

Wednesday, June 14, 2023

MINUTES OF THE FINANCE COMMITTEE OF THE  
BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held June 14,  
2023, via Teams, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:33 p.m. Present were members Chair Joe Sokolovic and Christine Baptiste-Perez. Board members Bobbi Brown, Albert Benejan and Robert Traber were present.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez moved to approve the minutes of the meeting of May 10, 2023. The motion was seconded by Mr. Sokolovic and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on the 2023-24 budget request.

Interim Supt. Alyshia Perrin joined the meeting.

Marlene Siegel, chief financial officer, presented. She said there are still some unknown variables.

Ms. Siegel said the city budget has been approved and contains an increase to the MBR of \$2.5 million. The Alliance/ECS budget is supposed to increase by about \$3.5 million and would grow to about \$28 million.

Ms. Siegel said the 2024-25 budget accelerates the rollout of the ECS formula, which result in almost an \$8 million increase, which would raise the Alliance/ECS total to about \$36 million.

Ms. Siegel said the new revenue for 2023-24 will total \$6 million. She said this is 2.29 percent increase in the total budget.

Ms. Siegel said there are some uncertainties around magnet tuition. She said the legislation appears to be allocating additional funds to magnet school operators, while at the same time phasing out the charging of tuition beginning in 2024-25. The limit would be 58 percent of the amount charged in the previous year. She said the exact formula is not known at this time, although we would no longer be billing for magnet tuition.

Ms. Siegel said she looked at the potential net impact of the phase out. In the current year, the district is paying out to CES about \$1.2 million for Six to Six, paying Trumbull \$300,000 for agriscience and the Regional Center for the Arts. She said magnet tuition is received from suburban schools and we might come out ahead under this change to the extent of about \$500,000.

Ms. Siegel said the Fairchild Wheeler campus continues to run a deficit. This year it was \$1.7 million, which the district had to cover. She said she anticipated a shortfall of at least \$2 million next year. She said she remained hopeful that the enrollment of Bridgeport and suburban students will increase to bring in additional revenue.

Ms. Siegel said the total special education excess cost for out-of-district students has been increased statewide by \$25 million, which should benefit Bridgeport.

Ms. Siegel said there were higher costs for the local share of the district's out-of-district placements this year, although the

number of students was reduced. She noted additional increases in special education expenses.

Ms. Siegel said the director of speech and languages is requesting three additional positions for occupational therapists, which could cost up to \$300,000.

Ms. Siegel discussed the Alliance requirement on increasing diversity. She said the law passed requires ten percent of a district's Alliance/ECS allocation to be set aside and redirect the funds into a grant dedicated to increasing educator diversity. The law was waived in 2022-23. The status of the law for 2023-24 is not known.

Ms. Siegel said if the law remained in effect, it would create a problem for Bridgeport and every Alliance district. She said one of the criticisms of the law is that the amount rises in every subsequent year in significant increments.

Ms. Siegel said she was not concerned about 2023-24 because we have resources in ARP/ESSER for recruitment and diversity. However, in 2022-25, there would be a shortfall in the operating budget if this diversion of resources takes effect.

Ms. Siegel said the adopted budget includes \$150 million in new funding for 2024-25 for reforms but is unclear as to the policies the funding would implement. She discussed the Open Choice program and the funding of the agriscience and technology education centers.

Ms. Siegel said it was critical to understand the trends in special education and English language learners. She said there are positions in these areas in ESSER grants which will require funding in 2024-25 unless the need for services

declines. She said in ESSER grants there are twelve special education teachers, nine ELL teachers, and two occupational therapists, with three more to be added; along with contracted psychologists and speech services. The grand total is about five to six million dollars. She said rollover of funds in Title I and IDEA serve as a cushion against potential grant reductions, which can occur.

Ms. Siegel displayed a chart with ELL and special education enrollment as of June 1. She said the population has grown from October 1, and the district is now at 20.07 percent special education. ELL numbers have also grown, and the final number is 27.54 percent. She said the numbers indicate a very significant upward trend, which does not bode well in terms of the pressure on limited resources.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said she did not know if the district would be eligible for a grant if BMA was absorbed into Bassick.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the guidelines shared on the diversity law a few months ago mandated that the funds be utilized for residency programs directed towards recruiting candidates of diversity. Funding was also allowed towards peer support. She said she did not know if the guidelines would be modified to allow flexibility.

Ms. Siegel described cross-certification and residency programs. She said if there is a requirement to spend \$736,000 on this initiative in the next fiscal year and for comparison, she estimated between three and four hundred thousand at a minimum was being spent currently in this area.

Mr. Sokolovic characterized the law as a diversity unfunded mandate. Ms. Siegel said none of the services being funded are in the operating budget.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said one special education class would not be needed next year. She said the focus for next year is to retain students in inclusion settings, wherever possible.

Supt. Perrin said the elimination of the class was the result of students graduating into high school, which allowed the transfer of the remaining students into other classes. She said there were conversations at the state level regarding special education teachers being laid off, with information to be provided to districts who need special education teachers.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the potential additional maximum revenue for magnet students at Aquaculture and Fairchild Wheeler would be up to \$1.5 million if all seats were filled.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the facilities costs at the JFK Campus include a percentage that is charged to Six to Six. There is also an indirect cost factor in accordance with the agreement made fifteen or twenty years ago.

Mr. Sokolovic said the difference in magnet costs in the current year is about \$517,000 in Bridgeport's favor.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said we are not charging anyone below \$3,000 per year for magnet tuition, however, the maximum is limited to 50 students, or \$150,000 per district.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said for 2022-23 there were 182 Bridgeport students in Six to Six, and 69 students in Regional Center for the Arts. She said the tuition is \$6,920.

Mr. Sokolovic said we're restricted to receive \$3,000 for magnet tuition, but CES gets a larger amount. He said this is blowing his mind and is the definition of inequity. He said this was beyond the pale and a task for our lobbyist.

Mr. Sokolovic said he wanted to highlight the positive fact that we are doing the best compared to other districts on educational diversity. In response to a question, Supt. Perrin said the diversity mandate only applies to Alliance districts. Mr. Sokolovic said it was inequitable because it applied to the districts that struggle the least for diversity recruitment.

Mr. Sokolovic noted the positions funded by ESSER that are providing mandated services.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the Internal Service Fund (ISF) currently has about \$28 million, along with \$3 million that belongs to the nutrition department. She said the nutrition department is operating highly efficiently, they are operating at a profit and are on track to have a surplus. About \$1.5 million or more will be added to the ISF to replenish funds for retirees' health insurance.

Ms. Siegel said the amount of some grants are not announced until July, August or early September.

Ms. Siegel said efforts continue to fill vacancies. She said we are encountering experienced teachers to a large degree who are seeking positions. She projected current savings of

\$3.5 million from vacancies, which may decline depending on the salaries of the new hires.

Ms. Siegel said we never want to go to zero in the ISF in order to have a reserve in the event of an unforeseen increases in expenses. She said at this time we are projecting that we're going to need between six and seven million dollars to close the 2022-23 budget.

Ms. Siegel discussed the food and nutrition surplus, including the use of \$64,395 to pay the balance on a new vehicle.

Ms. Siegel said she projected the use of \$13 million from the ISF for fiscal year 2024, leaving a balance of about \$9.5 million for the following year. The projected revenue for the following year is \$10.5 million, which would leave over \$20 million available.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the ECS formula includes a factor for students in need. She said even though the state passes a biennium budget, it doesn't mean the second-year amount is definite and adjustments can be made.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said the biennium budget specified a revenue increase of \$7.9 million for 2024-25.

Mr. Traber noted the Regional Education Centers received a larger increase in the bill than charter and public schools. He said the Senate chair works at the Hartford Regional Education Center.

The next agenda item was on creating ideal staffing in the event of adequate funding.

Mr. Traber said he spoke to some folks in New Haven and the board there authorized a best-case scenario funding plan and put together a committee to look at a plan. He suggested the board look at creating something like this in order to move on it in the fall. He said it would be an initiative under the direction of the superintendent.

Supt. Perrin said it was a credible idea, particularly since the district is facing a shortfall in the next fiscal year. She said it was a good way to create urgency for parents, teachers, and the community.

Mr. Sokolovic said we had to make it clear when we present the plan that it is over and above the amount needed to fund the district. Mr. Traber said he did not recall the use of budget amounts; rather, staffing levels were specified.

Ms. Siegel suggested indicating priority ranking of specific items. Mr. Traber said the priorities would be determined each year by the board and the administration during the budget process.

Mr. Sokolovic said this was not an action item, but the superintendent is within her rights to form a work group on this. He suggested Mr. Traber be part of the group.

In response to a question, Ms. Siegel said she will present a final budget plan, which is still subject to change, in September. She said the Education Finance System report must be completed by September 1 first. Mr. Sokolovic said we have basically approved the budget, subject to final changes in numbers.



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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:16 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

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