

**BRISTOL WARREN REGIONAL SCHOOL COMMITTEE
VIRTUAL BUSINESS MEETING MINUTES**

Monday, March 8, 2021

The virtual meeting of the Bristol Warren Regional School Committee was held virtually on Monday, March 8, 2021, via Zoom Conferencing. Chairperson Marjorie McBride called the meeting to order at approximately 7:01 p.m.

Present: Marjorie McBride, Chairperson; Tara Thibaudeau, Vice-Chair; Sheila Ellsworth, Treasurer; Victor Cabral, Secretary; Nicky Piper, Carly Reich, Sarah Bullard, Erin Schofield, and Karen Cabral; Jonathan Brice, Ed.D., Superintendent; Diane Sanna, Ph.D., Assistant Superintendent; Thomas Wood, Director of Facilities; Rose Muller, Director of Technology; Mary Ann Carroll, Esq., District Solicitor; Edward Clarke, M.Ed., CAGS, Director of Student Support Services; Diana Campbell, Recording Secretary

Guests: Dr. Deb DiBiase, Principal of Mt Hope High School and Dr. Nicole Lyons, Director of College and Career Readiness

I. **Open Session**

_____ Chairperson McBride called the meeting to order at approximately 7:01 p.m.

II. **Opening Business**

_____ Chairperson McBride invited all present to join in the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag.

III. **Public Comment**

_____ No one requested Public Comment

IV. **Consent Agenda**

_____ All items under the Consent Agenda are considered to be routine by the School Committee and will be enacted by one motion. There will be no separate discussion of these items unless a Committee member requests, in which event the items will be withdrawn from the general order of business and considered in the normal sequence on the agenda. Consent Agenda items are received and filed with no discussion or further action taken.

A. Approval of the February 22, 2021 School Committee Meeting Minutes

B. Approval of the February 25, 2021 School Committee Meeting Minutes

MOTION: Ms. Thibaudeau made a motion to approve the Consent Agenda; seconded by Mr. Cabral. The Motion passed unanimously.

V. **Discussion/Action**

A. Approval of Chief Financial Officer Contract

This item was removed from the Agenda by Chairperson McBride.

**BRISTOL WARREN REGIONAL SCHOOL COMMITTEE
VIRTUAL BUSINESS MEETING MINUTES**

B. Contract for Recruiting Firm

Superintendent Brice recommended that the School Committee approve two contracts for recruiting services of Robert Half, Finance and Accounting, and Greysmith Companies.

A Motion to approve the two contracts was made by Ms. Ellsworth; seconded by Mr. Cabral.

Superintendent Brice explained that Robert Half is an international company with offices in Providence, RI and Greysmith Companies is a local company with an office in Bristol, RI. Both companies will support the District's efforts to recruit a Chief Financial Officer for the District, which the District has not been able to do on its own. He noted that each firm is offering a discount on their usual rates and that the District will only have to pay the company that recruits the successful candidate for the position. The District will continue to do their own recruiting, but Superintendent Brice feels that the recruiting firms have a wider reach and can help to attract more qualified candidates. There is no time limit on the contracts, which will continue to be in place until a candidate is found. Payment to the successful firm will be due 10 days after the start of employment.

The Motion was approved unanimously.

C. Suspension of School Committee's Policies DJ and DIC/GASB 54

Ms. Ellsworth made a Motion to amend the Procurement Policy DJ to read that all goods and services valued at \$1000 or more to be signed off by the School Committee Chair and the Treasurer, all other purchases valued at more than \$5000 to be signed off by the full School Committee, and all Capital expenditures to be on hold pending consultants' recommendation.

Ms. Schofield asked for a Point of Order on whether there should be a motion to suspend the policies as stated on the Agenda before an amendment to the motion. Chairperson McBride agreed that Ms. Schofield is correct and asked if Ms. Ellsworth would make the motion to suspend the Policies.

Ms. Ellsworth made a Motion to suspend School Committee Policies DJ - Procurement and DIC/GASB 54 - Spending Policy and Minimum Fund Balance. Ms. Thibaudeau seconded the motion.

Discussion: School Committee members Ms. Reich and Ms. Schofield asked for background on the purpose for suspending the policies. Ms. Reich stated that suspending the policies appeared to be a way to micromanage the administration because the School Committee doesn't trust the Administration to do its job. Ms. Schofield asked for further information on who is recommending the suspension, if

**BRISTOL WARREN REGIONAL SCHOOL COMMITTEE
VIRTUAL BUSINESS MEETING MINUTES**

there were reasons for the suspension that she doesn't know, and for how long the suspension will last.

Mr. Cabral stated that he asked for the item to be placed on the Agenda because he had a lot of inquiries from the public about why there is a deficit, what the School Committee is doing to alleviate the deficit, and the controls the School Committee has over the money being spent. Mr. Cabral stated that he thinks it's ok to have amounts in the policy, as suggested by Ms. Ellsworth, as long as there are members of the School Committee who are overseeing the spending. Ms. Schofield explained that she just wanted to know the source of the item on the agenda.

Ms. Ellsworth explained that while going through the budget process with the consultants, she realized that there were items that the Budget Committee were not made aware of until the invoices were presented for payment, indicating that the Policies may not have been followed properly. This is an effort to put in more constraints and to provide the information to the School Committee. She explained that a temporary spending freeze was put in place, but it doesn't seem to work as expected: providing information to the Committee on what was being spent and how the expenditures aligned with policy.

Ms. Schofield asked if the oversight is something that can be done by the consultants, Ms. Brennan and Ms. King, instead of the members of the School Committee. Ms. Ellsworth explained that the consultants were brought in to oversee the financial process, and are not in place to do the day-to-day financials. She expects this amended policy to be in place until a new CFO is hired.

Superintendent Brice acknowledged that some members of the School Committee have concerns about certain invoices and, that in some cases, that the procurement rules were not followed. He reminded the School Committee that from March 2020 to November 2021, the School Committee had given him emergency authority to act in the best interests of the District. He made some decisions that needed to be made in the best interests of the District.

Superintendent Brice pointed out that Ms. Brennan and Ms. King have been very helpful in helping his office to understand some things that were not known and that they are projecting an FY21 surplus of several hundred thousands of dollars and that the District has a clean audit report from FY20. He stated that it's fine to be taking this action in order to have oversight of what's going on with the Budget, but not if its purpose is to cast aspersions implicating that something wrong was done.

Chairperson McBride stated that the District's finances are a group effort where everyone participates, especially since the District doesn't have a CFO. Once a CFO is hired, Superintendent Brice and the new CFO can work together to put into place processes to keep the Committee informed and within the approved Budget.

**BRISTOL WARREN REGIONAL SCHOOL COMMITTEE
VIRTUAL BUSINESS MEETING MINUTES**

Ms. Bullard stated that she feels that the proposed action seems to reflect the Committee's level of trust in Superintendent Brice. She wondered why two members of the Committee will have responsibility to make financial decisions, even though they may not have any educational or financial credentials. She would like to better understand what the big problems and concerns are. She's not sure why all of a sudden the School Committee wants to be limiting the Superintendent in a way that seems to be extreme and unnecessary. She'd like to see paper proof of some of the issues.

Ms. Reich agreed, stating that \$1000, (the amount proposed that the Superintendent can spend without approval from members of the School Committee) is very small compared to the entire size of the Budget. She feels that it doesn't seem right to put the responsibility to approve this level on the shoulders of two non-educators. She feels like all of the blame for the deficits is being put on the shoulders of the Superintendent, which she does not agree with.

Chairperson McBride stated that she is fully behind the Superintendent. She believes that everyone has to stay within their Budgets. This action is not a reflection of what we've done, but on where we are and what needs to be done going forward. This gives strength to the fact that the District has to live within its budget.

Ms. Piper agrees with Chairperson McBride that we are all on a team and are responsible for managing a budget together, but the message of this motion seems to be the opposite of that. She believes that this is not the way to send the message that we are a team.

Assistant Superintendent Sanna pointed out that changing the two policies will require that other policies be altered to put related policies in alignment.

Ms. Bullard wanted to know why this item wasn't brought to the Policy Committee. Chairperson McBride stated that the item was placed on the agenda to suspend the policy not to amend it, which could be done by the School Committee. She is hoping that we can go back to the Policy once a CFO is in place.

Ms. Bullard wanted to know what kind of operational impact this decision will have on the day-to-day operations. Superintendent Brice pointed out that currently there is a freeze on spending, but if something needs to be purchased, there is a strict protocol for requests to be approved at many levels before it gets to his office. He also pointed out that there is a focus on spending funds from restricted, Federal and Title grants, before using funds from the operational budget. He assured Ms. Bullard that regardless of the decision, he will adapt to do whatever needs to be done to get the materials in the classroom that are needed.

Ms. Schofield asked if Superintendent Brice currently runs purchases by Ms. Brennan as part of the process. She sees that this decision would place the School Committee in the

**BRISTOL WARREN REGIONAL SCHOOL COMMITTEE
VIRTUAL BUSINESS MEETING MINUTES**

role of watchdog and she would feel more comfortable allowing staff that are in place to fulfill that role. Superintendent Brice responded that since Ms. King and Ms. Brennan are so busy, he would not bother them with everyday small purchases or hiring.

Ms. Ellsworth pointed out that Ms. King was brought into the District to reconcile Actuals and to help with the FY22 Budget, including making recommendations on processes and staffing levels (in the Financial Department). As a result, the School Committee is in the process of putting protocols in place to help with oversight prior to a CFO being hired.

Ms. Thibaudeau recognizes that it's difficult to manage a budget when there isn't a CFO in place. She feels that this motion will give the School Committee strength.

Before Chairperson McBride called the motion to a vote, she asked if Ms. Ellsworth wanted to make an amendment.

Attorney Carroll advised Ms. Ellsworth to withdraw the motion to suspend the policy, which she and Tara, who was the 2nd on the motion, did.

Ms. Ellsworth then made a motion to amend the Procurement Policy DJ to change it to be that "...until a CFO is hired to the District, all goods and services of \$1000 up to \$5000, be signed off by the Chair and the Treasurer, and all purchases over \$5000 will need to be signed off by the full School Committee. Additionally, all Capital expenditures will be on hold, pending the Consultant's recommendation. A Second made by Ms. Thibaudeau.

Chairperson McBride called for a roll call vote on the Motion. The motion passed by a 5-4 vote, with Ms. Schofield, Ms. Bullard, Ms. Reich, and Ms. Piper voting in dissent.

D. Technology Presentation

Ms. Muller, Director of Technology, presented a Technology Report to the School Committee. Superintendent Brice pointed out that Instructional Technology is a necessary part of today's educational processes. Because technology continues to evolve we have a responsibility to put technology in the hands of teachers/students to ensure that they are successful. He added that there is also a need to keep the technology in the district safe from outside attacks on the system.

Ms. Muller presented the Technology report. She stated that the purpose of technology in the schools is to provide current, cost effective, and quality technological tools and services in support of teaching, learning and operational excellence.

Technology provides tools, platforms and programs to support education. It also provides data on student assessment and resources for enrichment and intervention.

**BRISTOL WARREN REGIONAL SCHOOL COMMITTEE
VIRTUAL BUSINESS MEETING MINUTES**

Ms. Muller reviewed the types, the amount, and the age of the current technology devices and peripherals in the District. She then reviewed the Teaching and Learning Software being used in the District classrooms, the Operational Software used to manage the District's data and IT management and support, and the current network infrastructure.

She presented the projected network improvements with their estimated costs (total and after E-Rate Discount) over the next 5 years (until 2026). She explained how the Federal E-Rate Program works and that Bristol Warren receives a 50% discount for Internet access, Category 1 Equipment, and Special Construction.

On staffing, Ms. Muller provided information on the current IT staff and how it compares to other RI Districts.

She concluded by explaining the challenges to her efforts to advance and sustain academic technology and a technology infrastructure in BWRSD and her goals for policies in 2021/2022: data governance, a written information security program, and at-home network provisions.

Ms. Reich noted that having all the technology in place really helped to transition to at-home learning at the start of the Covid-19 crisis. She noted that the District did not have the same struggles as other schools, and acknowledged that this was due in large part to Ms. Muller and her staff, and the teachers and staff transitioned to its use in a perceived seamless way. Superintendent Brice agreed that Ms. Muller and her staff deserved kudos for their work in supporting the transition to distance learning. Assistant Superintendent Sanna noted that when Ms. Muller came to the district she had a vision and that vision helped in allowing the District to transition to distance learning when it was necessary.

Ms. Piper asked if there is state-level guidance on the technology networks, data, privacy, and security. Ms. Muller stated that there is no formal guidance, but there are groups of educators in place who share and collaborate to evaluate different applications before purchasing them. Superintendent Brice also noted that there are some organizations, such as the Trust, that does a lot of work on network and internet security, providing recommendations to the Districts, and the RI Army National Guard that oversees internet security for government agencies in the State. These resources and our own diligence helped to keep our District's IT infrastructure safe and security.

Ms. Ellsworth asked about the difference between the amount of Chromebooks reported in the presentation and the number that was listed on the lease agreement for the Chromebooks. Ms. Muller explained that 17 devices were returned because there were issues with them, but she expects them to be replaced. She pointed out that Year 5 Chromebooks will be collected and harvested for parts to maintain the newer models. Ms. Ellsworth asked if the Chromebooks are tracked. Ms. Muller stated that there is a log

BRISTOL WARREN REGIONAL SCHOOL COMMITTEE VIRTUAL BUSINESS MEETING MINUTES

to track which Chromebooks are considered end-of-life and which are actually in use. Superintendent Brice explained that there is a form with the information on each of the Chromebooks.

Ms. Ellsworth asked about other classroom technology. Ms. Muller stated that she can provide additional information on that equipment, including the Smartboards, which are not being used to their fullest capability due to compatibility issues with Chromebooks.. The District did purchase Document cameras to support teachers who need to project information from the Chromebooks so the whole classroom can see.

Ms. Ellsworth asked about some of the Vendor contracts, wanting to make sure that the School Committee gets to see the Vendor contracts as they expire and that they are included in the Budget. She noted other instances where there may be differences from the Budget and what is reported. She noted that it's important to have accurate data to make sure that the District has the funds it needs for everything needed.

Chairperson McBride commended Ms. Muller on her very complete report on the District's technology.

Mr. Cabral feels that it's important that purchases of computer equipment be spread out over several years, instead of purchasing (leasing) so many in a single year. Superintendent Brice agreed and stated that that's the goal.

Ms.Thibaudeau asked about the cost for OSHEAN, the internet service provider for the District. Ms. Muller stated that it is an E-Rate item. She budgets for the full cost and when all the funds are reimbursed, she adjusts the budget.

Ms. Thibaudeau asked for job descriptions of the IT staff and a breakdown of the support tickets for this year, by school. She wanted to know if some equipment is serviced in-house and which equipment is serviced through outside contractors. Ms. Muller responded that some items are under warranty and are sent out (or the contractor sends someone to the District) to be fixed. Additionally Ms. Thibaudeau asked for information on district-paid software applications and the numbers of copiers in each school.

Ms. Thibaudeau asked about the recommended screen-time levels for students at different ages. Due to the pandemic, students are spending more time on computers because it's nearly impossible to not be on the screen either for teacher-led instruction or completing assignments. Superintendent Brice noted that the primary instrument of instruction is still the classroom teacher.

Ms. Thibaudeau asked about equipment for special needs students and an inventory of equipment used by specialized classes like the radio classroom. Superintendent Brice responded that this type of information is on the individual school budgets, not part of Ms. Muller's budget.

**BRISTOL WARREN REGIONAL SCHOOL COMMITTEE
VIRTUAL BUSINESS MEETING MINUTES**

Ms. Schofield noted that teaching with technology is important to the futures of our students. She noted that Ms. Muller purchased the Chromebooks “in the nick of time” when everyone was looking to purchase them to deal with the pandemic and at-home learning. This ensured that the District was first on the vendor’s list and that the equipment could be delivered when needed, instead of being put on a waiting list like other Districts.

Chairperson McBride thanked Ms. Muller for her presentation and asked her to extend her and the School Committee’s appreciation for their efforts.

E. Career and Technology Education Presentation

Due to the lateness at this point in the meeting, the CTE presentation was postponed to the next School Committee meeting, March 29, 2021. Chairperson McBride felt that the presentation is very important to the community, and she wants to make sure that it’s given the time and attention that it deserves.

Before closing, Superintendent Brice announced that there will be a Strategic Planning meeting link on the District web page and there will also be a RIDE presentation on Wednesday on the State funding formula.

VI. Adjournment - 9:37 p.m.

MOTION: There being no more business to discuss, a motion was made by Mrs. Piper to adjourn the meeting at 9:37 p.m.; seconded by Ms. Reich.

The motion passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Victor Cabral, Secretary
/dbc