

Monday, July 28, 2025

MINUTES OF THE SPECIAL MEETING OF THE  
BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held July 28,  
2025, at Bridgeport City Hall, 45 Lyon Terrace, Bridgeport,  
Connecticut.

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

\*remote participation

Interim Supt. Dr. Royce Avery was present.

The meeting was called to order at 6:32 p.m.

The first agenda item was on Dr. Avery's end-of-year report.

Dr. Avery thanked the board for the opportunity to lead the district. He became the acting superintendent in November and later became the interim superintendent. He said it had been a joyful, but tough ride.

Dr. Avery said he wanted to emphasize the work of the executive cabinet.

Dr. Avery said he brought clarity, structure and bold vision to the board, grounded in the district mission. He said the community made a huge difference in its advocacy in Hartford.

Dr. Avery described a theory of action, a change process in an organization. He said professional learning was needed for community members as well as new teachers and staff. He said there needed to be a feedback loop to gather input such as with Thought Exchange. He said data-driven decisions were needed.

Dr. Avery said in fiscal year 2025 there was a \$37 million projected deficit, and we came together with the board to get the deficit down. He said in fiscal year 2026 we closed a \$26 million deficit. He said the audit conducted by the state showed there was no evidence of fraud, although 34 things that were done in the past that will not be done again.

Dr. Avery said the central office departments were reorganized to maximize efficiency. He said he believed his relationship with the board has grown and we have learned a lot together. He said there had been over fifteen community forums in the last nine months. He said the community was engaged regarding immigration issues.

Dr. Avery noted he and the board participated in state-mandated trainings. He said Bridgeport still needed to advocate in the special session of the legislative in the fall.

Dr. Avery said there are over thirty new partnerships with the district in the last two years. He described the registration center that will be opened at Housatonic Community College.

Dr. Avery said over \$19 million of new state funding was secured for fiscal year 2026. He said it was a great opportunity to get a \$75 million grant from the state to secure the first-ever special education center, which might result in the savings of \$20 million over ten years in out-of-district placements. He noted the facilities master plan funded by the city is intended to right-size campuses.

In special education, Dr. Avery said the 2021-22 Arizona State University study has guided work this year. He said in January 2025, a special education task force was launched, and a special education advisory council, including parents, was also started. He said the state also conducted a special education audit, which will help with redesign and restructuring programs.

Dr. Avery thanked the mayor, the City Council, and the board for advocating for the special education facility, which will be the first of a kind in Connecticut.

Dr. Avery discussed collaboration with the teachers' and administrators' union, particularly teachers' request for input in the writing of curriculum. He noted the 6,000 multilanguage learners in the district, which require support.

Dr. Avery described assessment and data systems. He described the help of the state technical assistance team in developing a professional learning schedule for teachers and administrators.

Dr. Avery said the current academic achievement data is embargoed by the state. He highlighted some numerical increases. He said the official data will be presented to the board when it is released.

Dr. Avery said the district is no longer viewed as a district of dysfunction, but as a district rising with urgency, accountability, and student-centered leadership.

Ms. Perez said the superintendent's evaluation would be completed next week in executive session.

Mr. Benejan Grajales applauded Dr. Avery's presentation and said Dr Avery never gave up. He also thanked the cabinet, singling them out by name, and the superintendent's office staff. He said he was proud of Dr. Avery's work, and he would be in support.

Ms. Estremera Jimenez said it had been a very difficult few months and said she echoed what Mr. Benejan Grajales said.

In response to a question, Dr. Avery described the effort to create procedural manuals for every department. Jorge Garcia, chief operations officer, said the special education school will include the capacity to expand the number of students that can be accommodated.

In response to a question, Margaret Hughes, executive director of school turnaround, described the dual literacy classes that will be used at Batalla School. Dr. Avery said it would be piloted this year. Ms. Hughes said the program would start with K-5 and then be expanded to 6 to 8 next year.

Ms. Cassermere thanked Dr. Avery for everything he has done. She said Dr. Avery was very accessible and has met with her when requested.

In response to a question, Dr. Avery said that data on math was available on every school and classroom.

In response to a question, Dr. Hughes described the dual language program to be used at Batalla School. Mr. Traber said he would like to cover this at the committee level.

Ms. Perez said the superintendent's evaluation would be addressed in executive session next week.

The next agenda item was on board-recommended priorities for reinstatement of budget reductions pending potential additional funding.

Ms. Perez said the state has additional funding and they will work with Dr. Avery on where the money would be most effective.

Ms. Cassermere asked if the recommendations should be based on whether they could be funded into future years. Dr. Avery said that was an important consideration and he said the state money would be a one-time funding opportunity.

Mr. Sokolovic said the amount of money received should be considered when the decisions are made, along with sustainability. He said his priorities are librarians, paraprofessionals, the arts program, and transportation in that order.

Mr. Traber agreed that it depends on the amount of money, so maybe only some staff positions could be reinstituted. He said he did not agree the money spent has to be sustainable. He said when kindergarten paras were cut, two kindergarten teachers were lost. He noted the recent changes to federal funding and whether or not

Governor Lamont would run for reelection and make more money available for cities.

Mr. Traber said his priorities would be kindergarten paras, librarians, the arts program, social workers, and counselors.

Ms. Cassermere said her priorities were mental health services, librarians, transportation, and arts and science programs, and paraprofessionals. She described how parents could contact programs that their children would benefit from and locating discounts.

Ms. Estremera Jimenez said it would be nice if programs would be sustainable, but we have to deal with what we have. She said her priorities includes feedback from parents. Her items were kindergarten, librarians, transportation, social workers and guidance counselors, performing arts programs, interventionists, and assistant principals.

Mr. Benejan Grajales said his list was paraprofessionals, especially because of special education; transportation; arts; sports; and librarians.

Mr. Woodson said he believed we should hear from assistant principals and principals on personnel and the loss of staff. He said principals would have to take on more work because of the loss of staff. He said librarians and assistant principals were important to him.

Ms. Perez said her list was kindergarten paras, librarians and media specialists, transportation, social workers, and the arts.

Mr. Sokolovic said psychosocial services would be impactful even if the funding only lasts for a year.

Mr. Traber said his list means permanent paraprofessionals, not the contracted-out services.

In response to a question, Dr. Avery said the allocation is a one-time allocation of \$5 million.

Mr. Medina\* joined the meeting.

In response to a question, Dr. Avery said librarians had different certifications than those who teach computer literacy. He said it was possible to restore half of the personnel in some areas such as librarians or paraprofessionals.

In response to a question, Dr. Avery said he believes the money was the same as bond bill money, which gives the mayor and OPM input, and the commissioner is using the state technical assistance team as part of the decision. He said he would like to take a board recommendation to the state technical assistance team.

The next agenda item was on the hotel cost for the 2025 CABE/CAPSS convention in Groton, Connecticut.



Ms. Perez said the early registration date is August 22nd. She said because it is an election year we can register in numerical slots, rather than in individual board member names.

Ms. Perez said there is an opportunity for a two-day registration. The cost for nine board members to stay at the hotel would be \$6,500, including two members staying an extra night as delegates. If the board only attended the Friday session, the cost would be half, \$3,200. The hotel cost is \$221 per night.

Mr. Sokolovic said we should not incur the cost of the hotel because it is a drivable distance. He said the board should set the tone for the district and the austerity budget.

Mr. Medina said he was in favor of early registration to save money. He said he was looking forward to staying up there to attend all sessions, and he did not have a vehicle to be going back and forth. He noted he was one of the delegates. He said last year the board was recognized for having the full board in attendance.

Mr. Benejan Grajales said he agreed with Mr. Medina.

Ms. Perez said the delegates are members Woodson, Benejan Grajales, and Medina.

Ms. Perez said because the commute was about an hour, it was not necessary to pay the hotel costs.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *“to take advantage of the early registration for all board members who are interested in the CAFE conference.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Benejan Grajales.

Ms. Perez said she may not be in town, so she did not want to register until the last minute.

The motion was unanimously approved.

Mr. Benejan Grajales made a motion *“for the district to pay the hotel.”* The motion was seconded by Ms. Cassermere.

Mr. Sokolovic said we’re asking staff to do conferences remotely and not incur overnight costs. Dr. Avery said staff had very limited rights to stay overnight.

The motion failed by a 5-3 vote. Voting in opposition were members Sokolovic, Estremera Jimenez, Traber, Perez, and Benejan Grajales. Voting in favor were members Woodson, Cassermere, and Medina.

Mr. Traber said the state’s audit did not include meeting with the board, which he found objectionable, although they were meeting with all kinds of people.

In response to a question, Ms. Perez said the meeting tomorrow night in the South End was not a board meeting, despite what was stated in a flyer. Dr. Avery said he agreed to join the meeting to answer questions on transportation to Bassick High. Mr. Traber said the city

councilperson, who works for us, has no business suggesting the board was having a meeting.

Ms. Perez and Dr. Avery said they were not commenting on the fiscal audit until there is a full presentation to the board next week. Dr. Avery said he received the report at the same time it was released to the public, and he has inquired of the state about that.

Mr. Benejan Grajales said this is what happens when they don't communicate with Dr. Avery.

Regarding tomorrow's community meeting, Dr. Avery said he would speak to anyone about transportation.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:20 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod