

BERLIN BOARD OF EDUCATION
August 10, 2020
MINUTES
REGULAR MEETING

Attendance: Richard Aroian
Julia Dennis – Absent
Mary Ellen Maloney – Absent
Jaymee Miller – Absent
Timothy Oakes
Adam Salina
Kari Sassu, Ph.D. – Arrived at 6:02 p.m.
Tracy Sisti – Via Zoom
Matthew Tencza
Student Representatives: Ryan McGowan – Absent
Lindsey Leary

Also in attendance: Superintendent of Schools Brian J. Benigni; Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction Erin McGurk; Director of Business Operations Jeffrey Cugno; Director of Human Resources Denise Parsons; Director of Literacy and Social Studies Laurie Gjerpen; Director of Mathematics and Science Kara Watson; Principal of Berlin High School Eileen Eustis; Principal of McGee Middle School Salvatore Urso; Assistant Principal of McGee Middle School Tim Chiaverini; Principal of Griswold School David Kitzman; Principal of Hubbard School Alfred Souza; Principal of Willard School Megan Sirois; and Athletic Director and K-12 Physical Education Health Coordinator David Francalanga.

I. CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Aroian called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. in the Berlin High School Auditorium at 139 Patterson Way, Berlin, Connecticut. The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Mr. Aroian congratulated Eileen Eustis on the graduation ceremony. Ms. Sisti reported on her attendance at the graduation ceremony as the Board representative. Principal Eustis publically applauded Helen DeRito for doing the “lion’s share” of the coordination and for her careful planning and thoughtful details.

Mr. Aroian clarified the role of the Board of Education with regard to the reopening plan.

II. COMMITTEE REPORTS/CORRESPONDENCE TO THE BOARD

A. Committee Reports

There were no Committee reports this evening.

B. Correspondence to the Board

Superintendent Benigni shared a thank you note received from Sharon Corriveau.

III. AUDIENCE OF CITIZENS

Carmela Minier, 84 Valley Drive, Berlin, Connecticut, inquired why the town has not made a decision for the reopening of schools. She inquired if there is an increase in parents opting not to use buses for transportation and how that will affect drop off lines, learning time and social distancing.

Superintendent Benigni stated that the Governor made the announcement two weeks ago regarding the requirement that all schools go back with live teaching; thereafter, he opened it up to districts to decide which plan is best. Superintendent Benigni stated time was needed to decide which plan was best for Berlin. The hybrid plan for Berlin Public Schools will be shared later in the agenda, and tomorrow parents will receive a letter, including the updated plan, along with a return to school enrollment options form.

With regard to bus transportation, Superintendent Benigni stated, there have been discussions at each building, and the administrators are working on different plans to eliminate any delay in starting school or causing an early end to the school day.

Jodi Wojas, 253 Spruce Brook Road, Berlin, Connecticut, inquired why a hybrid plan is not being considered for the elementary schools. Superintendent Benigni stated, at the elementary level, the district has decided on a full in-person model as there will be a cohort model in place. If parents feel uncomfortable with the full in-person model, they may opt for remote learning.

Kimberly Bennett, 78 Chatham Road, Berlin, Connecticut, inquired how 6th and 7th graders, who are 11 and 12 years old, are expected to be home alone for a week at a time to complete and log into classes. Superintendent Benigni stated the district recognizes this can be an imposition for parents and apologizes, but the district is looking to maximize education for students, given the safety concerns that need to be in place. The current plan provides continuity and connectivity to the class while also providing safe distancing.

Julie Gadomski, 29 Robbins Road, Berlin, Connecticut, inquired what the cleaning schedule will look like for the school buses, how students will be seated and inquired as to whether siblings will sit together. Superintendent Benigni stated students will have assigned seats, and the district is also looking at the location a student gets on the bus relative to where they sit. The buses will be cleaned after each run.

Ms. Gadomski also inquired if any local pediatrician has been consulted concerning the return to school. Superintendent Benigni stated the district is working with Charles Brown from the Central Connecticut Health District for guidance and Director of Nursing Wendy Russo who is in contact with the town pediatrician.

John Frink, 37 Mattabasset Street, Berlin, Connecticut, inquired if consideration has been given to extending the distance students can walk to school to limit the number of students on a bus. Superintendent Benigni stated the district has not looked at increasing the walking distance; that may be something to consider, in the future, once the number of students being transported is known.

As a follow-up, Board Member Timothy Oakes asked about the ability for parents to make changes to their bussing decisions if, for example, they were going to drop off children and then later decided that they wanted to resume bus pick up/drop off. Superintendent Benigni stated that the Board of Education

needs one day notice to make these changes. Likewise, he stated, the families are free to change the selected learning model (i.e., in-person or remote learning).

Jamie Albright, 114 Cole Lane, Berlin, Connecticut, inquired as to the plan for an overabundance of parents dropping off and picking up their children from school. Superintendent Benigni stated he is working with each building principal to devise a pattern that makes sense for their building in a manner that supports both social distancing and students staying within their cohorts.

Julie Arcila, 192 Hudson Street, Berlin, Connecticut, thanked Principal Eustis for the graduation ceremony. She inquired if the Board is consulting with a pediatrician to monitor cases of COVID-19 in Berlin. Superintendent Benigni stated, as far as monitoring, one of the updates in the reopening plan for Berlin schools is the Connecticut State Department of Education Addendum 5, which provides guidance for responding to COVID-19 scenarios in Connecticut school districts.

Jennifer Sawyer, 54 Winesap Road, Berlin, Connecticut, inquired if her third grade twins, who are separated under normal circumstances, will be in the same class and cohort this year. Superintendent Benigni stated, most likely, they will be in the same cohort as the intent is to keep families together. If there is a reason not to cohort them, she should contact the building principal.

Nancy Barbagallo, 136 Elton Road, Berlin, Connecticut, inquired why parents are not included for the in-person school tour at McGee. Principal Urso stated there are two 3-hour slots blocked for this Thursday and Friday. The plan is to have ten students sign up for a twenty minute tour of the school with one tour guide. This would have 200 students going through the building. Inviting others could possibly increase the number of people to 600 in six hours. Mr. Urso stated he looked at the summer school program guidelines that were put out by Governor Lamont on June 1, and persons not involved in the summer school program were prohibited from entering the building. Principal Urso stated if a parent feels they need to attend with their student, they can call the school, and a private tour can be set up.

Patricia Yagmin, 66 Misty Mountain Road, Berlin, Connecticut, inquired what percentage of parents responded to the initial survey regarding the reopening of schools and what percentage of those parents felt comfortable sending their children back to school full time. Superintendent Benigni stated roughly 66% responded, with 69% of those parents comfortable sending their child back to school.

Superintendent Benigni stated that parents will receive the return to school enrollment options form on Tuesday. The district is asking parents to select whether their child will attend in-person instruction or will participate in remote instruction.

Ms. Yagmin also inquired when parents may expect to see the final learning model. Mr. Aroian responded students in grades 6-12 will participate in the hybrid model and elementary students will participate in a full in-person return to class.

Anitra Maio, 243 Somerset Drive, Berlin, Connecticut, inquired why a survey was not sent to parents to see which model of instruction parents would prefer. Superintendent Benigni stated up until last Monday the directive from the Governor was live teaching; there was not a choice.

Kimberly Cogelum inquired if Berlin can start the school year with the hybrid model. Superintendent Benigni stated that at the elementary level, classroom cohorts will be established in addition to safety provisions. There will be additional custodians, masks and desk dividers in place that will provide a safe learning environment for students and staff. Superintendent Benigni noted Addendum 4 from the

State Department of Education regarding the interim guidance for decision making regarding the use of in-person, hybrid or remote learning models.

Becky Souza, 67 Raspberry Hill, Berlin, Connecticut, inquired how classrooms will be set up at Hubbard School and how teachers will manage individual questions from students. Superintendent Benigni stated he anticipates sharing a video with parents of what classrooms will look like. Students will be given two masks and will have a desk partition, desks will be separated to the greatest degree possible, and it is anticipated class sizes will be as few as 14 to a maximum of 22 students at the elementary level. Teachers will have a mask and will also be provided with a face shield and a desk shield, which will allow students to interact with teachers.

Laura Charamut, 45 Main Street EB, Berlin, Connecticut, inquired what a typical school day will be for an elementary aged student, participating in distant learning, and will students be able to participate in music, art and physical education. Superintendent Benigni stated students will receive instruction in a grade level grouping from a certified teacher assigned to provide distance learning. The intent is to have students participate in specials comparable to being in school.

Jennifer Favara, 128 Chestnut Lane, Berlin, Connecticut, inquired if there will be additional cleaning and sanitizing being done in the buildings, will students be responsible with the cleaning and sanitizing and the plan for mask breaks. Superintendent Benigni stated there definitely will be additional cleaning and sanitizing in the buildings, especially restrooms and flat surfaces, students will only be asked to wipe down their desk before and after lunch and every student will have a desk shield. There will be scheduled mask breaks throughout the day, and there will be a designated area that allows for at least six feet of social distancing where a student will be able to go for a safe mask break when needed.

Erin Roche, 1190 High Road, Berlin, Connecticut, inquired of the plans for music and theater arts and expressed her hope they remain part of the conversation both logistically and when funding is being discussed. Superintendent Benigni stated the district is not defunding the arts in any way and if a performance can be put together that allows students to showcase their talents in a safe manner that will be done.

Gina Antonucci, 70 Westview Terrace, Berlin, Connecticut, inquired what steps she needs to take to make sure her children are appropriately enrolled in school now that she has decided to have her children learn remotely. Superintendent Benigni stated she needs to complete the return to school enrollment options form for each child, and once completed, each child will be enrolled in remote learning. If no response is received for a student, the student will be automatically enrolled in in-person instruction for the start of the school year.

John Richards, Board of Finance liaison to the Board of Education, 239 Hawthorne Drive, Berlin, Connecticut, thanked the Board of Education and administration for the information sessions held the week of July 20. Mr. Richards requested an understanding how this year's educational instructional options will allow for students to be promoted or to gain credit based on successful curriculum delivery. Superintendent Benigni stated students in PreK-5 will participate in a full, in-person return to class and those students engaged in distance learning will receive instruction in a grade level grouping from an educator assigned to provide distance learning that would be in contact with them daily. At the secondary level, students engaged in distance learning will participate in daily instruction with their peers and teachers using technology based access.

Mr. Richards requested the Board discuss the relationship with the Central Connecticut Health District and perhaps provide a list of criteria for monitoring COVID-19.

Mr. Richards requested the Board provide a summary of the changes made for instruction for this school year that will be different from the past.

In response to Mr. Richards' question regarding the availability and use of certified staff, Superintendent Benigni stated a survey was sent to staff. Any staff member not intending to come back to school to teach live instruction was to contact the Human Resources Department to have a discussion concerning their need and what may be available for them. Superintendent Benigni stated at the secondary level, there is not a need for additional instructors as students engaged in distance learning will participate in live daily instruction with their peers and teachers using technology based access. At the elementary level, there is potentially a need for up to six certified grade level teachers.

Mr. Richards, as a member of the Board of Finance, requested the expenses for the reopening of school, how the Board is doing so far and what may be needed in the future for the continuation of the hybrid plan or for the possible event of distant learning. Mr. Richards stated the Board of Finance will keep its promise to the Board to be responsive to its needs along the way, and is requesting as much information the Board can provide. Mr. Aroian stated information has been shared with the Chairman of the Board of Finance and the Mayor in terms of expenses, and the Board has opened up the conversation with regard to what may be needed in the future.

In response to Board member Jayme Miller's question will students be broken out alphabetically at the middle school and high school, Superintendent Benigni stated the hybrid model will be broken out alphabetically to the greatest degree possible.

IV. CONSENT AGENDA

- A. Approval of Minutes – Regular Meeting of July 13, 2020
- B. Monthly Budget Report – Period ending July 31, 2020

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

FAVOR: ALL

MOTION CARRIED: 6:0; including President Aroian

V. NEW BUSINESS

- A. Superintendent's Report: District's Readiness for the Opening of School

Superintendent of Schools Brian Benigni reported on the district's preparation for the opening of school on August 31, 2020. Superintendent Benigni stated all staffing positions have been filled for the 2020-2021 school year. Superintendent Benigni stated parents will receive the district's reopening plan tomorrow. At this time, the district will utilize an updated hybrid model in grades 6-12 with students attending school on assigned, alternating weeks. This model will be in place for the first six weeks of

school and will be reassessed in the fall for a full in-person instruction at that time. Students will attend class either live or participate in classroom instruction from home via Zoom. Superintendent Benigni noted Addendums 4 and 5 to the Connecticut State Department of Education's Plan, concerning guidance for decision making regarding the use of in-person, hybrid or remote learning and details regarding the district's response to COVID-19 cases in school. Parents not comfortable with the hybrid model or having their child in school may opt for remote learning. Parents may change the model of instruction for their child at any time and can do so by contacting the school.

B. Facilities Related Updates

Director of Business Operations Jeffrey Cugno reported most of the work at the McGee gym is complete; the library media center has been refurnished along with a new rug; all gym floors in the schools have been refinished; and the stands for the studio level cameras are being assembled for the classrooms in the middle school and high school. The Board will be looking for the Town to move forward with the roof top unit at McGee Middle School and the fire suppression capital expenditure at Hubbard School. Mr. Cugno reported the Facilities Department for the Town, along with the school custodians, are changing unit ventilator filters, checking windows for fresh air ventilation, replacing fountains with bottle fillers and completing plumbing repairs. The security vestibules project final submission has been submitted to the State and the Statement of Need the Board approved for the design and construction of upgrades to the HVAC systems at the three elementary schools has moved to the Public Building Commission.

In response to Mr. Tencza's question concerning the status of the Facilities Study, Mr. Cugno stated the study is generally completed, and he, along with Doug Solak, reviewed the substance of the executive summary and would like to see some additional information in the report.

C. Staffing Update

Superintendent Benigni stated, at this time, all certified staffing positions have been filled. Superintendent Benigni stated that, in order to address some of the needs of COVID-19, the district will be hiring five part-time custodians and one full-time custodian. Two paraprofessionals have been hired based on scheduling needs in the buildings. The district is looking to hire two new security staff members that were approved on the town side of the budget. Superintendent Benigni stated he received a letter from the Chief of Police that the School Resource Officer (SRO) at McGee Middle School will be removed for the 2020-2021 school year, and the position will be filled with security staff. Superintendent Benigni stated, depending on the number of students receiving remote learning, the district may need to hire additional elementary staff.

D. Final Financial Report – 2019-2020 Fiscal Year

Director of Business Operations Jeffrey Cugno provided the final report for the 2019-2020 fiscal year, which consisted of the general fund budget, adjustments, revised general fund budget, percentage change, cumulative expenditures and the savings or surplus. A copy of the final budget report was provided to Board members.

In response to Mr. Tencza's question regarding where the district is with CHOICE funds, Superintendent Benigni stated, the district spent over a \$1 million in preparing to reopen the schools for safety precautions, technology and staffing. In addition, roughly \$80,000 of CHOICE funds was spent

for the summer school program. The remaining CHOICE funds were used for personal protective equipment, camera system, licensing, technology and staffing. Superintendent Benigni stated the district is now into this year's CHOICE monies, which have not yet been received. Superintendent Benigni anticipates receiving reimbursement at a rate of \$8,000 per student, and at this point, there is approximately \$300,000 remaining. Superintendent Benigni stated the Board of Finance and the Finance and Operations Committee requested monies come from CHOICE first. Superintendent Benigni stated his concern now is additional staff may be needed to fill classrooms or for remote learning.

In response to Mr. Salina's question, how much of the monies spent are reimbursable and what is the process for receiving reimbursement, Superintendent Benigni stated the Governor announced there will be federal money as well as additional state money. Superintendent Benigni stated he did put in for reimbursement, this week, for items the district already purchased that are not reimbursable at this time and completed a survey today with the state for reimbursement. Currently, the district is receiving approximately \$145,000 in reimbursement from the CARES Act of which \$15,000 will go to St. Paul's School.

Add Item to the Agenda:

Moved by Mr. Oakes, seconded by Mr. Salina, to add an item to the agenda, specifically an Executive Session, to discuss a personnel matter.

FAVOR: ALL

MOTION CARRIED: 6:0; including President Aroian

At 7:47 p.m., a motion was made by Mr. Oakes, seconded by Mr. Tencza, to go into Executive Session to discuss a personnel matter, inviting the Superintendent Brian Benigni and the Director of Human Resources Denise Parsons.

FAVOR: ALL

MOTION CARRIED: 6:0; including President Aroian

In attendance for Executive Session were Board members Aroian, Oakes, Salina, Sassu, Sisti (remotely) and Tencza. In addition, Superintendent Brian Benigni and Director of Human Resources Denise Parsons were present.

At 8:07 p.m., the Board returned to Open Session.

VI. ADJOURNMENT

At 8:08 p.m., a motion was made by Mr. Oakes, seconded by Mr. Salina, to adjourn.

FAVOR: ALL

MOTION CARRIED: 6:0; including President Aroian

Respectfully submitted,

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