

Wednesday, October 26, 2022

MINUTES OF THE TEACHING AND LEARNING COMMITTEE OF THE BRIDGEPORT BOARD OF EDUCATION, held October 26, 2022, at Central High School, 1 Lincoln Boulevard, Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The meeting was called to order at 6:37 p.m. Present were members Chair Christine Baptiste-Perez and Joe Lombard. Board member Joseph Sokolovic was present.

Mr. Lombard moved to approve the minutes of the meeting of September 27, 2022. The motion was seconded by Ms. Baptiste-Perez and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on the High Horizons field trip to the New England Aquarium and the Science Museum in Boston on December 5, 2022.

Francine Carbone, principal of High Horizons , and Tim Meehan, social studies teacher, were present.

Mr. Meehan said he has been doing school trips since about 2005 to both Boston and New York City, along with spring trips to Washington and Philadelphia. He said this year's trip will be an all-science trip, but he will narrate sites of interest from the bus.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said everything provided to her seemed to be in compliance.

Mr. Lombard moved *“to refer to the full board High Horizons Magnet’s field trip to the New England Aquarium and Science Museum in Boston, Massachusetts, on December*

5, 2022.” The motion was seconded by Ms. Baptiste-Perez and unanimously approved.

The next agenda item was on Community Life Solutions’ Reset program at Wilbur Cross School. Christine McFarland and Eugene Allen were present.

Ms. McFarland said she submitted a document covering an overview of the program, which also included bullet point answers. She said it was an out-of-school suspension therapeutic program for children that will provide therapeutic trauma -informed supports and programming for middle school children, ages 11 to 13, in Grades 6 to 8.

Ms. McFarland said originally three schools were proposed, but the emphasis is now on Wilbur Cross School. She said the goal is to provide children and families with support and to improve behavior and family dynamics.

Ms. McFarland said the staff modeling includes having at all times a licensed social worker with an LMSW, a licensed clinical social worker, and a licensed mental health provider. Three student tutors from Sacred Heart University will work on academics.

Ms. McFarland said the goal is to turn out-of-school suspension into a positive tool for behavior change. he said Bridgeport was compared to other large school districts in the state, Alliance Districts. She said Wilbur Cross School falls within the 50 percent lowest performing schools in Connecticut. She said punitive and harsh discipline is relied on too often.

Ms. McFarland said out-of- school suspensions are awarded to black and Hispanic students at a slightly higher rate than

white students. She said there is disproportionality in the application of sanctions across all student groups, specifically in race and gender.

Ms. McFarland said it is a wrap-around program and there is an after-school program included, along with a Saturday academy.

In response to a question, Ms. McFarland said the program services the child who has received the suspension outside of the school. She said the program could possibly operate every day of the school year.

In response to a question, Ms. McFarland said the Sacred Heart students would receive payment and college credits.

In response to a question, Ms. McFarland said the program is a new initiative and being rolled out as a pilot. The Saturday academy is currently operating. She said we have been doing this work for over fifteen years.

Ms. McFarland said there are ten slots for students available. Students who are identified by the school as struggling can be sent to the program for the day and be back in the classroom tomorrow.

In response to a question, Ms. McFarland said parents provide consents forms on an intake packet. She said the documentation is currently in place with the support of DCF. There is insurance to transport students and liability insurance. The staff has also received DCF training. She said staff undergo DCF, state, and federal background checks.

In response to a question, Mr. Allen, a contractor with private entities and DCF, said he worked for the state for twenty-plus years as a case manager in juvenile detention, including at Bridgeport. He said development of the program started about five years ago when Ms. McFarland was a clinical worker at a foster care agency with very challenging children.

Mr. Allen discussed the Saturday Academy that is underway. He said programming was developed several years ago when foster care agencies would refer students who had been suspended from school. He described the use of incentives with children and their decision-making.

Shoshawn, a parent, shared the experience of her children in the Saturday Academy over the last two weeks. Her children attend Claytor Magnet and Capital Prep. She said her son does better in a small setting.

In response to a question, Mr. Allen said social workers can refer students to the Reset Program as well.

In response to a question, Ms. McFarland said the first referrals for the Saturday Academy came from the social worker at Geraldine Claytor School. She said she wanted to focus on one particular school, Wilbur Cross, due to capacity.

In response to a question, Ms. McFarland said a grant was received to run the program ,but as it grows other funding will be needed. Parents can be referred by the program to resources that are available to them.

Kavon, a contractor with the United Mentoring Academy, described tutoring, mentoring and advocacy provided to students.

In response to a question, Ms. McFarland said the after-school program and the Saturday Academy are being staffed by Mr. Allen's program. Mr. Allen said there is a rotating staff of four to five. He says he also runs a clinical after-school program for DCF.

Ms. McFarland described the training she would provide to the staff.

In response to a question, Ms. McFarland said the social workers in the program are available 24 hours a day. She said the proposed budget covers the after-school program, the Saturday academy and out-of-school suspension.

Dr. Selena Morgan, executive director of elementary education, joined the meeting. She said she was happy to hear the proposal because we need extra help.

Mr. Lombard described the proposal as ambitious and said he was uncertain about some of the details, but they could be talked about later. Ms. McFarland said beyond the use of tutors, teachers may have to get involved at some point, so that is included in the budget. She said tonight was intended to start the discussion.

In response to a question, Ms. McFarland said data would be gathered and presented at any time it was needed to show the results of the model.

Ms. McFarland described instruments to collect the data. Teachers will complete surveys on a weekly basis.

Mr. Lombard said the system seemed to require a lot of communication with the school.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said since she became a board member she started hearing a lot about Wilbur Cross and the quality of the education there. She said when Reset was presented to her, she suggested Wilbur Cross as a beneficiary.

Mr. Jackson said it will be the role of the advocates in the program to work with the guidance counselors at the school, as well as on parental engagement.

Mr. Lombard said the need for the services seems a lot more than a \$58,000 budget. Ms. McFarland said she agreed with that. She said the budget was reduced after a prior meeting, and the intent was to make it affordable.

In response to a question, Ms. McFarland said she did not have a relationship with Wilbur Cross yet. She said she hoped tonight's meeting would lead to a discussion.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said her thought was to have a presentation at the Students & Families Committee as well.

Mr. Jackson described some of the enrichment available through the mentorship program.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said she would take on the role of communication with Wilbur Cross parents.

Ms. McFarland said the curriculum will be based on trauma-informed CBT dynamics and cognitive behavioral models.

In response to a question, Ms. McFarland said the program could start right away once approved.

The next agenda item was on the creation of a mandatory program centered around student gender identity and the mandatory use of students' preferred pronouns.

Mr. Sokolovic said he provided a short video created by a school district to get the conversation going. The video was played.

Mr. Sokolovic said there was no professional development in this area. He said the board's policies and contracts all include gendered pronouns. He said we need to start going down the middle because people feel left out. He said using gender-neutral pronouns would not cost anybody anything, but would have astronomical benefits for children growing up with issues. He said there was the danger of intentional misgendering for teasing purposes.

Mr. Sokolovic said these were preliminary thoughts, and it could be presented in small videos or the board checking for gender-neutral language in its policies.

Mr. Lombard said he believed contracts should be gender-neutral.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez expressed concern about pronouns regarding learning sentence formation. She said referring to "them" or "they" can lead to confusion such as in an anecdotal safety situation she had heard about. She said she agreed district policies could be phrased as gender-neutral.

Mr. Sokolovic said language is beautiful that evolves every day. He said the use of “they” or “them” may be confusing, but it becomes clear by the end of a sentence. He said such phrases are integrated flawlessly on television shows. He said he had come a long way on this subject in the last four or five years.

Mr. Lombard asked how such a program would be implemented at different grade levels. He said there were many layers to the mandatory aspect of the suggestion. He said there would be complications surrounding religious objections or parental issues. He asked exactly who would be covered by the mandatory aspects.

Mr.. Lombard said he was all about education; not about mandating things that could cause a big can of worms. Mr. Sokolovic said he envisioned staff training. He said student behaviors could be addressed as a bullying issue.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said she also had concerns about potential consequences. She said she had concerns about persons changing their gender pronouns more than once, which could create consequences and challenges for teachers.

Mr. Sokolovic said we had to consider our responsibilities under Title IX.

Dr. Morgan said issues about trans students have come up a number of times. he described how bathroom issues have been handled. She said the pronoun issue is new for all of us.

Mr. Lombard noted complications over someone choosing to use a particular bathroom, particularly when their

appearance has not changed. He said he had a problem with someone choosing to use any bathroom.

Mr. Sokolovic said the bathrooms at the location tonight has Title IX notifications that indicate we cannot legally stop anyone from using the bathroom. Mr. Lombard said he believed that it is a problem to say we are required by law let him in a ladies' room with other women there if I say I'm a female.

Mr. Sokolovic said he viewed this as a preliminary discussion.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said gender-neutral language in the policies is doable, but she wondered about young children learning to read and whether instruction might infringe on parental choice. She said she was here for traditional education in reading, math, and basic fundamentals. She said incremental changes could occur. She said more community feedback may be needed.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said a lot of what she has heard about trans issues and trans athletes has not occurred in urban school districts. She said there were also potential legal implications.

Mr. Lombard said he wanted to emphasize he was not against discussion and education in this area, but was against mandating things like language. He said young people are learning who they are and there is nothing wrong with "he" or "she." He described the video shown tonight as appropriate and as non-threatening and non-mandatory.

Mr. Sokolovic said the use of gender-neutral language would not take away parental rights. He added difficult conversations are a way to move forward.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said she heard of a teacher in Bridgeport who decided to identify as another sex, but it was not obvious, and students were reprimanded for misgendering. She said she was pretty sure it was not a district school. She said this was a murky area.

Mr. Sokolovic said misgendering a teacher could create a hostile work environment. Mr. Lombard said teachers would always have an obligation to stop bullying.

In response to a question, Dr. Morgan said there has been no professional development around gender identity in the district. She added that the issues come up often. She said there was some resistance among parents about a video on different types of love. She said principals had challenges about how to respond to potential clubs after school. She noted mandates imply punishment if you're not in compliance.

Mr. Lombard said we cannot come off as indoctrinating the faculty. He said there were possible negative effects on education. He said an alternative video to the one presented earlier could also be provided.

Mr. Sokolovic said society for years had been presenting the other side. He said there would not be another side to the view that all races are created equal. Mr. Lombard said this was a new issue, and he noted in some ways things were going in a different direction. He said multiple perspectives are needed on the issue.

Dr. Morgan said professional development should be guided by state statutes. Mr. Lombard said he agreed.

Mr. Sokolovic said “indoctrinated” was kind of a loaded word that was also used in banning books.

Ms. Baptiste-Perez said she would like to have the board’s attorneys draft a memo. She said she agreed with staying in line with the law. She said she would contact the chair about getting legal advice.

Mr. Sokolovic said the main issue seemed to be, not professional development, but mandates with consequences. Mr. Lombard said he wanted to see the legal advice. He said he would also look for material that takes the opposite point of view.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 8:47 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

John McLeod

Approved by the committee on February 23, 2023