

# **BERLIN BOARD OF EDUCATION**

**March 13, 2023**

## **MINUTES**

### **REGULAR MEETING**

Attendance: Julia Dennis  
Melissa Gibbons  
Jaymee Miller - Absent  
Gina Nappi  
Adam Salina  
Kari Sassu, Ph.D.  
Tracy Sisti - Absent  
Matthew Tencza  
Peter Zarabozo  
Student Representatives: Samantha Negrao  
Ian Saunders

Also in attendance: Superintendent of Schools Brian J. Benigni; Director of Business Operations Jeffrey Cugno; Finance Director Ashley Dorsey; Director of Pupil Personnel Services Linda Holian; Director of Human Resources Denise Parsons; Co-Directors of Curriculum Laurie Gjerpen and Kara Watson; Security, Safety and Residency Director John Schmaltz; Principal of Berlin High School Eileen Eustis; Principal of McGee Middle School Salvatore Urso; Principal of Willard School Megan Sirois; Principal of Hubbard School Alfred Souza; and Principal of Griswold School Jonathan Campbell.

#### **I. CALL TO ORDER**

A. Pledge of Allegiance

Ms. Dennis called the meeting to order at 6:02 p.m. in the Board of Education (“the Board”) meeting room at 238 Kensington Road, Berlin, CT. The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

#### **II. STUDENT PRESENTATION – MARY E. GRISWOLD SCHOOL**

Griswold teachers Denise Durante, Danielle Gemmell, Elizabeth Spinella, Kristin Beaudet and Michelle Wade, along with Griswold Grade 5 students, Addison Akier, Maja Chylinski, Rylin Holland, Tamsin Kuzara, J.T. Lindgren, Daniel Rzadkiewicz, Ryan Stewart, Ella Wasiulewski and John Wesoly, presented their work on the creation of public service announcements that focus on a topic of their choosing within the theme of social justice. Some of the topics students chose are tobacco/nicotine use, animal cruelty, ocean pollution, global warming, bullying, childhood cancer, war, disabilities, anxiety and poverty. Students utilized technology skills to create a short video public service announcement.

#### **III. SPECIAL RECOGNITION**

Board Member Appreciation

The month of March is Connecticut Board of Education Member Appreciation month. Superintendent Brian Benigni thanked Board members for the time and effort they devote to Board business during the course of the year.

A short recess was taken from 6:29 p.m. until 6:39 p.m. for refreshments.

**IV. COMMITTEE REPORTS/CORRESPONDENCE TO THE BOARD**

A. Report of Student Representatives

Mr. Saunders reported the Upbeat pancake breakfast will be held on Saturday, March 25, 2023, at the Berlin Fair Grounds from 7:30 a.m. until 11:00 a.m.; the district school newspaper *Redcoat Review* released Issue #3 to the entire district on Wednesday, March 8, 2023; and the Rho Kappa National Social Studies Honor Society Induction Ceremony will be held on Wednesday, March 15, 2023.

Miss Negrao reported the Upbeat March Leadership weekend was held on March 10-12, 2023. Ms. Negrao stated that, unfortunately, because of a bedbug problem at Camp Woodstock, Upbeat has decided to no longer utilize Camp Woodstock. Ms. Negrao reported, due to weather, "Slice of Berlin" was postponed to Wednesday, March 15, 2023; Berlin High School is encouraging students and staff to wear crazy socks to support World Down Syndrome Day on Tuesday, March 21, 2023; and Mr. BHS will be held on Sunday, March 26, 2023, at 6:00 p.m. in the Berlin High School auditorium.

B. Committee Reports

Mr. Tencza reported the Finance & Operations Committee met virtually on Thursday, March 9, 2023, to discuss the McGee Outdoor Classroom and the Juneteenth Holiday.

Dr. Sassu reported the Curriculum Committee met prior to tonight's meeting to discuss proposed revisions to the 2023-2024 school calendar and the proposed 2024-2025 school calendar, which appear later in the meeting.

C. CREC Report

There was no CREC report this evening.

D. Correspondence to the Board

Superintendent Benigni shared a thank you note from Sheryl Desroches and Family.

**V. AUDIENCE OF CITIZENS**

Cornel Boudria, 115 Skinner Road, Berlin, Connecticut addressed the Board inquiring what percentage of the 2023-2024 Operating Budget is necessary to maintain and fund contractual obligations. Superintendent Benigni stated a 4.23% increase is needed to maintain the current programs, staffing and class sizes, which does not include increases to systems such as PowerSchool or inflation for supplies.

Ruth Lerro, 141 Four Rod Road, Kensington, Connecticut, addressed the Board of Education regarding gun safety. She requested the school district send a letter to all parents and guardians of Berlin students reminding them to make sure their firearms are secured and stored safely, out of reach of children. She provided Board members with a sample letter.

Mary Ellen Maloney, 1343 High Road, Berlin, Connecticut stated she was here tonight to support Ruth Lerro. She shared a personal story in support of gun safety.

**VI. CONSENT AGENDA**

- A. Approval of Minutes
  - 1. Special Meeting of February 13, 2023
  - 2. Regular Meeting of February 13, 2023
  - 3. Special Meeting of February 15, 2023
- B. Monthly Budget Report – Period ending February 28, 2023
- C. Facilities Update

Director of Operations Jeffrey Cugno provided a written update, which has been posted in Schoology.

**Moved by Mr. Salina, seconded by Mr. Tencza, to approve the consent agenda as presented.**

**FAVOR: ALL  
MOTION CARRIED: 7:0; including President Dennis**

**VII. NEW BUSINESS**

- A. RULER Presentation

Dr. Jessica Hoffman, Director of Adolescent Initiatives and research scientist at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, provided a presentation to the Board and responded to the Board’s questions concerning RULER, an evidence-based approach to emotional intelligence. Dr. Hoffman provided background on what RULER is and discussed the impact of emotion skills instruction on school climate, creative problem-solving and emotion regulation ability. Included in Dr. Hoffman’s presentation was The Mood Meter; RULER skills; what is social-emotional learning (SEL); the RULER approach; staff development; classroom curricula for early childhood, elementary, middle school and high school; RULER tools; examples of The Charter, Mood Meter and the Meta-Moment; school climate and teacher outcomes; emotional intelligence among youth; and emotional intelligence among educators.

- B. Adopted 2023-2024 Board of Education Budget Update

Superintendent Benigni reported the Board of Education, at its last meeting, adopted the Board of Education Operating Budget, with an overall increase of 5.84%. Superintendent Benigni stated the Board of Education has not had a conversation with the Board of Finance concerning the Operating Budget. Superintendent Benigni stated, at this time, the Budget is with the Board of Finance for review and further recommendations. The Board of Finance will then turn the budget over to the Town Council where the Town Council can either pass or reduce the Budget, which then moves forward to referendum for a vote.

Mr. Tencza stated the Finance & Operations Committee will need to meet again to discuss what different levels of funding, from the town, will look like for the Board’s Operating Budget. At Mr. Tencza’s request, Superintendent Benigni and Ashley Dorsey will provide recommendations for a 4%,

3.75%, 3.50%, 3.25% and a 3% level of funding. Ms. Dennis encouraged all Board members to attend the Committee meeting.

C. Proposed School Calendar 2024-2025 and Establishment of BHS Graduation Date for 2025

Board members were provided with the proposed school calendar for 2024-2025. Public Act 19-195, allows boards of education to establish a firm graduation date for students in Grade 12 for that school year which, at the time of establishment, provides for at least 180 days of school. In accordance with the Public Act, Superintendent Benigni recommended that the Board set the date of the 2025 Berlin High School graduation for Friday, June 13, 2025.

**Moved by Dr. Sassu, seconded by Ms. Nappi, to adopt the 2024-2025 Berlin Public Schools Calendar as proposed and set the 2025 Berlin High School graduation date for Friday, June 13, 2025.**

This item was tabled for the next Board meeting to allow the district to survey parents and staff concerning the start of the school year. The Board will then make its decision based on the data received.

D. Revisions to the 2023-2024 School Calendar

Superintendent Benigni proposed the following revisions to the adopted 2023-2024 School Calendar:

- move the elementary and middle school conferences scheduled in November to October
- move the middle school conferences scheduled in March to February
- revise some report card dates
- remove testing dates listed below the report card dates
- remove conference snow date
- move afternoon professional development on December 13 to December 6.

The proposed revisions were reviewed by the Curriculum Committee at its meeting earlier today.

**Moved by Ms. Gibbons, seconded by Mr. Salina, to approve the revisions to the 2023-2024 School Calendar, as presented.**

**FAVOR: ALL**  
**MOTION CARRIED: 7:0; including President Dennis**

E. Juneteenth Holiday

Superintendent Benigni proposed that the Board follow the Town Council's action and declare Juneteenth (June 19) a paid holiday for staff who work the full calendar year (administrators, IT, clerical and custodial staff). The Finance & Operations Committee met on March 9, 2023 to discuss the superintendent's proposal.

Director of Human Resources Denise Parsons stated that in October 2022, the State of Connecticut added Juneteenth as a recognized state holiday, and President Biden signed legislation last year establishing the day as a federal holiday. In January 2023, the Berlin Town Council unanimously voted to include Juneteenth in the list of observed holidays for Town employees beginning this June. Generally, Juneteenth falls outside of the regular student school year. If school needs to be in session on June 19, a floating holiday, in lieu of the Juneteenth holiday, would be provided to impacted staff. Ms. Parsons stated when the Town and Board of Education holidays are not aligned, the district can be left without the support of facilities staff.

**Moved by Dr. Sassu, seconded by Mr. Zarabozo, to declare Juneteenth (June 19) a paid holiday for staff who work the full calendar year (administrators, IT, clerical and custodial staff) beginning June 19, 2023.**

**FAVOR: ALL**

**MOTION CARRIED: 7:0; including President Dennis**

F. Policy Review/Revision – First Reading – Policy 3323 – Purchasing

The Town Council approved increasing the bid threshold from \$10,000 to \$25,000 for the purchase of goods and services requiring the competitive bidding process. Superintendent Benigni is proposing that the Board's purchasing policy be revised to reflect the same increase. The Ad-Hoc Committee for Policy Review/Revision met on March 6, 2023, to review the recommended revisions. Since this is a first reading, no action is required; the second reading/adoption will take place at the April 24, 2023 Board meeting.

G. Outdoor Classroom at Catherine M. McGee School

Director of Operations Jeff Cugno provided additional information regarding this project in response to the Board's concerns for student safety, raised at the February 13, 2023 Board meeting. Mr. Cugno shared the Site Plan for the proposed Outdoor Classroom project, noting the addition of a fence and recommendations for guardrails. Principal Urso explained the existing protocols for student and staff use of outside areas of the property. Mr. Schmaltz explained the existing outdoor safety protocols for student and staff use for the district, including gym classes, recess period, outdoor classes and staff training.

H. Voting in the Elementary Schools

Superintendent Benigni stated that he received a request from Registrars of Voters Christy Miano and Joan Veley to align the school calendars with referendum voting dates, a copy which was provided to

Board members. Schools are currently closed for the November state and federal elections. Ms. Miano and Ms. Veley requested school not be in session on referendum dates. Per the Town charter, a referendum is held every last Tuesday in April and, if required, a second referendum shall be held four weeks following the first referendum. Board members were provided with the history of the percentage of registered voters who voted at the polls from November 8, 2016 through November 8, 2022. Ms. Dennis noted, on April 27, 2021, 2.61% of registered voters came out for the referendum.

The Board discussed the closing of schools on referendum dates, new legislation for early voting and the use of alternative town facilities for referendum dates. Mr. Schmaltz explained the safety and security protocols at the schools on referendum dates. After discussion, the position of the Board was that referendum dates be moved to other town facilities, mutually convenient to all.

### **VIII. ADJOURNMENT**

**At 8:46 p.m., a motion was made by Mr. Salina, seconded by Mr. Tencza, to adjourn.**

**FAVOR: ALL**

**MOTION CARRIED: 7:0; including President Dennis**

Respectfully submitted,

Kari Sassu, Ph.D., Berlin Board of Education