

**CITY OF BRIDGEPORT
EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SERVICES
COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING
SEPTEMBER 14, 2016**

ATTENDANCE: John Olson, Co-Chair; Katherine Bukovsky, Scott Burns, Jose Casco and Nessah Smith

STAFF: Fran Rabinowitz, Interim Superintendent of Bridgeport Public Schools
Angel dePara, CAO's Office

CALL TO ORDER

Co-Co-Chair Olson called the meeting to order at 6:40 P.M. He reviewed the procedures of the meeting to all those present.

AGENDA

APPROVAL OF COMMITTEE MINUTES OF JUNE 8, 2016

This item was not on the agenda; however, Council Member Smith stated that she had a question about the minutes from the June 8, 2016 meeting. Co-Co-Chair Olson remarked that this item was not on the agenda and suggested that those minutes be approved at the next meeting.

- ** COUNCIL MEMBER BUKOVSKY MOVED TO APPROVE COMMITTEE MINUTES OF JUNE 8, 2016 AT THE NEXT MEETING.**
- ** COUNCIL MEMBER SMITH SECONDED.**
- ** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

INFORMATIONAL SESSION RE: DISCUSSION ON WAYS COMMITTEE MEMBERS CAN PROMOTE "READ ALOUD DAY" IN THE CITY'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS ON OCTOBER 20, 2016

Co-Co-Chair Olson began the discussion by noting that the recruitment goal for Read Aloud Day is 650 and said he would like to recruit 650 more. He encouraged his fellow Committee members to participate as volunteers on Thursday at 9:00 AM, when they will be assigned a school and provided with a book. He asked whether any of the members had ever done Read Aloud Day before to which Council Member Bukovsky answered that she had and had enjoyed it. Council Member Bukovsky asked if she could get PDFs of the email to distribute to all Council members in the hope of recruiting volunteers from the Council before the deadline which is September 22nd. Co-Chair Olson said he hopes to extend to the next Council meeting on Monday. Council Member Bukovsky asked Council Member Burns if he would mind making the copies to which Council Member Burns answered he did not mind and would provide the copies for the Council. Co-Chair Olson said the debit card could be used to make 500 copies.

Co-Chair Olson then talked about recruiting volunteers from the Police and Fire Departments, in addition to the Mayor's Office. He remarked that he does not know how the Police and Fire Departments would handle this, and suggested that Mr. dePara could be the liaison between the Committee and the Mayor's Office. Council Member Burns suggested going to the libraries – the main one and the branches – in addition to recruiting from the four senior centers in Bridgeport. Co-Chair Olson said he would get flyers, with Mr. dePara providing the information to the Mayor's Office and with Co-Chair Olson providing it to Police and Fire Departments. Co-Chair Olson asked who would do the libraries and Mr. Burns answered that he would.

Interim Superintendent Rabinowitz joined the meeting at 6:55.

Mrs. Rabinowitz asked the Committee if they wanted her to come to the meeting. Co-Chair Olson said he was not aware she was coming, but welcomed her, along with the other Committee members, to join the meeting. She noticed the Read Aloud flyer and commented positively, and Co-Chair Olson asked if she would be willing to promote this in the schools. Mrs. Rabinowitz said that she absolutely would promote it, that it is huge, and that everybody already knows about it in the schools. Co-Chair Olson asked if she needed any flyers to which Mrs. Rabinowitz answered that Anne Gribbon had already provided lots of flyers.

Co-Chair Olson asked the Committee if there were any more ideas on how to promote the Read-Aloud Day. Council Member Bukovsky asked Council Member Burns if it is possible to upload the flyer to a facebook page to which Council Member Burns answered that it could be uploaded as a picture, but confirmed Council Member Bukovsky's doubt that it could be printed from a picture on facebook.

Co-Chair Olson asked Mrs. Rabinowitz if she had any suggestions for long-term goals of the Committee, stating that this has long been a moribund Committee in search of reason for being, and saying that he things the Committee has something very important now. Co-Chair Olson said that the Committee has no economic power, but nevertheless will do anything to promote the cause of education in the schools. He said that one of his ideas is to invite various school-related non-profit groups to the meetings to hear what they are doing, thereby making it a learning process for the Committee. Council Member Burns added that social services non-profits deserve merit to be included. Mrs. Rabinowitz stated that she sees the committee as an important voice for the school system, commenting on the fact that the nature of the information about Bridgeport's Public School System is negative, adding that there are so many good things happening in the schools that the public does not hear. She said that the Committee would do her and the all the kids a great favor by just talking about and promoting the good things, remarking that she joined the meeting to talk about this.

Mrs. Rabinowitz commented that, when she goes out in the state, other people ask her what is going on in Bridgeport and why it is so chaotic. She stated that it is not chaotic, mentioning the great things happening in the areas of literacy and in many areas, handing out a powerpoint packet which provides an educational overview of the school system.

**** COUNCIL MEMBER BURNS MOVED TO ENTER AS EXHIBIT 9.14.16-1 BRIDGEPORT PUBLIC SCHOOLS VISION STATEMENT.**

**** COUNCIL MEMBER SMITH SECONDED.**

**** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

Mrs. Rabinowitz said that the more voices there are, recognizing the members as very important voices because of their fellow council members, and saying that people read the negative news and throw up their hands. Mrs. Rabinowitz stated again that there is phenomenally good things going and that she hopes the Board straightens out its issues. Referring to the Vision Statement, she said they have a vision of Bridgeport as a model urban district, there is a mission statement about working together to get there, and there are belief statements. She showed the school improvement plan which is tied to the belief statements and which include four aspects:

- collaboration to take care of the social/emotional development of Bridgeport children;
- rigorous curriculum for all;
- insure that scaffolding and remedial services are in place; and
- collaboration with parents as partners.

Co-Chair Olson interjected by asking Mrs. Rabinowitz how she could say all these things when she was flat-funded, and after she testified in Hartford about lack of funds. He told Mrs. Rabinowitz he is not trying to be rude to which Mrs. Rabinowitz responded that he was right. Mrs. Rabinowitz said she understands she does not have the funding nor interventionists, and referred to the CJEF decision which she said had come down very recently and which Co-Chair Olson acknowledged, stating that there were two reports in the New York Times. Mrs. Rabinowitz said it was a 90-page decision in which she had testified for many days, with Mr. Olson interjecting that she provided key testimony, and Mrs. Rabinowitz continuing to say that she has to believe they will move forward on the funding. She said that she told her staff it does not matter as there are 21,000 students coming through their doors, and asking them how they are going to meet the needs until they have everything they need. She said they have to do the best they can with what they have, in addition to continuing to strive for that rigorous curriculum and intervening with the kids in the best way possible. Mrs. Rabinowitz said she knows it is not perfect, but they are getting there, and pointed to the next slide, The Ruler Program, which she said is now being implemented in the community and which is all about respect for the feelings of others which includes, but is not limited to, students, teachers, parents. This program builds social and emotional skills that students need in order to learn, is a partnership with Yale and receives all private funding necessary to be put in across the school system. Mrs. Rabinowitz stated that Bridgeport is one of Yale's model school districts, mentioning Mark Brackett, and explaining that they are working hard to cut down on out-of-school suspensions and to find other ways of providing a break for teachers from students who display egregious behavior. Co-Chair Olson asked what had happened to the Mayor's plan to provide a school for regional special education students. Mrs. Rabinowitz said she had been so excited about that, explaining that the Mayor had been willing to pay the rent on that and that she had done some similar work on a behavior program in Hamden. She continued that Brendan Sharkey, Speaker of the House, was in Hamden at the time and knew about the work, so they all went up to Hartford and met with him. Mrs. Rabinowitz stated that Brendan Sharkey had plans to start it in Hartford and then regionalize it, saying also that he had changed the regional program to allow Bridgeport to participate. She said that everything had been working fine until Mr. Sharkey resigned as Speaker of the House and the Governor used the money. Council Member Burns guessed that the amount of funds was about 2 or 3 million dollars to which Mrs. Rabinowitz confirmed that it was \$2.5, saying that what she wanted for the funding was for all K-4 children who come in with incredibly challenging behaviors to have their situations addressed early rather than costing the City a possible \$1.5 for the education of each student by the time they finish school. She

continued to summarize her goals for that money, saying that she wanted to find other ways of working with the students' behavior by teaching them and teaching teachers how to better deal with the students. Co-Chair Olson asked if there is any hope for a successful outcome to which Mrs. Rabinowitz stated that she has called them constantly to see if it is available, and added that there is some commission which has asked her to come up and make a presentation about the plan.

Council Member Burns asked what kind of physical building they are looking for to which Mrs. Rabinowitz answered that she was willing to use and the Mayor was willing to pay the rent for, the old Rodov Shalom Temple has a school in the back which they are not using anymore, and which is in a good area for attracting suburban students. She drew the comparison between spending \$2.5 million to help 25 students now and possibly \$30 million to help the same number of students down the road. Co-Chair Olson asked about funds from bonding to which Mrs. Rabinowitz stated that bonding money will not pay for staff. Council Member Burns commented that most of the money is staff which Mrs. Rabinowitz confirmed.

Mrs. Rabinowitz talked about some of the difficult changes that have been put in place, for example, the loss of kindergarten paras, no home-school coordinators, but she said they did get a technology grant from the State which will provide more technology in the elementary schools. She then pointed to another page of the packet and talked about the Restorative Justice Program which was written about in the New York Times as a widely-accepted technique used to promote social and emotional education in the classroom. She stated that a lot of this is being done in Bridgeport schools. Co-Chair Olson asked Mrs. Rabinowitz whether Bridgeport was in danger of losing her to which Mrs. Rabinowitz answered that it has been hard, but that she has stuck it out. She made reference to the tremendous amount of harassment she has had to endure from a particular Board member which she said is not an easy situation to work with, but that has had to speak out more because it is not just about her, but her staff which is also starting to be harassed.

Co-Chair Olson remarked that an argument often used to discredit increase funding requests is that there are too many consultants and too many assistant superintendants. Mrs. Rabinowitz stated that she had gotten rid of the assistant superintendent in a \$800,000 cut with Central Office, remarking that she had the leanest Central Office budget. Co-Chair Olson asked how many consultants Bridgeport has in comparison with the suburbs to which Mrs. Rabinowitz answered that Bridgeport was not even close, i.e. far fewer, and added that Bridgeport has half of what New Haven has. Council Member Burns asked if the student enrollment is about the same to which Mrs. Rabinowitz answered that New Haven had fewer students. Co-Chair Olson asked about a town such as Fairfield to which she said she does not know how many they have, but she knows they have a lot. Co-Chair Olson said he has heard this argument against raising the education budget since he came to Bridgeport in 1966 – too many consultants, too many... Mrs. Rabinowitz interjected with the comment that she has no consultants. She said she has this one gentleman, Todd White, whose position is paid for out of a state grant. Council Member Burns said there are people in the Council, not in this Committee, that feel they have not cut money at the top, and he was just relaying the message. He said he knows that Mrs. Rabinowitz's budget is lean, he can see it in the elementary schools, but he said it goes back to what she had said about good things happening, referring to the reading results which came out in early September being fabulous. He said the leaps were ridiculous, noting that the story came out on a Friday and then nobody heard it again. Council Member Burns said he would like to see Mrs. Rabinowitz get out and “bang the happy drum”, and encouraged her to be open about the cuts, and agreeing

that she has done a lot of that, He stated that, for some reason, however, the general public still feels that there is “fluff”. Council Member Bukovsky added that she has heard from teacher friends of hers that interventionists are being brought in at \$x/day, commenting further that, no matter how much the cost, the City will be saving down the road by keeping students out of a straight special education path for the rest of their K-12 career. Council Member Bukovsky asked Mrs. Rabinowitz if the interventionists are being paid more than the contracted teachers to which Mrs. Rabinowitz answered strongly in the negative. Council Member Bukovsky remarked that she thinks the perception is that the interventionists are being paid a huge amount of money.

Co-Chair Olson wondered whether the role of the Committee could be to bring out the facts, so that people can get a full picture. Mrs. Rabinowitz stated that she joined the meeting to have this conversation and that the Committee should talk to her staff too. Council Member Smith said she would like for Mrs. Rabinowitz to address the Council to let them know about the good things that are happening. Mrs. Rabinowitz said it is important that she come to the Council not asking for money, but to provide an informational report on the school district. Council Member Smith re-stated the amount of money saved by not putting a student on a special education path.

Mr. dePara interjected with a suggestion that, since this is the Education and Social Services committee, they can have Mrs. Rabinowitz come before the full Council to give an update or an information session on the schools. After some discussion about how to bring this to the full Council, it was decided that the Committee would ask Tom. Co-Chair Olson said they would do it in the first week of October and Mrs. Rabinowitz stated she would be happy to do that.

- ** COUNCIL MEMBER NESSAH SMITH MOVED TO ADD TO THE AGENDA OF AN UPCOMING MEETING OF THE FULL COUNCIL THE INTERIM SUPERINTENDANT OF SCHOOLS, FRAN RABINOWITZ, TO PROVIDE AN UPDATE ON THE PROGRESS IN THE BRIDGEPORT PUBLIC SCHOOLS.**
- ** COUNCIL MEMBER BUKOVSKY SECONDED.**
- ** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

Mrs. Rabinowitz stated there is nothing sexy about what will appear on the front page or the paper, but she said she is sticking to a focus, and referred to her goal of having kids reading by third grade. She noted that, if anyone visits a prison, and they talk to these kids – 14 to 21 – that are in for some serious offenses, they cannot read, and she stated that this condition has made them feel unsuccessful in school.

Co-Chair Olson turned the discussion to the issue about the guards, saying people were riled up about that, with Mrs. Rabinowitz saying that they should have been riled up. From her viewpoint, Mrs. Rabinowitz stated she would have had ever recommended or approved it, but she had no say with the Board. She stated that there are three things she is concerned about in the area of safety and said she has told Channel 12 and the Board. Her three concerns are:

- 5 SRO positions were eliminated at a time when everyone is concerned with safety of kids. She noted that what one's opinion of those individuals is, is not the important thing. Five safety positions were gotten rid of.
- The Board's elimination of LightHouse money for the first time since 1992 because of a budget crunch. She stated that this was not the right thing to do because 2000 kids are served by the program and it had to be cut back.

- She said she understands about the kindergarten paras and hated to see them go, and is trying every way possible to find dollars to bring them back, but to put cuts on the backs of kids and have the youngest children walk 1.5 miles to school is an outrage. She said the Board has not voted on the policy change yet, so it has not gone into effect, and the buses are still functioning as usual.

Mrs. Rabinowitz stated that this was the point at which she began pushing back against the Board. She said that harassment by one Board member is one thing, but she said that this Board member also misrepresented the truth to the rest of the Board about what the parents were thinking, getting the Board to move ahead with this change of policy.

Mrs. Rabinowitz thanked the Committee for having her there and got up to leave. The Committee members thanked her for coming.

ADJOURNMENT

**** COUNCIL MEMBER CASCO MOVED TO ADJOURN THE MEETING.
** COUNCIL MEMBER BUKOVSKY SECONDED.
** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

Co-Chair Olson adjourned the meeting at 7:30 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Nerina Kagan
Telesco Secretarial Services