

Wednesday, May 10, 2023

MINUTES OF THE FINANCE COMMITTEE OF THE
BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held May 10,
2023, at Central High School, 1 Lincoln Boulevard,
Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:37 p.m. Present were members Chair Joe Sokolovic, Christine Baptiste-Perez*, and Michael Maccarone.* Board members Bobbi Brown**, Albert Benejan, David Gelin*, and Robert Traber were present.

*remote participation; **began the meeting in person and subsequently participated remotely.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez moved approval of the minutes of April 19, 2023. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on city representatives' advocacy efforts on behalf of Bridgeport Public Schools.

Constance Vickers, director of legislative affairs for the city, was present. She said she works with the state delegation, along with the contracted lobbyist, the Reynolds Strategy Group. She said she has been doing this for four years. Kevin Reynolds has been lobbying for the city since the Finch Administration, and he is one of the respected lobbyists in Hartford.

Ms. Vickers said as bills are introduced, Mr. Reynolds provides her with a list almost daily as legislation is proposed. She said she came back to her position in

January and started a few weeks into the session. She said she missed the time usually spent meeting with department heads in the fall about priorities. She said she has meetings with the delegation weekly and the session is always started with a meeting with the mayor on city priorities and the plan of action.

Ms. Vickers said she had not run into conflicts of interest and there are great lines of communication with our delegation. She said in the past she met almost weekly with the former superintendent on priorities, and he came to Hartford to testify and met with other agencies and stakeholders. She noted the session ends on June 7th and she suggested started talking about the priorities for next year right after that.

Ms. Vickers said our delegation has grown and matured, and is now sitting in leadership positions, which gives us a much bigger voice at the table.

Ms. Vickers said she is not a supporter of charter schools. Often the charter schools are a small percentage of bills, but you can't throw the baby out with the bathwater.

Mr. Reynolds said a lobbyist for a municipality is more like a staff. He said he gets direction from city hall and Ms. Vickers and works with the delegation. He said we're up there on a daily basis with the delegation. He said the clout comes from the city itself, not the lobbyist, and, most importantly, the delegation. He said the delegation has grown and it is probably the best delegation in the state. He said seniority is lacking, unlike New Haven which has the appropriations chair. He said the delegation has very influential House members, and Mr. Felipe is a subcommittee chair on education in appropriations. He said the mayor is one of the

best at working with state officials and he has a good relationship with the governor and legislative leaders.

Mr. Reynolds said the board was perfectly right to want to have more influence, but the key is not getting a lobbyist. He said the delegation are ones who will get things done for you.

Mr. Sokolovic said Mr. Reynolds and Ms. Vickers are paid exclusively by the city. He said the HB 5003 bill is disproportionately funding New Haven, Hartford, and Waterbury, and also eliminates our ability to charge magnet school tuition. He said we also hear about these bills at the last minute.

Mr. Sokolovic said our delegation supports charter schools, which is not in our best interests. He said last year the delegation only brought home \$15,000 in an election in increased ECS.

In response to a question, Mr. Reynolds said he takes his orders from the city. He said hiring a lobbyist would not solve the board's problem. He said describing the situation as a conflict of interest was a dangerous way to put it. It may be a disagreement that has to be worked on. He said getting a lobbyist would not advance the ball and would be throwing the money out the window. He said at the end of the day the speaker of the house is going to say to the Bridgeport delegation, what do you want to do? He said the governor would go to the mayor and the delegation in a similar fashion. He said that is the power center for changing things in Hartford.

Mr. Reynolds said it was appropriate for the board to let people in Hartford to know there is a disagreement on

charter schools. He said a service could be hired for about \$1200 a year to spit out every bill dealing with charter schools and education. He said he believed hiring a lobbyist was a complete waste of time, but at the same time he understood completely where the board is coming from. He said Ms. Vickers had an outstanding reputation and was somebody really good to work with.

Mr. Sokolovic said we are elected officials to care for the needs of Bridgeport Public Schools, which may be in conflict of interest with other parts of the city budget and what the state delegation wants. He said our lobbyist could also work with representatives from other towns on bills.

Mr. Sokolovic said we're facing a fiscal cliff. He said the board would favor a bill where municipalities in Alliance districts would have to contribute three percent more every year to keep state funding. He said this would be a conflict with the city, and Ms. Vickers and Mr. Reynolds, being constrained by their employer, would not be able to assist on this, which would leave us with no voice in Hartford.

Ms. Vickers said the General Assembly would not have an appetite for that because it would bind the hands of every chief executive. She said you need a Recovery for All type campaign for that.

Mr. Reynolds said he did not believe there is a single board of education in Connecticut that has a lobbyist. He suggested thinking long and hard about it because there is a reason for this. Mr. Sokolovic said we're trend-setters in the state, having mandated a black history course for graduation requirements and the state is catching up with us.

Mr. Traber asked how you're representing us when a bill is being proposed that's going to give three times more money to a charter school student than a public-school student, and arguably they don't need it as much. He noted the charter schools have their own lobbyist, and that lobbyist is related to one of our state delegation members. He said the HB5003 was not brought to the board, nor was its opinion requested. He said that is the conflict.

Ms. Vickers said she had many meetings with the previous superintendent and the former board chair on the concept of HB5003. She said she goes through leadership at the City Council or the board, and this year, she went through Ms. Brown. She said her concern on that bill is not charter schools, but what it will do for Bridgeport public schools. She said she has never had a conversation with the mayor on charter schools.

Mr. Reynold said there are a lot of people against charter schools, and the board would only be another voice against it. He said the city made a decision where it's going to put its emphasis, and addressing charter schools was not on the list. He said if it should be, the city leaders, including the board, should get together and make that decision and tell the lobbyist what to do. He said the board branching out would not work politically because people in Hartford would look to the Bridgeport delegation to decide what to do.

Mr. Reynolds said when our delegation meets with the speaker, they get behind a unified position. If the delegation were split, the speaker would not give us either of the two priorities. He said that you have to be unified.

Mr. Traber said HB 5003 adds more money to charter schools and another bill, SB1096, which also impacts more

charter schools in Bridgeport. He said it is an issue of grave concern, but the city has not had that conversation with our delegation, while the delegation has had conversations with other influencers. Mr. Traber said somebody sat down with the charter school proponents but not with us.

Mr. Reynolds said if you want the mayor to take a position on charter schools, then you need to work with the mayor to come up with a position. He said fighting for or against charter schools is not one of the mayor's priorities.

Mr. Traber said he believed charter schools are flawed public policy, but short term he is raising issue of the allocation of resources. He said the state has been systemically racist with regard to urban areas and the city has underfunded the board. He said he did not know how we get in this position of having two bills that our delegation is pushing that the board or the superintendent did not discuss with them.

Ms. Vickers said there was a meeting with Ms. Brown and the superintendent. Ms. Brown said she understood the meeting was about how we can work collectively together. She said she was only aware of HB 5003. She said she shared her concerns and the board's concerns about the bill. She said she met with the superintendent, the finance chair, and the CFO, and we realized that this was not properly representative of the Board of Education.

Ms. Brown said it felt like we were not given the opportunity to have our issues elevated at the level that we wanted to. She said when this committee brought the idea of lobbyist, we didn't feel that we were getting proper representation when bills are presented.

Ms. Brown said Mr. Reynolds and Ms. Vickers both work for the mayor; if the mayor wants specific things pushed, that puts the board in the background. She said she spoke to the delegation and told them our concerns.

Mr. Reynolds said he would reiterate that for the board to hire a lobbyist is throwing money out of the window; the hard work needs to be done internally in Bridgeport to get people on the same page. He said the reason he is a successful lobbyist from Bridgeport is he works with the delegation, and it comes from the power of Bridgeport. He said who you represent is the key.

Mr. Traber said we have a city administration that for decades has been negligent with regard to helping the schools. There has been an internal battle on this going for years. He said the standard line in the last 35 years was the Bridgeport delegation hasn't been very good. He said the new wrinkle is another interest, the charter school, which is competing for those legislators, and which represents 15 percent of the student body in Bridgeport. He said they're going to get more money for the 15 percent than for the 85 percent in public schools.

Mr. Traber noted this year is the long session of the legislature where the biennial budget is set. He said nobody sat down with the board and no discussions occurred. He noted Ms. Vickers was off on a sabbatical. He said if such discussions had been held, the board would have identified conflicts between what we were thinking and what members of our delegation were thinking that we could have spent months on. He said a number of testified us in numerous hearings in Hartford, but it was us versus the city delegation and the city legislators.

Mr. Traber said while we don't want to spend money where we don't need to, we want to make sure somebody is providing us with good advice at appropriate times.

Mr. Reynolds said it would have been great to sit down with the board beforehand. He said he didn't know the board's position on charter schools. He said he met with Supt. Testani a few times. He said what is being laid out should have been done.

Mr. Traber said it seemed we're the victims of the same sort of business as usual in Bridgeport. Mr. Sokolovic said it was the children who are victims. Mr. Traber said the board was the largest department in the city, with an elected board, that gets no respect, which is a problem. He said this is why we need to have somebody telling us what's going on and who is not trying to juggle conflicts.

Mr. Traber said the Finch administration was far worse on this issue than the current administration. He said he was an old friend of Mayor Finch, but he was a proponent of dismantling public schools. He said ever since Mr. Reynolds started as lobbyist there was an ongoing effort to support charter schools, which is why the board is thinking maybe it can get better advice from somebody else.

Ms. Vickers said she'd be happy to meet with the board more often.

Mr. Benejan said this is his fourth year as a board member. He asked why he had not heard from Ms. Vickers or Mr. Reynolds. He said communication was needed. Ms. Vickers said she did not come back to the city until two weeks after the legislative session started. She said in the past she had always met with the superintendent and the board chair. Mr.

Reynolds said he was not given direction to meet with the board.

Ms. Vickers said there were so many issues beyond HB 5003. She said Supt. Testani harangued her constantly about special education funding. She said it was realized the board had not been counting free and reduced lunch accurately for years to the tune of \$10 million. She said there was an ELL bill and unfunded mandates issues as well.

Mr. Sokolovic said regardless of what decision we come to on the board lobbyist, which is like the independent lawyer the board has, we can distribute the work appropriately.

Ms. Brown said she appreciated the opportunity to talk about this from the Board of Education perspective. She said our lens is always Bridgeport public schools because that's what we're elected to do. She said she viewed her job as translating conversations at the state level to board members.

Mr. Traber said the ELL bill is an unfunded mandate. Ms. Vickers said there is supposed to be funding attached to it. Mr. Traber said in HB 5003 there is an inflationary protector of charter school funding that could possibly force the district to fund them additional monies if money coming from state doesn't keep up with inflation. He said this is galling to have heard and not to have heard from our lobbyist. Mr. Reynolds said he did not have an answer on the inflationary provision in the bill, but he could get an answer.

Mr. Traber said Recovery for All is pushing an agenda which is much more sympathetic to us than 5003 or the governor's budget. Ms. Vickers said we have weekly delegation meetings. She said last week there was a meeting with the

speaker. Budget negotiations will begin with the governor's budget and all four conferences' budgets. She said it is a dance of communication and negotiation. She said she could not get into the details of ongoing negotiations to bring more money back to Bridgeport Public Schools.

Mr. Traber said the Recovery for All proponents are arguing to create a set-aside, which has been done in the past by two Republican governors. He said that would mean more money for our district. Ms. Vickers said that has been part of the discussions. Mr. Reynolds said the priorities for the city were presented to the speaker, including the \$300 million extra, in the meeting last week, and now it's all going to be a negotiation. He said we work in tandem with the delegation.

Ms. Vickers said we meet every week and talk about priorities, including more funding for Bridgeport Public Schools. She said the nine-member delegation's buy-in on this is important.

Mr. Traber asked what our priorities are on school funding. He said the board's priorities aren't necessarily the priorities that were spoken.

Mr. Sokolovic said he believed we have received enough fruitful information on matter to make our decision on the next agenda item. He implored our delegation, our lobbyist, and our director of legislative affairs to get equitable money for Bridgeport, which is the largest school district. He said any further money for schools that is not within four or five percent of that ratio is a failure. Ms. Vickers said *Sheff vs. O'Neill* and how magnet schools are weighted are part of the equation. Mr. Sokolovic said the formula should be fixed so the largest school distort benefits the most from any new funding.

Mr. Traber said, not only are preliminary discussions needed before the session, but we also need to have ongoing reports on discussions that you're having with others, but not with us. Ms. Vickers said there was a delicate dance that goes with this, and there needs to be a mutual respect, and there should be lines of communication with the delegation.

Ms. Vickers said our delegation is finally in a place where they're taking on leadership roles. She said Hartford and New Haven control the appropriations committee; the speaker of the house is from Hartford and the president of the senate is from New Haven.

Ms. Vickers requested the board members e-mail her for further communication.

The next agenda item was on an RFP to engage lobbying services on behalf of the Board of Education.

Tony Pires of the business office displayed the draft of the RFP on the screen, which listed the objectives of the services sought.

In response to a question, Mr. Pires said there is no expense to the board to publish an RFP. He said the draft looked good. Mr. Pires said the entire process of vetting and approvals may take two and a half to three months. He said the price range in the draft is \$10,000 to \$50,000.

Marlene Siegel, chief financial officer, said it was very important to have a dollar range in the RFP. Mr. Sokolovic suggested a higher range. He described it as an investment to get more dollars back with the impending fiscal cliff.

Mr. Pires said the responses would likely be in terms of an hourly rate and the board can determine how much work will be needed, and whether it's affordable and worth it.

Ms. Brown said she would like to see responses from those who have strong experience or a portfolio. Mr. Pires said that is contained in the RFP. Ms. Brown said she would like to see the statement that lobbyists don't make a difference is debunked. Mr. Pires said he could add a line requesting samples of work performed for similar urban districts and results.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *"to amend the RFP presented with Ms. Brown's additions."* The motion was seconded but Mr. Maccarone and unanimously approved.

Mr. Sokolovic requested the word "education" be added to "legislative processes." Mr. Traber cautioned against narrowing it too much because there are good lobbyists in Hartford who may not have extensive experience in education alone. He suggested "legislative and regulatory processes."

Mr. Sokolovic moved *"to amend as discussed by Mr. Traber."* The amendment was seconded by Mr. Maccarone and unanimously approved.

Mr. Sokolovic said he believed the \$50,000 figure was a bit low. Mr. Traber said the firm may be handling multiple jobs. Mr. Sokolovic suggested "preferably be in the range of."

In response to a question, Mr. Traber said he believed the timeline for hiring would be adequate because next year is the short session of the Legislature. He noted Ms. Vickers referenced meetings in the fall and summer.

Mr. Traber suggested the figures of \$10,000 to \$50,000 be used in the RFP because \$2,500 looked low.

Mr. Sokolovic moved *“to present to the full board going out for an RFP for lobbying services as amended at the committee level.”* The motion was seconded by Mr. Maccarone and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on ways to prepare and mitigate for the fiscal cliff. Mr. Sokolovic said a lot of preparations needed to be done. He said it is very obvious nobody is coming to our rescue given the small contributions from the state and city.

Marlene Siegel, chief financial officer, said the strategies in place include maximizing new revenue through advocacy. She said the City Council has allocated \$2.5 million, while the state ECS increase is still projected at a minimum of \$3.5 million. The status of the Alliance diversity requirement, which was proposed to allocate ten percent to recruitment efforts, is still unknown at this point. She said we remain hopeful that there will be a modification to that law.

Ms. Siegel said other strategies are conserving operating resources through leveraging of grant resources for expenditures such as curriculum and technology services, and facilities. She said 18 special education and ELL positions are funded through ESSER. She said three new ESL teacher positions were created for next year, which are funded in a separate ESSER grant.

Ms. Siegel said we continue to optimize our rollover funds in grants that allow for rollover. She said we are not aware of what will happen at the federal level with the budget.

Ms. Siegel said there is a downward trend in utilities costs because of numerous energy efficiency projects and the warmer winter. She said there is a positive trend in the lower number of out-of-district special ed students, however, there is a higher cost factor for the existing placements due to the NCEP and cap.

Ms. Siegel said the projected withdrawal from ISF to balance in the current year has gone from \$9 million to \$8 million, and it is hoped the latter figure will further decline.

Ms. Siegel said we need to eliminate the loss of state grant revenue at the Fairchild Wheeler campus and in pre-K programs. There are excellent strategies in place to fill pre-K seats. Each unfilled seat represents a loss of \$600 per month. She said the superintendent and deputy superintendent are working on a revitalization effort at Fairchild Wheeler. Revenue loss occurs in every year when there is a loss of enrollment.

Ms. Siegel said all the strategies will help to conserve the funds on deposit in the ISF.

Mr. Sokolovic said we can't keep kicking the can down the road and we need to plan for worst-case scenarios. He said there are things the board could start doing. He said not replacing positions through attrition is one potential savings. He said other districts are using some of our services and paying way too little for adult education and other programs. He said it was learned that Fairfield had 17 students in our adult education program. Ms. Siegel said Fairfield is paying \$25,000 a year for up to fifty students. Mr. Sokolovic said that needs to be looked at. Ms. Siegel said those funds had to be used for adult education. Mr. Sokolovic said we're

here for Bridgeport students, and we should capture every single dollar of those funds.

Mr. Sokolovic said other districts using our services should pay their proportional share. He said we pay a big premium for our out-of-district special education students.

Mr. Sokolovic said any contracts up for renewal that contain a penalty clause for breaking the contract should be paused.

Mr. Sokolovic said in his experience on the board last-minute decisions don't work well. He said the RFP for lobbying would be valuable for getting an outside look from someone who has no allegiances to the city.

Mr. Sokolovic said with the potential deficit looming there is no way we could keep every school building open. He said a lot of our schools are under-enrolled. He said we will have to right size our school district and consolidate our dollars.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said last night's committee meeting focused on two budlings, but the inquiry can go out whether there are other buildings that are also non-compliant.

Mr. Sokolovic said when the board made cuts in 2017-18 it was very intimately involved in the decision-making process. He said this was the beginning of the conversations moving back towards being hands on with the budget. He said he got involved by protecting the position of the science director during the budget process in the past.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said if we have to close budlings, we're not necessarily cutting jobs. She said the idea of eliminating staff at this point doesn't seem feasible with so many vacancies. She said closing old, inefficient, non-ADA-

compliant buildings financially makes sense. She said she did not agree with getting rid of kindergarten paras because of the educational foundation of babies in elementary school.

Mr. Sokolovic said personnel cuts should be the absolute last resort. He said kindergarten paras are important in introducing children to schools, especially in the city where a lot of children did not go to preschool. He said we could never say never because we are not allowed to run a deficit. He said past cuts such as math coaches, literacy coaches, and walking distances for students were painful.

Mr. Traber said Bridgeport had never had a situation where jobs were going to be lost among the certified unit because of the high turnover. He said layoffs in the last five to ten years occurred in non-certified positions.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said we are funding 12 special education and 6 ESL teachers in ESSER. She said the grand total is \$21 million and the cost factor going into 2024-25 is estimated between \$2 million and \$2.5 million, depending on the salaries of teachers and the cost of health insurance.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said 14 of the 30 sites were under capacity, including about a third of the sites with less than 50 percent occupancy. She said savings would occur with consolidating sites.

Ms. Siegel said even though student enrollment declined over the pandemic years, we were not able to close classes. She said if three students leave a class of 26 students, there are still 23 students, and it may not be possible to consolidate with another class on the grade level. She said if

a building were to be closed, we still have to consider the cost of transportation to another building, if warranted.

Mr. Traber said Mr. Flatto told him that we had spent our ESSER funds too fast. Ms. Siegel said she mentioned during the meeting that the comment was absolutely false and totally untrue. She said the city ESSER funding was a totally separate stream. She said the guidelines for municipalities were different than those for school districts. She said the board spent more than the city to offset operating costs and we've done that in compliance with ESSER guidelines. She described the \$2 million expenditure for special ed and ELL teachers, and the \$3 million spent for contracted providers for speech and psychology when positions could not be filled. She said substitute costs arising out of ESSER and the building substitute program were funded to about \$4 million.

Ms. Siegel said various types of facilities services and supplies were also funded in ESSER for about \$1 million that would be in the operating budget in ordinary conditions. There were also new projects funded for HVAC renovation and other services. She said close to \$15 to \$20 million was spent on technology.

Ms. Siegel said the district has put significantly more than \$10 million in ESSER (the figure mentioned by Mr. Flatto) each year to offset operating costs. She said we strive to accomplish our goals in full compliance because we could be subject to federal audits at any time. She described the audits that take place each year. She said she was surprised Mr. Flatto made that statement without knowledge of the facts.

Ms. Sokolovic said he was not surprised because Mr. Flatto is acting at the behest of the mayor and looking for reasons not to fund us. He said it was an attack on Ms. Siegel's professionalism in order to make a point for the mayor. He said Ms. Siegel had done an exemplary job in making sure the ESSER funds are spent to the maximum ability. He said the city should be ashamed of itself for questioning how the money is spent without any knowledge of how it was spent.

Mr. Traber said for years the city's fiscal officers, including City Council chairs and Mr. Flatto's predecessors, find it easy to point to the board's mistakes and say we shouldn't reward them with more money.

Ms. Siegel displayed the ARP/ESSER priorities. She said the city has a different set of priorities that were established for municipalities.

Mr. Benejan thanked Ms. Siegel for all the time she puts into her presentations.

Mr. Sokolovic said this item would come back as a standing agenda item.

The next agenda item was on what Lighthouse and other programs would be charged if policy is changed to charge every user of school buildings the same.

Jorge Garcia, director of facilities, said the department was converting into its digital system on rental of school facilities. He said an in-depth report on waivers was not possible. He said over the next weeks Lighthouse will be submitting its requests for usage for the summer. He said the number of buildings with Lighthouse has been reduced to 13 from 21 due to the need for economies in getting facilities prepared.

He said he worked closely with Ms. Papa of Lighthouse and Dr. Jenkins on this. He said this reduces cost of utilities and allows a different focus to prepare buildings for the school year.

Mr. Garcia said there is verbiage in the policy about city agencies. He said the board approved a \$75,000 yearly fee for Lighthouse for custodial fees and supplies. The total cost for the 21 facilities for all programs was \$566,711.

Mr. Sokolovic said we were subsidizing a city program in our buildings for about \$500,000 a year. He said since the city underfunds our schools, they should be charged the full price.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said the situation was offensive because Lighthouse was awarded a huge ARP/ESSER grant. She said the city charges parents for Lighthouse. She said we have a legal duty to have a balanced budget and we can't do that by having city services run for free in our buildings.

Mr. Gelin said he agreed. He said it was insulting and eye-opening.

Mr. Traber said Lighthouse costs were one of the factors that led to the elimination of kindergarten paras. He said in the past his daughter went to Lighthouse, and she later worked for the program.

Mr. Sokolovic said there was a memo from the director of Lighthouse complaining that the program was being overcharged for toilet paper, which he said was ridiculous given the \$500,000 figure.

Mr. Sokolovic said the board would be looking at the policy in the Governance Committee.

Mr. Benejan said Lighthouse receives money from federal and state resources and parents. Mr. Sokolovic said he believed the \$75,000 annual fee began the year he started on the board or the year prior.

Mr. Garcia said he would provide a summary of Lighthouse expenditures using 21 schools compared to the 13 schools going forward.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said if snacks are provided to Lighthouse, it was likely through the supper program and reimbursed through the food and nutrition budget.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez moved to adjourn the meeting. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:17 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Approved by the committee on June 14, 2023