

**CITY OF BRIDGEPORT
CHARTER REVISION COMMISSION
PUBLIC HEARING
MARCH 20, 2012**

ATTENDANCE: Cathleen Simpson, Chair; George Estrada, Vice Chair; Florisca Carter, Secretary; Harry Weichsel, Rev. William Marshall, Ruben Felipe (5:45 p.m.); Charles Valentino (5:47 p.m.)

STAFF: Atty. Steve Mednick, Atty. Ed Maley; Atty. Mark Anastasi (6:37 p.m.)

CALL TO ORDER

Ms. Simpson called the meeting to order at 5:43 p.m. She had the members present introduce themselves.

Mr. Felipe joined the meeting at 5:45 p.m.

PUBLIC HEARING ON EDUCATIONAL GOVERNANCE

Mr. Max Medina, a business owner and Hickory Street resident came forward and said that he had four children graduate from the District. He said that he had served for 16 years on a former Board and was present to support the electoral Board system. He then gave several illustrations.

Mr. Valentino joined the meeting at 5:47 p.m.

Mr. Medina said that the City would not eliminate the achievement unless the families were fully engaged. He said that an appointed board system would not encourage this and that the problem that had happened was the result of something going on behind the scenes. Mr. ?? said that he had been denied the right to vote for the members of the Board of Education since last July.

Ms. Frances Newby and said that she was a Bridgeport resident and said that she was present to support clear directives on ethics for the Board of Education. She said that no one should be in the positions of conflict of interests. This includes the Council members who are employees and those who are members of the Board of Education. The responsibilities of the Mayor, the Board of Education and the Superintendent should be clear in the Charter.

Pastor Anthony Bennett, the pastor of Mt. Aery Church, came forward and said that he was a church leader, a parent and a resident of the City. He was present to urge the Commission not sacrifice the right of the residents to vote for their school board representatives. The children need to learn from their parents, guardians that they should have an active voice in government and not be dictated to. It is disturbing that the City where the population is primarily African American and Latino that they have to justify themselves for the right to vote. Westport, Wilton

and Fairfield would arm themselves with lawyers and lawsuits if they suddenly found themselves with an appointed Board of Education and asked why Bridgeport should be any different.

Ms. Mary Pat Healy, the Executive Director of the Bridgeport Child Advocacy Coalition, came forward and said that last week, some got the impression that BCAC was against mayoral control. She said that for every pro there is a con, and encouraged the people to think long and hard about this. An audit and diversity of representation should be in the process. A BOE should never be a rubber stamp for the Council or the Mayor. There should be no conflicts of interests. She then mentioned the screening process and said that the data was inconclusive regarding the effectiveness of mayoral control of the Board. Ms. Healy then handed out a packet of information to the Commission members.

Mr. Robert Walsh came forward and distributed a document. He said that he was a former Council Member and said that it was very clear by the turn out of the public tonight that the City needed to have elected Board of Education. He said that there were a number of negative emails from the Hartford officials that showed how the Hartford officials viewed Bridgeport. The size of city was a big factor in how well a school system performs, not whether they have an elected or an appointed Board of Education members. He said that the Board was being duped by the Mayor to play games with the children's education.

Ms. Carter asked Mr. Walsh for confirmation that he had indeed stated that the Board was being duped. He said that he had indeed said that the Board was being duped. Mr. Walsh then went on to briefly address the crowd despite the fact that Ms. Simpson told him he was out of order.

Rev. Mary Lee, the pastor of El Shaddai, came forward and said that she was a teacher in the Public School for about two years. She said that she had serious concerns about an appointed board and the loss of her right to vote. She said that in Alabama, the appointed board does what the appointing body tells them to. Ms. Lee said that she did not want to go back to what people went through to obtain the right to vote during the Civil Rights era. Democracy is important. She repeated that the Commission should not take away the right to vote.

Mr. David Faile came forward and said that he was head of the Friends of Sikorsky Airport and the group was requesting that the Commission make a change of the Airport Commission. He pointed out that none of the current commissioners, consisting of the Mayor of Bridgeport, the Mayor of Stratford, the Bridgeport Council President, the Bridgeport City Clerk and the Bridgeport Finance Director, have any expertise in aviation. He requested that the membership of the Commission be changed to include civilian aviation experts.

Ms. Samantha Lalli, a BPS teacher came forward and said that she was present in support of mayoral control. She said that she had attended several BOE meetings and that the Board had not addressed student achievement at all, but argued about other issues. With the new Board, the members talk about student achievement, speak politely to one another and have actually brought order back into the system. People need to be held accountable. With mayoral control, the

community can hold the mayor accountable for the performance of the schools. An elected board makes it almost impossible to hold people accountable. Every system needs checks and balances and gave some suggestion for that. It is important to have skills for service on the Board.

Bishop Griffith came forward and stated that he was the Senior Pastor at Word of Life ministries. He said that he had concerns about going backwards. He said that he was pleased with the performance of the appointed board and did not want to return to the previous system. He said that he was in favor of an appointed board because an elected Board has qualifications. Sitting through the Board of Education arguments, he was ashamed of the behavior of the Board members. The children suffer while the adults argue. He said that it would be important to hold people accountable.

Mr. Brandon Clark, a 10 year resident of Bridgeport came forward and said that he was tutoring Bridgeport students while a student at SHU and later when he was at Fairfield U. For the past 2 years, he's been working for Achieve Bridgeport and strongly supports the appointed school board. Low income students are usually three years behind their companions in reading and math. The Board needs to be willing and able to implement new systems. Make sure the appointed board has appropriate checks and balances, skills and that there is a way to have someone accountable. This will give a high quality education.

Ms. Susan Reyes came forward. She said that if the Mayor could appoint the Board, and it didn't work out, then the Board can be changed. Since it didn't work before, the citizens have failed the students. Now there is an opportunity to do better. She encouraged everyone to see what the Mayor has to bring to the table.

Mr. Steve Karjanis, a school social worker, who has attended almost every Board meeting for the last two years came forward. He said that the State take over changed the dynamics of the Board. He said that the system wasn't working that well. He said that it would be important to move closer to the families and that an appointment would be moving in the wrong direction. Family involvement is important and an appointed board takes all the family involvement away. There is a serious drug problem in the schools. Clean students don't drop out of school. He said that an appointed board would remove the power from the programs and the families.

Mr. David Gordon came forward and said that he was a resident and also a former Bridgeport Schools drug counselor until he was laid off. Mr. Gordon then spoke about the Mayor's comments about refusing to sit on the sidelines. He said that gangs have infiltrated the schools with drugs. Two years ago, he and his colleagues came to the City Council and appealed to the Mayor and Council Members about this issue, with no response. The City failed to come to the aid of the children. He said that he would not support the plan to have an appointed Board because he takes away the rights of the citizens. The Mayor has already failed to address the drug problem, and the gangs.

Mr. John Marshall Lee came forward and said that what the Commission was hearing was that there needed to have accountability. Mayor Finch was the first speaker to the Commission but he has not been accountable. Mr. Lee then pointed out that there was a Charter requirement that dictated monthly financial reports be published, but these have not been supplied for many years. This shows that the Mayor is not accountable, along with Chief Operating Officer Nunn and Council President McCarthy.

Mr. Lee then spoke about the internal audits and the CAFR report. He said that the CAFR report that the Commission was different from the original one. Mr. Lee then gave a number of examples about accountability.

Atty. Anastasi joined the meeting at 6:37 p.m.

Ms. Christine O'Neil, who works at Park City Academy came forward and said that she supported the mayoral appointed Board. She said that it would give parents more of a voice in the education. Mayoral elections have a greater turn out than Board elections. If the parents do not like the changes in the school or how the Board is functioning, they will vote the mayor out. She went on to list two other points: the first about being fiscally responsible and the second; that a more diverse Board would be a positive change. In the end, her focus is on the students and their achievement.

Ms. Emily Shumway then came forward distributed a document to the Commissioners. She said that she was present to support mayoral control because of accountability. She said that she works at Achievement First and that she had been a former Bridgeport public school teacher.

Mr. Mack Allen said that he was the father of three children. Mr. Allen is always a member of the South End NRZ and an elder at New Vision International Ministries. He said that the way that the school system as it is set up is failing. The current Board set up is failing. At some point, the insanity has to stop, otherwise the cycle will continue to harm the children. He said that he was not a governance scholar, but he saw the recent change. While he is not in favor of taking votes away from people, he pointed out that voting for the person who can improve the system, will also allow the voters to vote him or her out. Mayor Finch does care about the kids. It is impossible to ignore the fact that the system needs to change.

Ms. Laura Marianon came forward and said that she had three children in the Bridgeport Public Schools. She said that in every meeting people talk about accountability, but nothing gets done. The former BOE was bouncing the ball to one another. She said that she was in favor of an appointed Board. The schools need to improve the quality of education. It is important to get rid of the teachers who are not doing their job. It is important to have someone who is accountable. If Mayor Finch is not doing his job, the people need to make sure he does his job and stop playing with the children's education.

Mr. Rob Traber, came forward and said that about 11 years ago he became a Bridgeport Public School teacher, and was a member of the Bridgeport Education System. He said that he was opposed to the change. Everyone is here for the children and people have been fighting for the schools. He said that twice there were two very close elections, but both times the votes were controlled by the machine. The wasted time at BOE meetings should be stopped. The Town Committees decided and people have been making decisions in the back room. He said that he was for transparency, but the people speaking loudest are the ones in the back rooms. He said that it would be good to have the elections by the District. Mr. Traber said that there was an appointment by the machine and the appointee had not been to a meeting yet.

Mr. George Giankakos came forward and said that he was a teacher at Barnum School. He said that something needed to change in Bridgeport. Teachers educate people but also have to advocate for the students. He said that he was in support of mayoral accountability. He then said that the pattern was simple, the Mayor appoints a board and the Board either raises or lowers the achievements. That actually paints a bull's eye on the forehead of the mayor. He said that it is not a cure all for the system, but it is a start towards a change. Mr. Giankakos then gave the Commission members copies of his remarks.

Ms. Janet Estrell came forward and said that she had to navigate her three sons through a system that was not always fair or easy. She said that during the last 14 years, she had seen many problems. At one meeting, years ago, The Mayor and the Superintendent disagreed about how the money was being spent and couldn't agree. She said that she was in support of mayoral system. During the past years, there has been no accountability and the new system will hold someone accountable. There will also be an equitable and fair system. She said that there needed to be strict guidelines.

Ms. Maria Zambrano, the Director of Excel Bridgeport, came forward and said that she was a graduate of Bridgeport public schools. She said that it would be important to look at the reality. She said that Bridgeport is the worse performing District in the State. Only 3% of the students across the District are on grade level. She asked how has the community allowed this to happen.

Ms. Zambrano said that taking away the right to vote. The right to an education is the civil rights issue today. When the Charter comes up for a vote, the people have the right to vote. If they don't like the performance of the Board, they vote the mayor out. Currently, there is no accountability. Unity and respect is critical. School Board members have been focused on their personal agendas and not the students. Expertise is also important. Running the second largest school district is a challenge. The board members need to understand how to analyze the data and implement the changes.

Ms. Zambrano said that she would read some comments from a 2010 graduate that focused on "what if" and the fact that the student wondered how her life would have been different if she had the opportunities that other students in other districts had.

Mr. Carlos Yanez came forward and said he was the father of three children. He said that he grew up in another country. His parents told him over and over again that the best way to better his life was through education. During the last few years, the BOE has not been doing much for the children of Bridgeport. The children deserve better than this. These changes need to be made in the best interest of the children and Mr. Yanez was in support of the mayoral appointment of the Board.

Ms. Yolehema Felican came forward and said she was working at the high schools. During the last three years the BOE has not been helping the students. One sixth grade student was unable to write a simple sentence. Harding High school had a student who could not read. Ms. Felican said that the people were voting for a Mayor to appoint a school board.

Mr. Dick Ferguson, came forward and said that he was a broadcaster and a member of the Bridgeport Educational Fund. He said that he was also a volunteer for the schools. He said that he was for the appointed Board. However, Ms. Zambrano neatly summed it all up for him and he agreed with her comments.

Pastor William McCullen, the chair on the Committee for Education and a Bridgeport resident came forward. He said that he had respect for Mayor Finch, but felt that there needs to have some elected spots on the Board, so that the people have representatives that are accountable and transparent.

Ms. Joty Allison, the student president of the NAACP, said that the issue was the children and they are dying both in and out of the schools. Esteem is in favor of mayoral control. There have been positive changes in NYC following mayoral control. At the end of the day, it is important to have elected officials who are involved with the students. Not to do so is to fail the children.

Ms. Alexis Jackson, president of Build On, pointed out that change can be difficult. She said while the right to vote is crucial but the main point is that the students are not receiving the education they need. With the drop out rates at the pinnacle, the focus should be on the children. She encouraged people to try something new and asked whether the Bridgeport students were not worth taking the risk.

A Kolbe student came forward and said that his nephew in the Bridgeport Public Schools. His nephew was failing, and so the failing student's mother transferred him to a Catholic school. Now, with tutoring, the failing student is starting to improve.

Another Kolbe student came forward and said that when he went to Kolbe, he was enrolled in a Big Brother Program. Now, he goes back to his old school to give his old friends hope and help. School shouldn't be quicksand where students get sucked down. He listed many different areas where there were problems for the public school students.

Another student named Amy came forward and said that in the beginning she heard a lot about civil rights and losing a right to vote, but pointed out that the vote will still be there. As a member of Excel Bridgeport, she was being given opportunities. It's not about the right to vote, but the right for an education. She asked how it would empower the students if they don't have an education. How many years have the elected officials failed the students? It's sad when TV shows like Family Guy looks down on Bridgeport. With the lack of communication between the Board of Education and others, people look down on Bridgeport students. Bridgeport needs to be encouraged to look forward and improve. Who is actually listening to the students unless they are here in person? The new Superintendent has been trying to start parent forums, but the parents aren't showing up at the meetings.

Ms. Duaneaa Evans, a UB senior, said that when she came from Harlem, she felt there was little difference between Harlem and Bridgeport. Now four years later, she is committed to helping Bridgeport anyway she can. She is in support of mayoral control. It is time to get out of the business of pointing blame and start educating the children. People have claimed that their civil rights were being taken away, but maybe it will make people take the mayoral elections more seriously.

Mr. Jim Fox, a resident said that he was against the mayor taking the Board over. He said that he's been on appointed boards and elected boards. Sitting on various boards can be difficult. He said that he did not want an elected official deciding who was going to be on the board. He said that on various commissions there were numerous people with expired terms. That is no way to run a City. The Mayor can't even deal with the Fire Commission, the Police Commission, Planning and Zoning. Each of the Commissions are being micromanaged and all of them have vacancies that have not been filled. He added that the City needs to have a Board of Finance. The City is in trouble.

Mr. Kirk Wesley came forward and said he was a graduate of Bassick High School and that he was present to support the mayoral appointment. He said that the former BOE was failing the students and was dysfunctional. In 10 or 20 years, the students in the schools will be adults but still struggling because they didn't get a good education. He previously lived in Orange, New Jersey and that city has a great school system. When he came to Bridgeport, it was a shock. In the 21st century, it's important to have 21st century skills.

Mr. Gary DeBrizzi came forward and said he was a teacher. He said that he had been attending BOE meetings for 16 years. After 16 years of teaching, he said that the students can function and do go on to college. In all those years, he didn't see the Mayor very often. One of the first things the new BOE did was to get rid of Dr. Ramos. He said that in the last four years, the Mayor has not increased the budget at all but that the Mayor had given a 25% increase to other City staff.

Mr. DeBrizzi said that if he had known that Charter school student would be present, he would have brought the magnet school students. He also pointed out that dysfunctional students can be

removed from the private schools but the public schools must educate them. He then gave a detailed statement about the change between the former BOE and the current appointed Board. Mr. DeBrizzi said that Mayor Finch had not gone to Hartford to get the money that he was promised.

Mr. Alain Cesar came forward and said that he was a Bridgeport resident and a veteran. He said that there should be a hybrid board, five elected and four appointed. There are many factors that aren't known yet. He said that he has a four year son and he is worried. The Mayor has assets and abilities to give his children things that Mr. Cesar doesn't have. Parents, staff and ministers need to be held accountable. Bridgeport is recycling bad teachers and administrators, and staff is simply being shuffled around.

Ms. Kim McLoughlin came forward and said that what she sees is something that wants to cry. The suburbs are basically white and the cities have the minorities. The State doesn't want to deal with that issue. She said that she had nothing but the best things to say about the parents, administrators and staff. There is a hustle going on. Ms. McLoughlin said that it's not about Bridgeport Charter Schools vs. Bridgeport Public Schools. It should be about every child in the state.

Mr. Peter George then came forward and said that he was a retired teacher. Now, he works with students who are not able to attend school for a variety of reasons. After hearing all the speakers, he wondered what he could add. He said that he didn't see much changed from when he started in 1959. But the students were really trying. The idea of change is what is being discussed. Unless everyone is willing to help make the change take place, it won't work. There are no guarantees in anything, and having a hybrid Board it would help balance things out.

Everyone involved in the system must work together. When he visits some of the high schools to get supplies for his students, he sees some things that break his heart, and other things that encourage him. Students have to realize that school is serious business and preparation for life. This includes showing respect for the teachers and having teachers being prepared to teach.

Mr. Evan Book came forward and said that he cares about the education but feels that the mayoral control of the BOE may not be the best for the City. He agrees with Mr. Rob Traber about the challenges, but has written an eight page article on the "Secularization of the Government", which he will forward it to the Commission members.

Ms. Simpson asked if there was anyone else present who wished to address the Commission. No one came forward. Ms. Simpson then thanked everyone for the attendance and closed the public hearing at 8:05 p.m.

ANNOUNCEMENT

An Announcement was made about public hearing at Black Rock Library from 12:00 to 1:30 p.m. on March 21st.

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ADJOURNMENT

- ** MR. VALENTINE MOVED TO ADJOURN.**
- ** MR. ESTRADA SECONDED.**
- ** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The meeting adjourned at 8:06 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Sharon L. Soltes
Telesco Secretarial Services