual harassment, 4000.1.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Traber and unanimously approved.

Mr. Traber moved *“to approve Policy Title IX sexual harassment, 4000.1.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on the district’s organizational structure and budget planning.

Dr. Avery said the items in the document would be an extension to Mr. Nkwo’s presentation on the budget.

Dr. Avery said he is proposing eliminating the position of assistant superintendent for SEL. He said he believed the position can be consumed by other members of the district. He said the same situation applies to the director of grants and grants management.

Dr. Avery said he was proposing to reclassify the chief human resource officer position as an assistant superintendent for human capital, which will require a state certification. He also proposed eliminating the director of payroll and benefits, which will be covered by reorganization. The director of SEL programs and student affairs is also proposed to be eliminated.

Dr. Avery said an elimination of an assistant principal position and a program services coordinator is also proposed.

Dr. Avery said there are an additional five clerical positions that are proposed to be eliminated.

Dr. Avery said the total savings are \$1.4 million.

Dr. Avery said Items 9 to 12 cover delaying the elimination of positions until six months into the next school year due to future retirements.

Dr. Avery displayed the final organizational chart. He said the streamlining includes having him supervise high school principals. He noted the chief financial officer position will also require a state certification.

Dr. Avery described it as a lean organizational chart.

In response to a question, Dr. Avery said the \$1 million savings could be used to bring back items previously cut. He cautioned against using additional dollars that may be received when you don't know if you will get them next year, which means they don't need to be used on personnel.

Mr. Benejan Grajales arrived at the meeting in person.

Mr. Nkwo described the \$980,000 as part of the gap-closing measures.

Mr. Sokolovic said the board should have previously prioritized items that should be brought back. He said having staff stay for six months and then leave in the middle of the year would be quite disruptive. He said the \$400,000 could have brought back the entire arts program. He said librarians or social workers could have been brought back with the savings.

There was a discussion of \$89,000 in nutrition savings. Mr. Sokolovic said there was an estimated \$2.5 million savings in the budget on returning special education students to the district. He said this was not the time to be reversing cuts, which, if done, should be the board's priority cuts.

Dr. Avery said the board made about \$30 million in cuts and it was going to be a tough year. He said he cut two additional people from the cabinet because that's what the board wanted him to do.

Mr. Traber said there are two \$5 million chunks of money at the state level and there has not been an answer as to how we get them. He said his source, which is very good, says it's coming to us.

In response to a question, Dr. Avery said there is staff within the department that will be able to expand upon obtaining grants. Hannah Whitley, the current assistant director of grants development and management,

described her background in grants. She described the process that is used in obtaining grants.

Mr. Nkwo presented on the budget. He discussed the excess cost reimbursement for special education. He described the ECS increase of \$667,906 and the increase in special education funding of \$2.6 million.

In response to a question about \$5 million in funding, Mr. Nkwo said that money is not under the control of the school district. He said the state commissioner decides.

Dr. Avery said he asked the same question of the deputy commissioner, and he said they're working on providing clarity to the district. He said he believed the meeting with the commissioner next month will provide that clarity.

In response to a question, Dr. Avery said there was a whole other issue on an additional \$5 million. He said there were different interpretations of the status of the funding. Mr. Traber said the state finance advisory commission is not under the state Department of Education.

Mr. Traber said the commissioner is pressuring us to make cuts when we might not have to make those cuts if we actually knew what money was coming in next year that the legislature voted on.

Mr. Benejan Grajales said the situation made him upset, sad, and angry. He asked, what else do they want? He said Bridgeport gave Hartford everything they wanted.

Mr. Sokolovic said the legislation referred to an amount “not exceeding” \$5 million. He noted the provision calling for the mayor to submit a report in writing that includes a plan for corrective actions. He said this was unacceptable because the legislation was tying our hands. He said the state ECS was flat funded at zero with the district facing ten to twelve million dollars of increased costs. He said we that we were not in a position to bring back a single position under we get clarity on all of this.

Mr. Nkwo said come 2027 the district will need \$22 million to \$24 million in additional funding.

Ms. Estremera Jimenez said she believed public comment should be allowed at every board meeting. She said she was very deflated about this conversation.

Mr. Benejan Grajales said an election was coming soon and it’s time to talk.

In response to a question, Mr. Nkwo said the city allocated an additional \$3.1 million increase, which the city must maintain going forward. He said the state Alliance Grant went up by \$11 million. He described special education funding and the use of the Internal Service Fund.

Mr. Traber said the board was extraordinarily responsible on the budget and we moved as quickly as we could to take responsible steps to correct the problem. He said it feels like they don't have respect for what we did.

Dr. Avery said we have people trying to keep the district afloat and we're struggling. He said the board had done a great job in making the cuts. Mr. Traber said there was the possibility of a special legislative session.

Ms. Estremera Jimenez noted the FY2026 budget had a \$13 million deficit.

Mr. Sokolovic said it would take a two-thirds vote to rescind any prior votes by the board. He said we had to tread very carefully because the state is watching us. He said the SEED funding had to be used for new services outside the operating budget. He said the proposed \$2 million in attrition savings seemed to be an astronomical amount.

Mr. Sokolovic said that the budget was a reflection of our values, and if the superintendent's proposals are adopted, we are saying we value this more than bringing back an arts program or four or five school counselors or three librarians. He said the proposals did not reflect his values.

Mr. Traber said the administrative positions would be paid \$1,000 less by bumping them into a teaching position, for a total of \$7,000 if they work for half of the school year.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said she agreed with holding off on hiring people without the board's priorities and given the nature of the budget.

In response to a question, Domenic Costello, chief human resource officer, said an administrator on assignment would be able to bump out principals they are senior to, and principals would potentially bump assistant superintendents, and assistant superintendents could bump a teacher.

In response to a question, Mr. Costello said the new principals would be bumped by the two administrators on assignment. Ms. Baptiste-Perez said she was opposed to removing an outstanding first-year principal who was honored recently for two administrators that we've already voted to get rid of.

Mr. Sokolovic described the savings projected in the budget document, which would allow restoring the arts program.

Ms. Estremera Jimenez said we have to restabilize central office because we had gotten rid of so many positions. She said if this is not done, we will not be able to provide proper resources to the schools. Mr. Costello said the administrators on assignment had twenty-plus years of experience as administrators.

Mr. Sokolovic said because we voted as a board to cut these positions, a motion to rescind was required, which takes a two-thirds vote. He said the motion had to come from someone who voted to make the cuts. He suggested the votes be separated out, with those that require only a majority be done first.

In response to a question, Mr. Nkwo said the savings from eliminating librarians was \$1.7 million. Ms. Cassermere said she was really concerned about this elimination, although she did not have a solution to this. Mr. Traber said he shared her concern.

Ms. Perez suggested a recess to talk to legal counsel on the vote.

Mr. Traber moved "*for a ten-minute recess.*" The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan Grajales and unanimous approved.

The meeting was recessed at 9:02 p.m.

The board resumed in public session at 9:32 p.m.

Atty, Mark Anastasi of the city attorney's office was present.

Mr. Sokolovic said the agenda did not include a reference to rescinding a vote. Atty. Anastasi said if the item was on the agenda, only a majority vote would be needed. He

said a reference to approval of the 2025-26 budget would not be the type of specific notice that's required.

Ms. Perez said a budget-gap plan was approved previously, but not the budget.

Atty. Anastasi said he believed the board would first need to reconsider the vote to eliminate the positions.

Ms. Perez moved to rescind the proposed fiscal year 2025-26 budget. The motion was seconded by Mr. Traber.

Ms. Perez moved to rescind the vote that was taken on April 28th for the elimination of the administrators on special assignment, four assistant principals, one school counselor, and the alternative education supervisor. The motion was seconded by Mr. Traber.

Atty. Anastasi said two votes were needed: one to put it on the agenda and, second, to vote to rescind.

Ms. Perez withdrew her motion; Mr. Traber withdrew his second.

Atty, Anastasi said an item could not be added to the agenda of a special meeting. Mr. Traber said the agenda item is "approval of the fiscal year 25-26 operating budget." Atty, Anastasi said that was very general and the layoffs are part of that budget, so the FOI vote could be skipped.

Ms. Perez moved *“to rescind the vote on 4/28 for the positions of two administrators on special assignment, four assistant principals, one school counselor, and one supervisor of alternative education.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Traber.

Mr. Sokolovic moved to amend to replace the eight associated positions with the restoration of the arts program in its entirety so all our students can enjoy the arts for the entire year. The amendment was not seconded.

Atty, Anastasi said if the positions were voted on separately, they would have to be rescinded on separate votes. If it was one vote, the action could be rescinded with one vote. Ms. Perez said it was one vote on April 28th.

Mr. Sokolovic said our budget is not clean and we have too much money in flux to bring back \$418,254 in cuts. He said the board never established a hierarchy of things to return; he urged the Finance Committee convene and do so.

Ms. Perez said this was the bare minimum we could do because we’ve eliminated so many administrative positions.

Mr. Traber said the conversation could not isolated from Dr. Avery’s discussion of the reorganization to save \$1.43

million. He noted past debates over savings sports and/or arts. He said he supported the plan to create more savings in the central office proposed by Dr. Avery.

Mr. Sokolovic said he agreed with reshuffling the staff.

Atty, Anastasi suggested being clear as to how long the positions are coming back for.

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

Mr. Sokolovic moved *“to approve the superintendent’s additional cuts, 1 through 8.”*

Mr. Nkwo said the positions in items 9, 10, and 12 were six-month positions, while item 11 was a full-year position. He said the counselor position for the juvenile justice center was required by law.

In response to a question, Ms. Perez said the document submitted reflects the other positions are only funded for six months.

Mr. Sokolovic said he supported Dr. Avery’s cuts, given the situation we have, and the board should get behind him, no matter how disgusting they are. He said we need to live within the budget that the governor and mayor have forced upon us.

The motion was seconded by Mr. Woodson.

The motion was approved unanimously approved.

Mr. Traber moved *“to approve the superintendent’s recommendations of Items 9 through 12 as written.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Perez.

The motion was approved by a 6-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Benejan Grajales, Perez, Estremera Jimenez, Woodson, Baptiste-Perez, and Traber. Mr. Sokolovic voted no. Ms. Cassermere abstained.

Mr. Sokolovic said he voted no because it was not clear enough that we may have to come back and cut another \$418,000.

Mr. Traber moved *“to approve the operating budget as presented tonight and as amended by the previous two motions amounting to \$304,160,933.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Perez.

Mr. Sokolovic moved to amend to specifically add that these are only six-months delays. Ms. Perez said it was on the document presented. Atty. Anastasi said he believed that was sufficient.

The motion was approved by a 6-0 vote. Voting in favor were members Benejan Grajales, Perez, Estremera Jimenez, Woodson, Sokolovic, and Traber. Members Baptiste-Perez and Cassermere abstained.

The next agenda item was on the evaluation process of the interim superintendent. Ms. Perez said she forgot to put the information in the portal. She said she just sent an e-mail to the board members. She said she spoke with Nick Caruso of CABE, and he recommended a process similar to a midyear review or a workshop situation. She noted the board had not established goals with superintendent.

Mr. Sokolovic said we are already behind on the midyear evaluation. He described how the board should approach the evaluation. Mr. Traber said he did not believe we were that far behind. Mr. Sokolovic said if we treat this as a midyear evaluation, then the one-year evaluation would be in December in order to be compliant with state statutes. Ms. Perez said Mr. Caruso suggested using the midyear evaluation as Dr. Avery's end-of-year evaluation.

Dr. Avery said he could agree to that process, and it will work out fine. He requested it be in July.

Mr. Traber moved *"to approve the format as you presented it."* Mr. Sokolovic seconded the motion, which was unanimously approved.

The next item was on a calendar to update board bylaws on board member decorum during meetings, along with a method of how to respond to members who violate the standard, and also the subcommittee structure.

Mr. Sokolovic said the mechanisms were already there, so there would not be major changes.

Mr. Traber said the subcommittee structure had been an issue for the last two years.

Ms. Perez suggested there be an ad hoc committee, and members interested in joining should contact her.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested there be a committee of the whole, which would cut out the middleman.

Ms. Cassermere said she has spoken to other top school districts in the state. She said she wondered how Dr. Avery feels about nine people who don't have his degree evaluating his work.

Mr. Traber moved to table. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on the board's community forums. Ms. Perez said the state recommended we have four board-led forums by August 1st on establishing a vision for the district.

Ms. Perez said she liked the idea of an interactive forum as suggested by Chris Horan, including the use of a facilitator. She said holding two forums in one week would mean there would not be a meeting every week. She said there would also a Thought Exchange survey. She requested the board members do their best to recruit

community members to attend the forums because it will be hard to get turnout in July.

Dr. Avery suggested each board member bring at least five people to the forum. He said the district would help in promotion. Mr. Traber said that it would be wise to use schools where Lighthouse is being held in the summer, so parents are made aware.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 10:37 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Approved by the board on July 21, 2025