

Monday, March 24, 2025

MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MEETING OF  
THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION,  
held March 24, 2025, at Bridgeport Regional  
Aquaculture Science Technology Education  
Center, 60 St. Stephens Road, Bridgeport,  
Connecticut.

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

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

\*remote participation

Acting Superintendent Dr. Royce Avery was  
present.

## **STUDENT REPRESENTATIVE REPORTS:**

Daniela Gomez of the Biotech School at  
Fairchild Wheeler highlighted SAT boot camp;

the National Honor Society fundraiser; a visit by a class to Superior Court in Bridgeport; the upcoming NGSS boot camp; and report card conferences.

Jeronimo Restrepo of the IT School at Fairchild Wheeler highlighted Marines participating in physical education classes with students; SAT boot camp; a field trip to Sacred Heart by Advanced IT classes; and the upcoming pathway showcase.

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Christian Bica of Central High highlighted Women's History Month announcements and an upcoming assembly; spring sports practice; upcoming events like the spring dance, junior ring dance, and senior prom. He said there will also be a college acceptance day.

Mr. Traber and Ms. Baptiste-Perez\* joined the meeting.

## **PUBLIC COMMENT:**

Rebecca Cabrera said we come before you as the BCAS membership to discuss the need to save our current districtwide assistant principals, social workers, school guidance counselors, and

special education district level supervisors for the 2025-26 school year and beyond. She said the current proposed budget cuts will result in the loss of 24 positions, including 18 assistant principals. She said these cuts will have a negative impact on the classrooms. She added that human capital is our most valuable resource.

Ms. Cabrera described the duties and importance of the assistant principals. She described the need for principals and assistant principals to attend PPTs for special education students. She said the loss of staff has increased special education referrals, which highlights the need for special education supervisors. She said there were also needs due to the mental health crisis in the aftermath of Covid.

Ms. Cabrera urged the board not to reduce the positions.

Omar Resto, a restorative interventionist, spoke on the importance of his position. He said he was a resident of the city for 46 years and an employee of the district for 24 years. He said he and his colleagues transitioned into this position

from in-school suspension officers. He said the positions provides a layer of support for administrators, teachers, and guidance counselors with our most at-risk students. He said our work is cost-effective and we make a difference with our children.

Jess Resto, Park City Magnet PAC president, said many of us stood before the board warning of financial irresponsibility, and now here we are facing the consequences of those decisions. She cuts of paras and restorative interventionists directly affect our classrooms and school climate. She said she has never seen her husband more fulfilled than he is in his restorative interventionist position.

Angel Resto said the board has a chance to hire twenty teachers for special education tonight. He said the twenty teachers would be a win and he urged the board to vote to send the teachers to school and become certified.

Estevao Martins, the student representative for the IT School at Fairchild Wheeler, said he knew of twenty students who work every day with Mr. Resto in his role as a restorative interventionist.

He said Mr. Resto provides essential services for students.

Ashner Witter and Audrey Badia of Bassick High welcomed Dr. Raiola back to Bassick. They reported the unified team took part in a track event and the St. Patrick's Day parade, and the school would be joining the Southwest Conference. They also reported on testing and fundraising.

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Albert Benejan Grajales said he knows we need to be saving money, but the saving should come from the people at the top, not those who have low income. He said it was very obvious how to save money. He said staff members sometimes work two or three jobs, and also after hours for students. He said he would fight for them.

Mr. Traber said there was a bill in the state Senate (1511) that would give us \$55 million, and we wouldn't have to make cuts. He urged everyone to call their senators and reps to advocate for that bill, which would allow the board to even add things to the schools. He noted the deficit was \$25 million. He said there is nobody in this room that wants to cut a thing.

## **APPROVAL OF BOARD MINUTES:**

Mr. Medina moved to approve the minutes of the Regular Meeting of March 10, 2025. The motion was seconded by Mr. Traber and unanimously approved.

## **CHAIR REPORT:**

Ms. Perez thanked Mr. Rapice for inviting her to the middle school debate league at the Capitol last week. The students participated in a mock debate on the Senate floor. She said there is also a debate tournament this weekend at Discovery School.

Ms. Perez said board training would occur on March 31st. The times of the meeting and the community forum will be adjusted to avoid a time conflict.

Ms. Perez said the board members received an e-mail from the Commissioner of Education's attorney regarding the superintendent search at 4 p.m. today. She said the e-mail would go to the board's legal counsel.

Ms. Estremera Jimenez proposed the board consider holding the meetings at the city hall because they are more cost-effective because of overtime, increased utilities, and security. Ms. Perez said permission from the City Council would be needed.

## **COMMITTEE REPORTS/REFERRALS:**

Mr. Sokolovic reported on the Finance Committee. He said advocacy efforts resulted in a good turnout for CAFE Day on the Hill to lobby legislators, including Senate Bill 1511. He said more than ten percent of the speakers were Bridgeport residents or staff. He thanked council members Newton, Spell, and Valle for testifying.

Mr. Sokolovic said the committee met on March 20 and advanced items to the meeting tonight. One will reduce the budget gap, one will raise the budget gap, and one will have a neutral impact.

Mr. Sokolovic said the budget gap went up during the meeting because one budget neutral item was incorrectly included as a savings of \$936,000 and an additional \$2.5 million was

included with no suggested cuts. The gap went up \$2.1 million after the meeting. He said the CFO estimated we need to cut about \$34 million to balance the budget. He said we are legally obligated to deliver a balanced budget prior to June 30th. He said if we don't balance the budget, the state likely come and do it for all of us.

Ms. Sokolovic said the February 28, 2025, financial update was discussed. He said the CFO said the update would be posted on the website, as required by law, and he said the website is still lacking the December and February reports in violations of statute.

Mr. Sokolovic said two audit firms submitted bids on February 28th, and we are awaiting the responses of two staff members in order to move forward. He said he has discussed this twice with the superintendent, and it still has not been done as of today. He said the audit is imperative in gaining community trust and finding efficiencies.

Mr. Sokolovic said the next meeting would be on April 3rd because we are facing an additional \$28 million in cuts.



Mr. Medina said the Policy & Personnel Committee moved four items for consideration at tonight's meeting, including suspending bylaw 9310. He said the next meeting would be on April 9th.

Ms. Perez said the Facilities Committee would meet on April 2nd.

Mr. Sokolovic said the CAFE Day on the Hill included advocacy on Senate Bill 1511, special education concerns, and meetings with legislators. He said about twenty people from Bridgeport were present to advocate. He said we can restore positions if we get funding, but if we don't get the funding, we're obligated by law to close the \$28 million budget gap.

## **SUPERINTENDENT'S REPORT:**

Dr. Avery said the state technical assistance team consists of four members. He said they will be in the district until December. They are currently coming to the district two to three days a week, looking at internal workings of the district, including finance, special education, HR,

and daily operations. He said they have also met with the board's executive team.

Dr. Avery said student registration for the 2025-26 school year has begun. He especially urged pre-K students to register. There are in-person events scheduled for pre-K students.

Dr. Avery said there will be a kickoff to kindergarten summer program from June 30th through July 25th to prepare incoming students.

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Dr. Avery said the magnet lottery has closed, and results will be announced on Wednesday.

Dr. Avery said we have done a lot of advocacy for the district in funding and special education. He said Senate Bill 1511 is really crucial. He urged further advocacy for the bill. He said he went with his executive cabinet for the CAFE Day on the Hill. He said it was important to advocate for the dollars our district, students, and families deserve. He said he was looking for an opportunity to bring additional state representatives to the district to have personal conversations.

Dr. Avery said open teacher interviews were held, and we have identified at least five candidates to hire for the upcoming school year.

Dr. Avery described upcoming events, including public forums at P.T. Barnum and Beardsley Terrace. He said there will also be three facilities master plan meetings.

Dr. Avery said the district puts out a weekly newsletter.

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In response to a question, Dr. Avery said the state team did not consult with him on the meeting being held tonight to gather community input. He said the dates were proposed by individual community organizations. Mr. Sokolovic said he was concerned that the meeting was taking place right now and they would be better off right here. He said the people at the state level are the ones deciding what we do with our money and forcing us to make these cuts. He said it was highly disrespectful to come into the community most impacted by the underfunding by the state's racist funding schemes. He urged someone go to 411 Bishop Avenue and tell them we need money, which solves many of our problems.

In response to a question, Lindsay Davis, director of early childhood, described the transition for pre-K students to kindergarten. She said there are 37 grant-funded classrooms at 23 locations. She said parents build relationships with the staff in the pre-K classes. She said the pre-K-4 curriculum has a component that is based on transition to kindergarten. She said the majority of the pre-K students in the district continue in the school that they are at. Parents also have a choice as to what pre-K school they attend.

Ms. Cassermere thanked Dr. Avery for his hard work and being professional and patient throughout this.

In response to a question, Dr. Avery described low-functioning students transitioning out of the district at age 22. Michelle McKinley, chief of special education, said discussions begin before the child's 18th birthday, and she described the support provided between ages 18 and 22.

Mr. Traber said testimony can still be submitted for Senate Bill 1511. Dr. Avery said his office has sample testimony that can be provided. Mr.

Traber suggested speaking from the heart about what it is that you care about.

Ms. Estremera Jimenez urged the building principals be surveyed for suggestions of where cuts can take place. She suggested a release on Parent Square on Bill 1511 for parents to advocate.

In response to a question, Dr. Avery said he would like representatives who visit the district to meet with the board and whoever else is needed.

Mr. Traber said the Instruction and Support Services Committee will meet on Wednesday.

Mr. Benejan Grajales said Dr. Avery was trying to fix a mess from years back. He said he tells the principals to come to Dr. Avery.

Dr. Avery said it has been three months and he has tried to do things in a manner that has been conducive to everybody. He said he feels he has a better grip on things. He said he takes ownership of not embracing administrators well enough, and he said he would fix that.

Mr. Benejan Grajales requested a moment of silence for faith leader Frankie Colon and Sheriff Charles Valentino.

## **NEW BUSINESS:**

The next agenda item was on the CREC agreement for the 2024-25 advanced alternate route to certification.

Michael Brosnan said this agreement was in place last year to cross-endorse current teachers into special education. There were over twenty responses to the survey for the program which takes one year. The teachers would be able to begin the 2025-26 school year as a special education teacher. The cost of program is \$9,950 per candidate. Tuition would be covered by the district, there would be a two-step pay bump, and the candidate would commit to remain in a special education role for four years.

Mr. Brosnan said there has been tremendous success with the program over the past several years.

In response to a question, Domenic Costello, chief human resource officer, said the current MOU is three years of the employment after the certification, for a total of four years. He said we have not been able to negotiate an adjustment to the term with the union yet. He said the union understands the dire situation with special education in the district.

In response to a question, Mr. Brosnan said the positions are currently staffed by Kelly substitutes. The proposal would move twenty of our teachers into those positions as certified teachers. Mr. Sokolovic said it was a great program but we're going to have to have a like cut on the other side of this equation to make up for the expenditure.

In response to a question, Nestor Nkwo, chief CFO, explained the program. He said the cost of the steps is \$3,700 per teacher each year. Mr. Costello said the total cost in salary difference of the teachers who applied is \$167,603. Mr. Traber said it was a worthwhile expenditure of money.

Mr. Traber moved *"to approve the extension of the CREC agreement for the 24-25 advanced*

*alternative route to certification in the SPED agreement.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan Grajales.

The motion was approved by approved by a 7-1 vote. Voting in favor were members Perez, Benejan Grajales, Traber, Medina, Cassermere, Woodson, and Estremera Jimenez. Ms. Baptiste-Perez was opposed. Mr. Sokolovic abstained. He said it was a great program, but it was an addition to the budget.

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The next agenda item was on Hancock Research.

Matt Ragone and Julie Shenefield were present.

Dr. Ragone displayed the research that was provided in areas of district's priorities.

Ms. Shenefield provided an overview of Hanover. She said Bridgeport also had access to Hanover's digital portal of over 1500 syndicated reports.

Dr. Ragone said Hanover has delivered eight formal projects to the district. He said we have met monthly with Dr. Avery, Dr. Sackley, and



other executive team members. He said Hanover has also presented to the board and committees.

Dr. Ragone said Hanover contributed to the district's special education grant submission last fall, which he described as a heavy lift for the district.

Dr. Ragone said the priorities listed were the areas where research could make progress towards goals. He said maximizing special education has been a huge priority for the district. There has been work on SEL for maximizing counselors and other support staff.

Dr. Ragone displayed information on the Connecticut teacher compensation report. He said data was gathered on salary averages in the state. He said research typically begets additional research, and each report provides suggested next steps. He said the objective is to lead to cuts to programs that are not being used or not giving return on investment.

Dr. Ragone said Hanover engaged in a lot of research on special education and delivered it to the executive team. He said the Arizona State

study of the special education program delivered a lot of recommendations, and Hanover carried out additional research based on the recommendations. He described work on misidentification of special education students.

Dr. Ragone said Hanover supported Bridgeport with a special education grant application. He described further research that can be carried out.

Dr. Ragone described work on climate and culture, including counseling models. He described an infographic that was used.

Dr. Ragone described work in the area of SEL, PBIS, restorative justice, and school climate initiatives. He said there was a noted lack of districtwide consistency across SEL and climate.

Dr. Ragone discussed the annotated bibliography provided as a quick report. He described it as being a curator of a large library. He displayed suggested follow-up research on SEL and climate and culture.

Dr. Ragone displayed a summary of research recommendations referenced in the presentation.

In response to a question, Ms. Perez said the report was in the board's portal. Mr. Medina said he did not see it in the portal.

In response to a question, Dr. Avery said Dr. Ragone provided the whole spectrum of reports presented in the year as an overview. He said every board member was presented a copy of all of them. He said our team has been utilizing the projects since beginning the work with Hanover a year ago. He said Hanover is working on a report of Fairfield County salaries of administrators.

Mr. Traber said his recollection was we were going to get a report on the special education packet at this meeting. He said most of what we were given was produced in the last few months.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said the packets were not provided in the portal until about 5:00 p.m. today. Ms. Perez said they were in the committee packet from March 5th. Ms. Baptiste-

Perez said she shouldn't have to fish for documents.

In response to a question, Ms. Shenefield said the Hanover contract ran from March 1, 2024, to the end of February. Dr. Avery said he was going to present a contract for consideration next year to the Instruction & Support Services Committee.

The next agenda item was on suspending bylaw 9310 for the purpose of immediate implementation of updated revised policies on health/medical records policy P5125.11 and the nondiscrimination policy and notice, P0521a.

The item was "*moved by Mr. Sokolovic*". The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan and approved by an 8-0 vote.

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

The next agenda item was on possible approval of the following updated, revised policies:

health/medical records policy P5125.11 and the nondiscrimination policy and notice, P0521a.

Albert Sackey, assistant superintendent, said the items were shared at the Policy & Personnel Committee last week.

Dr. Sackey said the health and medical records policy currently exists, but the CAFE policy will be added. The name of Ms. Earley has been removed and replaced by the school health supervisor. There is new specific language around the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996, and around the Family Educational Rights Privacy Act. A sample HIPPA form will also be included.

Mr. Medina noted the change from the name of the administrator to the position. Dr. Sackey said we are not changing our actual policy, but we are adding to our policy.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *“to approve updating the health/medical records policy P5125.11 for immediate implementation.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Medina and approved by a 7-0 vote.

Voting in favor were members Perez, Medina, Sokolovic, Benejan Grajales, Estremera Jimenez, Traber, and Woodson. Members Baptiste-Perez and Cassermere abstained.

Dr. Sackey said the current nondiscrimination policy is 5162, which will be replaced by CAFE policy 0521. He said the policy expands the explanation of discrimination and harassment and adds the contact person at the district level. Contact information for the U.S. Department of Civil Rights is also included.

Mr. Sokolovic moved “*to approve the nondiscrimination policy and P0521a for immediate implementation.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Medina.

Mr. Sokolovic requested that we immediately post this to the website and not hold off until we get a group of policies approved.

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

The next agenda was on a first read of the updated policies. The first one was the use of exclusionary timeout settings, P5144.2

Dr. Sackey said we do not currently have an exclusionary timeout policy. It provides specific information on definitions. He said Mr. Sokolovic suggested language be added to the policy when restraint or seclusion can be used.

In response to a question, Dr. Sackey said the entire section is new. DRAFT

In response to a question, Dr. Sackey said the only point in time staff would physically intervene with a child is if they are a safety concern to themselves or others. He said often restraint or seclusion are part of a behavior plan or an IEP.

Ms. Perez said certain teachers are trained in crisis prevention; she asked if training in this area is being expanded. Dr. Sackey said there is CPI training throughout the year. He said we're always looking to deescalate a situation and not restrain children. He said each building has a crisis intervention team. The new policy will be districtwide that covers all students who are restrained or secluded.

Ms. Perez said she was advocating for training all staff on recognizing behaviors.

Dr. Avery said we're seeing those types of behaviors at a younger age, so more training is needed, especially on a constant basis.

Michele McKinley, chief of special education, said we have seven certified trainers within the district, and there are monthly CPI trainings.

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Mr. Sokolovic proposed a revision of the sample timeout data collection form to add demographic information on age, race, and gender. Dr. Sackey said he would add that. Ms. Perez said a recent article said the majority of a recent increase of restraints in the state are of black and brown students.

Mr. Traber said he had a concern about overly bureaucratizing a classroom. He asked if a five-minute timeout had to be documented. Mr. Medina noted this was a first read and things could be changed.

Dr. Sackey said we have the flexibility to make some adjustments to this. He said whenever a



child is restrained or secluded, the form has to be completed. Ms. McKinley described the process of removal to another setting. She said a timeout can lead to seclusion or restraint, depending on the situation. She said the form is necessary when a restraint used. Ms. McKinley said we would have to explore whether sending a student to another class meets the definition of an exclusionary timeout.

Dr. Sackey said timeouts can be part of a student's IEP.

In response to a question, Dr. Sackey said the policy is exactly as recommended by CAGE. He said he did not know how much of the policy is written into state statute, and he would have to look into it and respond at the committee meeting.

Mr. Medina said he understood these are mandated policies.

The next item was on the alcohol use, drugs, and tobacco policy, P5131. Dr. Sackey said this is also complicated. He said the current policies 5136 and 5137 will be replaced by CAGE policy 5131, which expands the definition of drugs,

under the influence, electronic and liquid nicotine, and privacy rights. There is also discussion of performance-enhancing drugs, medical marijuana, and CBD products. Disciplinary actions for the various infractions are included.

In response to a question on marijuana, Dr. Sackey said it is illegal in a school setting for anyone 21. He said it was up to the board to set the wording. Mr. Sokolovic said if it's not contrary to state statute, it would be preferable to add that language. Dr. Sackey said he can review that prior to the next meeting.

Mr. Sokolovic said these are student-centered policies and they can't take effect until the next school year.

Dr. Avery said the board was out of compliance on five policies that are presented for consideration because there are no updated policies since 2015. He said CAGE urged they put before the board to get us within compliance. He said a lot of policies changed three or four years ago. He said the CAGE recommendations were streamlined to fit the district as best as we

possibly could. He said the ones brought forward were the critical ones.

Mr. Traber said CAFE told us that about 70 to 80 percent of the districts are not in compliance on policies. He said this goes against what makes sense as a teacher and a maker of rules. He said we should do it the right way and go through the two readings.

Mr. Woodson said he heard Dr. Avery expressing the importance of the five items. He suggested getting it done and then we can make changes from where we stand. He said we have to listen to Dr. Avery and his guidance.

Ms. Cassermere said she agreed with Mr. Woodson. She said the new policy was necessary.

Mr. Medina said he agreed. He noted this was the first read, which is for changes and discussions. He said CAFE indicated Bridgeport was in good standing compared to some districts.

Dr. Avery said we'll contact CAFE and inquire whether it will affect the current student code of

conduct, and if it does, we can bring a revised code of conduct to the board.

Ms. Perez said there is a sense of urgency because drug use in the schools is very common, including in middle schools.

In response to a question, Dr. Avery said there are existing policies, but they are not up to state standards. He said there is policy about drug use by staff. Mr. Sokolovic said he did not see a sense of urgency. He said if the policy was adopted, it would not take effect until next school year, unless waived by the board.

Ms. Perez said policy can be put in place that also provides support for students.

Dr. Avery said four or five years ago vape pens were not a thing, and now they are.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested passing the policy and posting it on the website, effective June 30th, which will lead to awareness. Dr. Avery said we'll have an answer from CAGE on urgency and it will be presented to the committee.

Mr. Traber said he was speaking to the employee policy and changing things with two months left in the school year.

The next agenda item was on the elimination of kindergarten paras funded through Delta T.

Nestor Nkwo, chief financial officer, said the proposal is for elimination for two-to-one paras in the next fiscal year. He said the elimination was included when this year's budget was being drafted as part of the gap-closing measures. He said this was approved by the Finance Committee.

Mr. Traber moved "*the elimination of the two-to-one kindergarten paras funded through Delta T was reinstated with ESSER funds.*" The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic.

Mr. Sokolovic said this is one of the most unkindest cuts we're going to have to make. He said he was going to vote for this cut, but we're cutting from kindergarten classrooms a second adult, who are there to help teachers manage the classroom. He described the challenges of kindergarten students. He said this was the second time in ten years we were facing

removing kindergarten paraprofessionals, which is not done in Greenwich or Westport.

Ms. Estremera Jimenez said it would be prudent to wait to hear what principals have to say about this cut and if they can suggest other cost-cutting measures. She said there would be no savings for this school year anyway.

Mr. Woodson said he agreed that we should get the opinions of principals.

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Mr. Traber said it was a great idea to ask the principals because we need another fifteen to twenty million dollars of cuts, so we need more ideas. He said he was involved with the cuts when Supt. Ramos and the board said they couldn't in good conscience pass a budget that would educate the children, so they threw up their hands and broke the law. He said that brought in Paul Vallas and turmoil.

Mr. Traber said there was a time when we had a para in every first and second grade classroom. He said the ESSER money allowed us to save one para in two kindergarten classrooms.

Mr. Traber said we still have fifteen to twenty million dollars to go, and we need to start taking actions. He said people need to take us seriously that this is the reality we're looking at. He said we can take this one back if someone comes up with better ideas.

Ms. Cassermere said she agreed with Ms. Jimenez on input from principals. She said every board member should get a tour of the schools from the principals. She said she was told she was only the second board member who took a tour of Roosevelt School in ten years. She said the vice principal at Hooker School had a lot of suggestions on cuts that can be made. She said she has visited all the schools in the district except for three.

Mr. Benejan Grajales said paras are very important for kindergartener. He said the parents trust the paras. He said he knows we have to cut and save money, but we don't want to hurt students and parents. He said he was opposed.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez moved to table the elimination of two-to-one kindergarten paras funded through Delta T until results from a

principal-based survey. The motion was seconded by Ms. Cassermere.

Ms. Perez noted there was a motion on the table.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez moved to call the question on the current motion.

The motion was approved by a 7-2 vote. Voting in favor were members Baptiste-Perez, Cassermere, Estremera Jimenez, Woodson, Benejan Grajales, Traber, and Perez. Voting in opposition were members Medina and Sokolovic.

The motion on the floor was defeated by a 6-3 vote. Voting in opposition were members Baptiste-Perez, Cassermere, Estremera Jimenez, Woodson, Benejan Grajales, and Perez. Voting in opposition were members Medina, Traber and Sokolovic.

Mr. Medina said the board was not considering what we have to present before the community and the state because there are cuts that are necessary. He asked where the rest of the community was when SB 1511 was discussed.



He said we need to pass a balanced budget. He said when we get 1511, this is the first thing that was going to be withdrawn. He said the ECS formula has not changed in thirteen years, and we have been treated like garbage.

Mr. Sokolovic said our CFO has suggested making these cuts. He said it was understood when we hired the paras through ESSER funding that these positions would end. He said in committee we went from a \$23 million to \$26 million deficit, and now we're currently at \$28.6 million and we would add \$1.9 million to that. So, we have to cut \$31 million, or the state is going to cut for us. He said he would rather the cuts be decided by us than them.

Mr. Traber said he voted yes for similar reasons. He said we need to start making cuts. He said the principals are not going to come up with \$30 million in cuts. He said he was going to keep fighting with state, but we need to show we're serious about what we want.

Mr. Benejan said he voted no because he was tired of seeing students here. He said we have to make noise with the state. He said everyone should be invited.

Mr. Nkwo said when the board adopted the FY25 budget, it adopted gap-closing measures, which included the elimination of two-to-one paras. He said the board was rejecting what it already adopted.

The next agenda item on the elimination of eleven restorative practice positions that were funded through ESSER.

Mr. Traber moved <sup>DRAFT</sup> “*to approve the elimination of eleven restorative practice positions that were funded with ESSER funds.*” The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic.

Mr. Traber moved to call the question. Mr. Sokolovic seconded the motion.

Mr. Sokolovic suggested giving the superintendent and the CFO to present on the question. Mr. Sokolovic removed his second.

Mr. Nkwo said we’re swapping two classifications of positions. He said the state requires in-school suspension, so we’re unfunding the restorative practice positions and using the money to hire in-school suspension

personnel. He said it is not a savings, but it will meet the grant requirements.

Dr. Avery said the previous administration eliminated in-school suspension officers and implemented restorative practices facilitators. He said last year the state indicated the district was out of compliance on in-school suspension officers. He said leftover Covid dollars were used to reinstate in-school suspension officers, with the help of the union. He said Delta subs were used to fill the void this year, but there are no more ESSER dollars available. He said this has to happen or we're going to have to find another million dollars.

In response to a question, Domenic Costello, chief human resource officer, said because the restorative practice individuals are not members of a bargaining unit, we would have to post the position of in-school suspension officers, who are members of NAGE. Current employees would not be guaranteed a job.

Mr. Costello said we are currently negotiating with the union on the job description for the ISS position so it can involve some restorative

practices roles. He said it is believed the district can be covered with nine ISS officers.

Mr. Sokolovic said he learned nine out of the eleven employees used to be ISS officers. Mr. Costello said the employees who were laid off have recall rights as long as it has been less than two years.

In response to a question, Mr. Costello said Omar Resto is a restorative practice person, and if he was laid off from the ISS position, he would be able to come back.

Dr. Avery said there may not be the same salary in these positions, so someone may not want to go to a lower salary. Ms. Perez said when the ISS position was eliminated, the restorative practice position was at a higher salary.

In response to a question, Mr. Costello said he did not know how many of restorative practice positions were laid off as ISS officers. Mr. Costello said if they were laid off, there would be a recall list. Mr. Medina said we should have had that information tonight. He said we're using \$936,408 now to hire ISS officers. He said we're really only talking about cutting two of

those. Mr. Costello said he guessed if they were laid off, they know they have these recall rights.

In response to a question, Mr. Nkwo said the restorative practice practitioners have a base salary of \$47,754, but including fringe benefits it totals an average of \$83,000 per employee. He said the ISS officers' salaries are about \$46,000, which is almost parallel.

Mr. Traber said it is a safe bet that they don't all know they have recall rights, so it is appropriate to advise them when it is done.

Mr. Benejan Grajales said, here we go again. He said he has witnessed what they do with the students. We have to save money, but we are hurting our kids. He said they do more than the position they have. He said the students trust them and they are amazing. He said we have to make noise for Hartford that we need money.

In response to a question, Dr. Avery said in-school suspension is a classroom where kids go and do lessons. Teachers rotate through the classroom with support. He said it is really different than restorative practices, but the ISS classroom is a requirement of the state.

Dr. Sackley said the ISS officers will need some level of restorative training and will provide some measure of restorative measures to students.

In response to a question, Dr. Sackley said the eleven restorative practice practitioners cover all the schools currently. He said the ISS officers will have a completely different role.

Mr. Traber seconded the motion to call the question.

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The motion was approved by a 5-4 vote. Voting in favor were members Cassermere, Sokolovic, Traber, Baptiste-Perez, Medina, and Benejan Grajales. Voting in opposition were members Estremera Jimenez, Perez, and Woodson.

The motion on the floor was approved by a 4-3 vote. Voting in favor were members Medina, Sokolovic, Traber, and Baptiste-Perez. Voting in opposition were members Estremera Jimenez, Woodson, Benejan Grajales. Ms. Cassermere and Ms. Perez abstained.

The next agenda item was on the reduction of public facilities overtime.

Mr. Nkwo said reinstatement of the in-school suspension officers is going to be funded with the monies from the restorative practice positions. He said net-net it does not give you any savings or costs.

Mr. Nkwo said the idea behind the item is to reduce the overtime spending level from the current year. He said a lot of overtime was done with ESSER money. He said the district cannot afford that trend of overtime going forward. He said the overtime trend goes by seasonality. He said we have to tighten our belts.

Mr. Sokolovic moved that “*we approve the reduction of facilities overtime.*” The motion was seconded by Ms. Baptiste-Perez.

Mr. Sokolovic said since we seem to be on a spending spree and we’ve made our deficit from \$28 million to \$31 million, and we’re moving in the wrong direction, he suggested we vote no on this since because our facilities are in need of repair. He said facilities was the only department that took a hit in last year’s budget when we went on a hiring spree for administration. He said schools are going to remain open for the

next four years, so he would love to propose to amend it to give more money to keep up schools.

Ms. Perez said we haven't voted for new schools. Mr. Sokolovic said the facilities master plan is proposing new schools, and he said Dr. Avery said we're not doing anything until the new schools are built, which is a four-year timeline. He said he would vote no.

Ms. Estremera Jimenez said she would vote yes because we need to make a cut, however, facilities is taking the brunt of it. She said we should be looking for overtime reductions everywhere as well. She said she was not asking the principals to look for \$30 million of savings, which is not practical, but she is asking for savings so we can save the paras. She said every single penny at this point counts.

In response to a question, Mr. Nkwo said the amount in question was \$350,000.

Jorge Garcia, chief operations officer, said we understand the financial situation and we've started the process of getting ahead of this. Meetings were held with every custodian in the



district last week, and cuts have been discussed. He said overtime encompasses a lot of different things, including coverage for staff, afterschool activities, and ESSER projects. He said that we're going to do whatever we have to do in order to help the district, but there will be pain because we don't have enough staff to cover every shift.

Mr. Garcia said we'll be asking our staff to do more, but we understand there is a deficit to overcome.

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The motion was approved by a 6-3 vote. Voting in favor were members Estremera Jimenez, Medina, Perez, Traber, Baptiste-Perez, and Benejan Grajales. Voting in opposition were members Cassermere, Sokolovic, and Woodson,

Mr. Medina said he voted yes because he wants everyone know this is happening because we are missing funds we haven't been getting. He said this department has bene underfunded dramatically.

Mr. Sokolovic said facilities have been hit hard and our kids are going to be in deplorable

conditions for the next four years, and Mr. Garcia is an employee who may be reluctant to buck what his boss may want.

Ms. Perez requested the board members send their board evaluations ASAP. She said there was an issue today with the state because they saw we weren't doing our trainings.

Mr. Nkwo said because item number 1 was not approved by the board, the \$1.3 million potential savings is not there any longer, and it has to be added to the \$28.6 million remaining deficit. The current deficit to cover for next year is \$30 million.

Mr. Sokolovic asked the chair to remove him as the Finance Committee chair because the board is moving in the wrong direction, and it is inevitable that the state is going to come in and take us over and do our job for us.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 10:27 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

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