

BERLIN BOARD OF EDUCATION
February 8, 2021
MINUTES
REGULAR MEETING

Attendance: Julia Dennis
Steven Jenkins
Jaymee Miller - Absent
Timothy Oakes
Mark Pruzin
Adam Salina
Kari Sassu, Ph.D.
Tracy Sisti
Stephen Weber
Student Representatives: Ryan McGowan
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; Finance Director Ashley Dorsey; Director of Pupil Personnel Services Linda Holian; Director of Human Resources Denise Parsons; Principal of Berlin High School Eileen Eustis; Principal of McGee Middle School Salvatore Urso; Principal of Hubbard School Alfred Souza; and Principal of Willard School Megan Sirois.

I. CALL TO ORDER

Ms. Dennis called the meeting to order at 7:07 p.m. in the Dr. Robert P. Long auditorium at Berlin High School, 139 Patterson Way, Berlin, Connecticut. The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

II. COMMITTEE REPORTS/CORRESPONDENCE TO THE BOARD

A. Report of Student Representatives

Mr. McGowan reported practices began on January 19, 2021 for all winter sports and competitions were able to begin today for basketball, ice hockey and men's swimming; the Capstone presentations, which were held both in-person and virtually, were successfully completed on January 20, 2021; and the website for WERB radio, appearing on channel 94.5 FM, has been updated with six new podcasts posted and some regular shows.

Miss Leary reported students recently organized a drive to collect clothing and other necessities for Connecticut residents; Berlin High School has 45 clubs, which provide plenty of opportunities for student involvement, and only 5 have been unable to meet this year; this evening Upbeat held a virtual meeting; and the Unity Club is celebrating Black History Month this February with weekly announcements, student questionnaires and school-wide advisory lessons to discuss and reflect on Black History.

B. Committee Reports

Ms. Sisti reported the Community Engagement Committee met prior to tonight's meeting and discussed new ideas, *The Berlin Citizen* column; and a possible video.

Mr. Oakes reported the Finance & Operations Committee will meet, in the next week, to review the Elementary & Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) Grant.

C. CREC Report

There was no report this evening.

D. Correspondence to the Board

Superintendent Benigni shared a thank you note from Jodi Bourdon.

III. AUDIENCE OF CITIZENS

Ms. Dennis stated she received three emails from parents over the past few days. The emails address if the Board of Education will be sending out a questionnaire concerning students attending school fulltime; students not as successful in reaching their potential; the hybrid and full remote models; and the district's next steps. Ms. Dennis stated she spoke with Superintendent Benigni, and the district will not be sending out a survey at this point. The district understands parents and students want to be back in school. Ms. Dennis stated the Department of Public Health for the Central Connecticut Health District is recommending the hybrid model be continued to ensure schools are safe for all students and staff. Ms. Dennis stated the Cromwell school district recently went back full-time, in person and now are closed for two weeks. The Board wants to avoid that situation as it will have a significant impact on families with child care. Superintendent Benigni will continue to monitor the numbers, and when they are at a consistently lower rate and the Central Connecticut Health District makes a recommendation, the district will move forward with next steps. If a parent feels their child is not reaching their full potential or having significant issues, Ms. Dennis recommended they reach out to the school administration.

Cornel Boudria, 115 Skinner Lane, Berlin, Connecticut, addressed the Board regarding the process for contracting for internet platforms. Superintendent Benigni stated the district does not contract out for internet platforms. The district chooses a system that best meets the needs of students and teachers, often times looking at and researching multiple systems and meeting with other school districts to question the support services and whether the system meets their needs.

In response to Mr. Boudria's questions if there is a listing of all the software used in the district and if the systems are reviewed annually, Superintendent Benigni stated, to his knowledge, there is not a listing but he can provide one, and yes, the systems are reviewed annually.

Add Item to the Agenda

Moved by Mr. Salina, seconded by Mr. Oakes, to add an item to New Business, Item E., for a discussion of athletic spectators at winter sporting events.

FAVOR: ALL

MOTION CARRIED: 8:0; including President Dennis

IV. CONSENT AGENDA

- A. Approval of Minutes
 - 1. Regular Meeting of January 11, 2021
 - 2. Regular Meeting of January 25, 2021

3. Special Meeting of January 13, 2021

B. Monthly Budget Report – Period ending January 31, 2021

Moved by Mr. Jenkins, seconded by Mr. Pruzin, to approve the consent agenda as presented.

FAVOR: ALL

MOTION CARRIED: 8:0; including President Dennis

V. NEW BUSINESS

A. Facilities Related Updates

Director of Business Operations Jeffrey Cugno reported the YMCA Day Care at the Berlin High School and the Berlin Transition Academy projects are moving forward. The lease has been put out for review.

Mr. Cugno reported the balancing study of the HVAC systems in the five schools was recently completed. A meeting is planned for later this week with a representative from the Town Manager's Office, the Board of Education and the Facilities Department to review the report and discuss next steps.

Mr. Cugno stated the report concerning the duct work at Berlin High School is complete and has been reviewed by the Committee. The Town Council has authorized the planning and design of the insulation and jacketing of the duct work. The preliminary estimate is a little over \$300,000, which will be funded from the Berlin High School project's excess funds.

Mr. Cugno stated the contracts for the design for the roof top unit at McGee Middle School and the fire alarm system replacement at Hubbard School are in place, and he anticipates that work to be put out to bid in the summer.

B. Open Choice Program Participation

Superintendent Brian Benigni reported on the current number of Open Choice Program (CHOICE) students in the Berlin schools and presented a recommendation to the Board regarding the level of participation for the 2021-2022 school year.

Superintendent Benigni provided Board members with a document reflecting, by grade, his recommended number of CHOICE students for 2021-2022. Superintendent Benigni reported the district currently has one hundred twenty-one (121) CHOICE students, and the projected maintained seats for 2021-2022 are one hundred twelve (112). Superintendent Benigni recommended the district accommodate an additional ten (10) students for the 2021-2022 school year and provided the Board with his recommendation for placement of these students within grade kindergarten.

Moved by Dr. Sassu, seconded by Mr. Jenkins, to approve the Superintendent's recommendation regarding the level of participation in the Open Choice Program for the 2021-2022 school year as presented.

Mr. Salina inquired if Superintendent Benigni is confident with these numbers and if the district traditionally loses students. Superintendent Benigni stated the district typically does lose a couple students; however, sometimes the numbers increase because siblings are already in the district. Mr. Salina appreciated offering the placements in kindergarten to allow students to have a smooth transition throughout their career in Berlin.

FAVOR: ALL
MOTION CARRIED: 8:0; including President Dennis

- C. Review and Possible Adoption of the Proposed Board of Education Budget for 2021-2022

The Board of Education has reviewed and discussed the Superintendent's Proposed Budget for 2021-2022. The Board met on January 25 to review the budget details, including information from presentations by central office administration. Earlier this evening, the Board held an informational meeting for the public so community members could provide input on the budget prior to approval. The Board of Education and the Board of Finance will hold a joint meeting on March 3 to discuss the adopted budget.

Moved by Mr. Salina, seconded by Mr. Pruzin, to adopt the Board of Education Operating Budget for 2021-2022 in the amount of \$48,534,130.

Mr. Jenkins stated he believes the proposed budget is a compromise and is fair but there still remains more work to be done in terms of facilities and education.

Ms. Sisti encouraged everyone to watch the video of the budget overview presentation to the public as it was well done and extremely simple and easy to understand.

Ms. Dennis noted the presentation she shared tonight with the public will be posted on the district's website in a PDF version.

Mr. Salina stated the proposed budget is fitting and meaningful given the current time, but there still remains much to be done, noting the science rooms at McGee, the bathrooms at the elementary schools, the air quality within all the schools, equipment and technology.

Mr. Oakes referenced the stacked bar graph and stated 1.13% of the overall 4.56% increase is above and beyond contractual obligations; however, when you remove tuition, supplies, textbooks and materials and transportation, the overall additional requests are .073% of the overall 4.56% increase.

Superintendent Benigni stated the proposed budget does not include COVID precautions, funds for remote teaching or the ability as last year to maneuver the CHOICE funds. Superintendent Benigni recognized the 4.56% increase is very much needed to preserve staff, programs and the educational system Berlin has come to expect.

Ms. Dennis clarified the requests for an interventionist and the substitute teachers.

FAVOR: ALL
MOTION CARRIED: 8:0; including President Dennis

- D. Discuss 2020-2021 School Calendar (last day of school) and Future Snow Days (remote learning and length of day)

The Board held a discussion concerning what the current school calendar will look like for the last day of school and discussed shortening the school year from 179 days to 177, based on the change in the statute for this school year, with the last day of school occurring on June 21, 2021 as long as there is not a need for another snow day or a day where school is canceled. Board members were provided with a copy of the 2020-2021 School Calendar. At the suggestion of Superintendent Benigni, this discussion was tabled to the first meeting in April because at that time winter weather will be over.

Mr. Jenkins requested Superintendent Benigni speak with staff to ensure shortening the school year does not compromise the quality of education for students overall.

Superintendent Benigni stated the discussion concerning future remote snow days for future school years is premature as the State Board of Education only approved remote snow days for the current school year. Ms. Dennis stated when the Board receives more information and direction, this item will be placed back on the agenda.

- E. Discussion of Athletic Spectators at Winter Sporting Events

Superintendent Benigni stated he has had conversations with Athletic Director and K-12 Physical Education Health Coordinator David Francalanga concerning spectators at winter sporting events for the Berlin Public Schools. The plan was for each athlete to have two tickets for home games and no spectators for the visiting team. Superintendent Benigni stated he reached out to Shipman & Goodwin and was advised the guidelines specifically state one parent per athlete, not two. The recommendation was not to provide two tickets for each athlete for each sporting event. If found to be in violation, the Board could be fined \$10,000, and if the Standard of Care is found to have been breached and someone was to become sick, liability would rest with the Board. Superintendent Benigni stated the Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference's (CIAC) recommendation is no spectators.

The Board held a discussion and provided their individual opinions. Superintendent Benigni stated he is not comfortable making a decision without the Board fully discussing the issue and providing him with direction and guidance. The Board will hold a Special Meeting on February 10, 2021, via Zoom, for a further discussion and a vote on this item.

VI. ADJOURNMENT

At 8:45 p.m., a motion was made by Dr. Sassu, seconded by Mr. Pruzin to adjourn.

FAVOR: ALL

MOTION CARRIED: 8:0; including President Dennis

Respectfully submitted,

Tracy Sisti, Secretary, Berlin Board of Education