

**CITY OF BRIDGEPORT
EDUCATION AND SOCIAL SERVICES
COMMITTEE
REGULAR MEETING
JUNE 8, 2022**

This meeting was conducted by Zoom/Teleconference.

ATTENDANCE: Jorge Cruz, Co-chair; Aikeem Boyd, Co-chair; Michelle Lyons, Michele Small, Frederick Hodges (6:10 p.m.); Maria Pereira (6:22 p.m.)

OTHERS: Council Member(s): S. Burns, E. Newton & M. Valle (6:30 p.m.); Thomas Gaudett, Mayor’s Office; State Rep. Antonio Felipe; Marc Donald; Executive Director of RYASAP; Isolina DeJesus, Director of Central Grants Office; Bridgeport Police Lieutenant Paul Grech, BOE Board Member Joseph Sokolovich, BOE Board Member Albert Benejan, Zoom user; iPhone-DG7TL75397, iPhone-DNPH80EH0DXT; 203-414-0712

CALL TO ORDER

Co-chair Cruz called the meeting to order at 6:06 p.m. A quorum was present.

Council Member Cruz announced that Superintendent Testani could not attend the meeting due to a conflict in his schedule.

APPROVAL OF COMMITTEE MINUTES

• **Minutes of May 11, 2022 (Regular Meeting).**

**** COUNCIL MEMBER BOYD MOVED THE MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MAY 11, 2022 MEETING.**

**** COUNCIL MEMBER LYONS SECONDED.**

**** THE MOTION TO APPROVE THE MINUTES OF THE REGULAR MAY 11, 2022 MEETING AS SUBMITTED PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

Informational Session with Michael Testani, Superintendent of Schools; State Representative Antonio Felipe; Isolina DeJesus, Director of Central Grants Office; School Board members John Weldon, Albert Benejan, Bobbie Brown, Joseph Sokolovich and Lieutenant Paul Grech regarding the possibility of increasing the School Resource Officers.

Informational Session with Marc Donald, Executive Director of RYASAP regarding the possibility of increasing the School Resource Officers.

Council Member Hodges joined the meeting at 6:10 p.m.

BOE Member Sokolovich said that Lt. Grech had been great and while BOE Member Sokolovich would like to have more security, he said that when police officers are in the school buildings, more black and brown students are arrested. This is how the school to prison pipeline works. He said that they would have to clearly define the parameters because it is a delicate balance.

Council Member Cruz said that while he understands this, he reminded everyone about the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, which is only right up the road. The Council Members have to have this conversation and he must speak up. They cannot leave it all the to School Board and the Police Department.

BOE Member Sokolovich said that he was expressing his own opinions, not that of the Board.

State Representative Felipe said that he was also torn, but was leaning towards not having the SROs at the schools. He said that the SROs don't receive additional training, so they are just armed security guards. When the SROs are on site, the students were more likely to be arrested, particularly the black and brown students. Putting the students in the Justice system is not a good thing. Often it is the 17 year olds who are trying to act like adults that get into trouble. He added that according to a study, there were more assaults in schools with SROs than other schools that did not have SROs. This is a high price to pay.

State Representative Felipe said SROs need additional training because they are not effective in their current form.

Council Member Cruz asked what they could do to create safety for the students.

BOE Member Benejan said that the situation was so tense, that it was not a good idea to have the officers there. People do not trust anyone right now. When people go into the schools, they are asked why they are there. He pointed out that bullets do not have names on them. However, if something happens in the school, the Board Members will be blamed. The budget is tight and the City doesn't have enough police officers. As a leader for the School District they have to decide what to do.

Mr. Donald said he was a former school principal in the Bronx. He said that he had never had any SROs in his school. He said that he did not want to give up the power and control over the building. He said that during his career, he had also worked with some of the best SROs on the planet.

He pointed out when the SROs were removed from the schools, some of the residents had no idea they had left. He said that de-escalation often was helpful. He would prefer to have the SROs respond rather than be stationed on site.

Council Member Cruz said while SROs have a negative image, he wanted to know what the alternative was to making the schools safe.

Council Member Lyons then related the experiences that her grandson, who is a minority, experienced when he attended a school where there was a State Trooper on site. She reminded everyone that all the studies don't matter when an event occurs. She said that she felt safer as a grandparent knowing that her grandson had a Trooper on site at his school.

Council Member Lyons said that they were making the students feel that they weren't safe with anyone, and they are afraid of people in authority. The students should not think that when they see an officer, they are going to end up in jail. This is her personal opinion.

Lt. Grech said about 10 years ago, the SROs were removed from the schools. Back then they were involved in administrative issues, which are really the teacher's responsibility. The SROs do receive special training. He reminded people that the schools call 9-1-1 when there were problems. They actually don't have a school to prison pipeline and people are not aware of what they have done in Bridgeport. The students are not afraid of the SROs and they refer students with problems to the Juvenile Review Board.

Lt. Grech said that in Bridgeport, no school arrests are made unless a Police Supervisor is there. They try to get to the bottom of the issues when a fight occurs. There are 12 SROs, and they visit the schools randomly. They get to know the students and have these officers working the football games, basketball games and other sports events. He said that they don't arrest a juvenile for a minor violations. They reach out to as many resources as they can to help to build a positive relationship. The common goal is keeping the students safe and not getting involved in administration. If teachers and students don't feel safe, it impacts the learning. He said that police should not be involved in administrative issues. When the school has to call 9-1-1, an SRO should be the one responding.

Council Member Cruz said that he had invited Ms. DeJesus because it takes money to provide resources. He asked her if there were grants that the City could be applying for.

Ms. DeJesus said that the Department of Justice have some grant funding available, but it is a matching funding grant. Also they have specific requirements. She said that she would share the grant requirements so that the Council Members would know what the requirements are.

Council Member Pereira joined the meeting at 6:22 p.m.

Council Member Pereira said that she apologized for being late and wished to have this noted in the record.

Council Member Cruz noted Council Member Valle had joined the meeting earlier.

Council Member Pereira stated that she was the School Board Member who knows the most about the SROs regarding when they were there, how many there were and why they were eliminated.

First of all, after Columbine, 10,000 SROs were hired nationally. However, they did not stop any mass school shootings. But they significantly increased the number of students who entered the school to prison pipeline. There were 14 SROs budgeted in 2013. When Council Member Pereira returned to the BOE in December 2015, there were only five SROs left. As they had been retiring, then Superintendent Vallas and then Sgt. Grech were replacing them with security guards without the Board's knowledge or permission because security guards were cheaper. There was no concern at that time about the schools needing SROs.

In 2016, the BOE had the largest budget deficit and the Mayor and City Council appropriated zero. There were \$16 million dollars in budget cuts made to balance the budget. The remaining 5 SROs were being 100% paid by the BOE. Police Chief Gaudette, Police Chief Perez and then Sgt. Grech were repeatedly removing the Board's SROs from the schools to deal with traffic accidents, domestic violence calls and other events.

After the BOE issued a formal letter repeatedly telling the Police Department to stop doing this as the SROs were school employees funded by the BOE, they refused to do so. When the \$16 million dollar budget cuts were made, those five SROs were eliminated because they cost \$500,000 a year. The morning that the budget cuts were made, Council Member Pereira stated she had walked into 999 Broad Street and saw an SRO seated at the desk, greeting visitors.

Council Member Pereira said that there was a comprehensive study done at Harding High School by one of the most respected educators in the country. The major finding from the study indicate that there could be 20 police officers at Harding High School and a zillion security guards, but it would not change the environment. The number one thing that the students wanted was adults that they could trust and believe in. Putting security guards and SROs in that school would not make one bit of difference. They did not trust the adults in that building.

The data is clear. The exact same two schools with the same demographics but if one has an SRO near the school, there will be a sharp increase in the number of predominately Hispanic students followed by black students that enter the school to prison pipeline.

Council Member Pereira said that she was totally opposed to this and was happy to see that the NAACP was also against this. They have never stopped a single mass school shooting, not one time.

Council Member Cruz said that it was a hot topic, but he was concerned about students and teachers being shot and killed. He said that he wanted to know how the City could help protect the schools.

Council Member Newton said the issue was there were people who were going into schools or churches and killing people. He said that he agreed that the SROs were trained on de-escalation because they are police officers and there were students who ended up with prison records. However, the City and the Schools need to be pro-active. He added that when the SROs became disciplinarians, that is when the school to prison pipeline happened.

Council Member Newton said that Steve Nelson was an SRO and never made any arrests and the kids trusted him. He added that the SROs are there to make sure the schools are safe.

Council Member Burns thanked Council Member Cruz for the meeting and said that it was important to hear other viewpoints. He said that three recent school shootings in Florida, Texas and Maryland, all had armed guards that failed to stop the shootings.

Council Member Burns said that the State had reacted to Sandy Hook by passing some more laws, such as prohibiting large magazines. Council Member Burns said that he was not in favor of having the SROs in the schools. He said that Mr. Donald was helping the students see that there were other paths through life without violence.

Council Member Cruz said that Ms. DeJesus had sent him some information about violence in the schools and the grant requirements.

Council Member Valle said that the recent shootings were a tragedy. She worked for the BOE for 34 years and saw things that she was not happy with during that time. When a student acts up in the hallway, the police officer had been trained to arrest the students. She would like to see staff that the students could talk to. She said that an SRO did not stop the 9 year old who killed himself. She said that they should have social workers or psychologists that could talk to the students.

Council Member Cruz asked State Representative Felipe whether there was State funding for security. State Representative Felipe said that he and Council Member Burns could talk to another State Representative about this, but it was time to look at social workers. The facts are clear that SROs have not worked in the schools. He said that the data is not clear regarding what Lt. Grech was claiming.

He said that he was not in favor of having SROs in the schools because when a shooter is in a school, it doesn't matter who is standing in front of him. He added that the issue was mental health and access to weapons. However, it is important to make sure that a black market doesn't spring up in their back yards. The SROs are different than school security.

Council Member Cruz said that he works in the mental health field. He said that mental health was not the entire problem. Accessibility to weapons are also part of the problem.

Council Member Hodges said that he would like to know how many counsellors are available in the schools. He asked if they could train some people in the community to help with security, like the previous hall monitors. He said that Kenny Jackson had an effective program at Central and Harding. It is time to start thinking outside the box. There are people who know how to de-escalate and the City should be using them. There's been a lot of data presented, but they need solutions.

Mr. Donald said that he had collaborated with the schools. He then gave a brief overview of a program called Credible Messengers. He said that he wanted to do better with the Juvenile

Review Board. He listed a number of schools that his program is working with. They are there to help the kids and their families. They are trying to increase their presence so that there is more mediation and possibly restitution.

There is a mental health component, which includes gun violence, since over half of the suicides involve firearms.

Anyone that is interested in the training should contact him. He said that he had found out that hiring people with lived experience was very valuable. Council Member Cruz said that people tend to gravitate to those with lived experiences. Mr. Donald said that he had to leave due to family obligations but would be happy to continue the conversation at another time.

BOE Member Benejan said that education starts at home. That is where the responsibility starts. Secondly they are trying to do the best they can do. The security needs more training to monitor the safety of the students. Last week, the BOE was short sixteen security guards for the schools. If something had happened, they would not have been able to cover the situation. By the time they called 9-1-1 and the police show up, it's more than 10 minutes. Something like that happened at Central High School last year. He said that he could send the Committee the details of that incident. It is important to work together as a team and train the guards the way they should be. This is a process and a protocol. He said that he believed that they could do this and move forward.

Council Member Cruz encouraged the Committee members to have a meeting with the BOE members to continue this conversation. It is not a one stop conversation.

Council Member Newton said that he would like to echo what Council Member Hodges said. He said that Mr. Jackson did an excellent job at Harding. They had staff that people respected. Unfortunately, they don't have that today. There were complaints from a Board Member that there was a felon in the school, however the felons know the streets, the students and the parents and know the community.

Council Member Newton suggested that the Board Members invite the Council Members to tour various schools so that they can get to know the schools they represent. He said that he had worked hard to get the program in the schools, but it was shot down because the individuals were felons.

Council Member Cruz repeated that they would continue the conversation. He encouraged the Board Members and the Committee members to have open minds. They cannot jeopardize the students or the staff by stereo typing. People like Kenny Jackson or Council Member Hodges and others know the kids and the community. They can relate with their experiences.

Council Member Pereira said that she had served on the BOE for 8 years and thoroughly understands the State laws involving schools. State laws do not allow teachers, guidance counsellors, social workers or custodians who are convicted felons in the schools. Teachers who are convicted of a felony after they have received their certification will lose their certification.

Council Member Pereira said that she was the person who brought the program to the attention of then Superintendent Johnson. The principal at Harding went ahead with the program without notifying the Superintendent. Since Superintendent Johnson knew the law, she immediately stopped the program.

The issue is not having people with life experiences coming in from the community to hold assemblies, but these students were being left in classrooms un-supervised with these mentors. This places the District at great liability if something happened. She said that she did not have a problem with people with different life experiences coming in to address the students, but it is against the law to leave the students alone with a convicted felon. If anyone has an issue with this, they should take it up with the Connecticut legislature. She claimed that she agreed with it. Superintendent Johnson knew it was a violation of the law.

Council Member Hodges said that they need to look around the country to see what other states are doing. He said that when they were in Dunbar School, they were never left alone with the students. There was a school psychologist who wrote letters about this program and the school principal approve the program.

Council Member Hodges said that his point was the effectiveness of the program. He said that maybe they needed to think about changing the law.

Council Member Hodges said that some of the issues that they are dealing with in Bridgeport are centered on bullying rather than gun violence but they need to look at other ways to handle this.

State Representative Felipe said that he partially agreed with Council Member Pereira, the problem is a catch all. Having violent offenders working with the student is wrong, but others who have done things in their youth have changed and mentored students since then.

Council Member Cruz said that he would like to continue this conversation. He thanked everyone who attended.

ADJOURNMENT

**** COUNCIL MEMBER LYONS MOVED TO ADJOURN.**

**** COUNCIL MEMBER BOYD SECONDED.**

**** THE MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.**

The meeting adjourned at 7:31 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Telesco Secretarial Services

City of Bridgeport
Education and Social Services
Regular Meeting
June 8, 2022