

**BERLIN BOARD OF EDUCATION**  
**January 12, 2022**  
**MINUTES**  
**SPECIAL MEETING**

Attendance: Julia Dennis  
Melissa Gibbons  
Jaymee Miller – Arrived 6:55 p.m.; Departed 7:12 p.m.  
Gina Nappi  
Timothy Oakes - Absent  
Adam Salina  
Kari Sassu, Ph.D.  
Tracy Sisti  
Matthew Tencza - Absent  
Student Representatives: Lindsey Leary - Absent  
Samantha Negrao - Absent

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; Supervisor of Special Education – Elementary Michelle Zeuschner; Supervisor of Special Education – Secondary Cindy Martin; Director of Literacy and Social Studies Laurie Gjerpen; Director of Mathematics and Science Kara Watson; Principal of Berlin High School Eileen Eustis; and Athletic Director and K-12 Physical Education Health Coordinator David Francalangia.

**I. CALL TO ORDER**

Pledge of Allegiance

Ms. Dennis called the meeting to order at 6:09 p.m. in the Berlin High School Auditorium at 139 Patterson Way, Berlin, Connecticut. The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

**Moved by Ms. Sisti, seconded by Dr. Sassu, to remove Item C. from the Agenda as it was discussed at our last meeting.**

**FAVOR: ALL**

**MOTION CARRIED: 6:0; including President Dennis**

**II. 2022-2023 PROPOSED BUDGET PRESENTATIONS**

A. Athletics – Additional Information

Athletic Director and K-12 Physical Education Health Coordinator David Francalangia provided further information from last night's presentation regarding the Athletic Budget.

Berlin Athletic Values – BHS & McGee – Based on Board of Education Values: Mr. Francalangia stated the student-athletes' academic achievement will meet or exceed the level of the rest of the student body; the Athletic Department will produce student-athletes and coaches who exemplify good sportsmanship, integrity, respect for others, commitment and dedication to goals and the ability to work as a valued member of a team; and the Athletic Department will produce student-athletes and coaches who aspire and work toward the highest possible competitive standards, while maintaining competitive and personal integrity.

Equipment/Fees/Ice Hockey/Staff: Included in the Budget, pursuant to the Berlin High School Hockey agreement with the Board of Education, for the first time, is a line item for \$10,000; an increase of \$300

for the trainer contract; and the repair and maintenance/reconditioning of lacrosse helmets. Mr. Francalanga stated there is no staff or added stipend additions at Berlin High School and McGee Middle School; equipment line items remain the same as last year; and tournament line items remain the same as last year.

Uniforms/Transportation/Facility: Included in the Athletics Budget are uniforms for Berlin High School tennis, golf, boys soccer, indoor track, girls tennis, girls swimming (deck coats) per cycle; uniforms for boys and girls basketball, per cycle, at McGee Middle School; the Officials' Budget has a slight total increase of \$2,200 for the 2022-2023 year due to contracts with all officiating boards; and transportation has a slight 3% increase pursuant to the district's contract with New Britain Transportation. Mr. Francalanga stated, moving forward, the district could save money with a new turf field project behind Berlin High School.

Building Operations/Instruction: Reinstate a line item as a necessity for improvement and growth of the staff for CAAD, CIAC, NIAAA meetings and conferences for the Athletic Department coaching staff; maintain current budget of instruction materials (HUDL), non-instructional materials, contracted medical services; and first aid supplies and sports awards at Berlin High School.

## B. Special Education Budget

Director of Pupil Personnel Services Linda Holian, along with Supervisor of Special Education – Secondary Cindy Martin and Supervisor of Special Education – Elementary Dr. Michelle Zeuschner, presented the 2022-2023 Special Education Budget. Ms. Holian responded to questions from the Board concerning the presentation. Board members were provided with a copy of the presentation. Ms. Holian stated the presentation will provide Board members with an overview of Special Education trends state-wide as well as within Berlin, expenses and funding sources that help to offset the general education budget. The Special Education Budget includes students serviced both in the Berlin school district as well as out-of-district, magnet schools, Southington Vo-Ag School and St. Paul's School. Ms. Holian acknowledged Lora Curtis, Ashley Dorsey, Doreen Guy, John Richards, JoAnn Walicki, Sue McNally, Cindy Martin and Dr. Michelle Zeuschner for their help in creating tonight's budget presentation.

Special Education Trend Data in Connecticut: The number of students with special needs continues to increase as overall student enrollment decreases. Included in Ms. Holian's presentation was the State of Connecticut K-12 Special Education Prevalence Rate for Connecticut and Berlin for the past ten years, which shows the prevalence rate of Special Education continues to increase while overall numbers of enrollment decrease. The state average is 15.90%, and Berlin's average is 15.20%.

Special Education and 504 Data in the Schools Today: Included in Ms. Holian's presentation was the number of students eligible to receive accommodations under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (ADA) as of October 1, 2021. Ms. Holian stated, as of today, 438 students are receiving Special Education Services, and for the first time in six years, that number has actually decreased. Last year, the school year ended with 445 students. This year, the district has seen a large group of students move out of district. Ms. Holian stated magnet school numbers increased by two students and hospitalizations and homebound tutoring has been decreasing since 2015 and 2017, mainly due to the Effective School Solutions Program. Ms. Holian stated this year she is starting to see an increase for requests for

homebound tutoring due to the social emotional impact from the COVID pandemic and also for some students with autoimmune disorders.

Ms. Holian shared the graph entitled Student by Primary Exceptionality and in order to be eligible for Special Education services, students must be identified as having one of the eleven (11) disabilities referenced on the graph.

As of July 1, 2021 through January 4, 2022 Unexpected Costs: Ms. Holian stated the district has out-placed two students since July 1, 2021. These two students were not in the budget. Currently, the district is in the process of bringing one student back from an out-of-district placement and another out-of-district student has moved to another town. There is a possible student moving into the district who currently attends an out-of-district program (\$105,000), which was not budgeted for, and there is another out-of-district placement pending (\$150,000) for this school year. Ms. Holian stated there have been twenty-five (25) new referrals this current school year: eleven (11) have been found eligible for Special Education services; six (6) have not; and eight (8) students are still in the process of being evaluated.

Special Education Drivers 2022-2023: Certified Salaries, Non-Certified salaries and Contracted Services are major drivers. Ms. Holian stated the Pupil Personnel Service Department consists of three administrators, Special Education teachers, paraprofessionals, registered behavior technicians, a Speech and Language pathologist; an occupation therapist, a physical therapist, social workers, a school psychologist, an assisted technology specialist, a BCBA and a BCABA. All staff is assigned to help with testing and PPTs, if needed, at St. Paul's School, the magnet schools and any students that are out-placed. Ms. Holian stated transportation is for preschool students, students that attend out-of-district and students in district who require Special Education transportation. Ms. Holian stated the district owns its vans, and New Britain Transportation maintains the vans and hires the drivers.

Special Education Department Operational Budget: Ms. Holian stated there is a bit of an increase in supplies and field trips. Many of the supplies that are purchased by the district's occupation therapist are used for classroom purposes for all students. Ms. Holian stated field trips have been put on hold over the past few years due to COVID and programs at each school use field trips to teach the generalization of skills in student IEPs.

Contracted services include psychiatric evaluations; neuropsychological evaluations; independent evaluations with consultants that can range anywhere from \$3,000 to \$10,000 per evaluation; Effective School Solutions Program; legal fees; interpreters; and hearing impaired services from CREC.

Ms. Holian stated Summer School, also a big line item in the Operational Budget, includes transportation and salaries for staff for ESY and PMT training.

Special Education Trend Report – Berlin, CT: Ms. Holian stated this is one of the biggest driving forces in the Special Education Budget. This is the tuition for students that need to be educated in another school because their needs cannot be met within the district.

Tuition Students: Mr. Holian provided a breakdown of the tuitions, which run from \$57,000 to \$283,000 depending upon placement.

The Excess Cost grant is Connecticut's method for paying extraordinary Special Education costs. The Excess Cost grant reimburses districts when expenditures for educating a Special Education student are 4.5 times greater than the district's spending per pupil. Berlin's per pupil expenditure is \$19,158 x 4.5 or \$86,212 (figure given by the State). Reimbursement by the State is at 70%

Out of District Berlin/CHOICE Students: Ms. Holian provided a breakdown of students that are currently out-placed, participating in the CHOICE program. She stated Berlin pays these tuitions up front and then Hartford reimburses the district for everything over the \$8,000 per student the district receives from the CHOICE Program.

Central Connecticut Transition Academy: Ms. Holian stated the rent line item was kept in as it is pending the YMCA Daycare located at McGee Middle School. Ms. Holian stated, if this program was not at the YMCA, the district would be responsible for all these expenses with the exception of utilities. Ms. Holian stated currently fourteen (14) Berlin students and four (4) Cromwell students are attending. Next year, the recommendation is for seventeen (17) Berlin students and nine (9) Cromwell students. All expenses for the Central Connecticut Transition Academy are split 50/50 between Berlin and Cromwell.

Additional Special Education Funding Sources: Currently, 4.6 certified staff and 10 FTE paraprofessional positions are partially funded through the IDEA Part B, Section 611 grant. One FTE paraprofessional is funded through the IDEA 619 grant. Ms. Holian stated \$5,479.98 is allocated for students at St. Paul's School for Special Education services.

Ms. Holian stated currently, the Medicaid Program funds one full time occupational therapist and provides professional development for related service providers as occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech and language pathologists and social workers require continuing education units to keep their licenses.

Included in the presentation was the additional CHOICE reimbursement. Currently, three students receive Special Education over the \$8,000 the district receives from the CHOICE program. Ms. Holian stated this year Berlin is projected to be reimbursed \$79,378.

Fiscal Year 2022 - ESSER II Special Education Recovery Activities: Included in Ms. Holian's presentation was the allocation of these funds. Ms. Holian stated the Dyslexia Recovery Grant monies (\$11,700) need to be used for tutoring services for students identified with dyslexia. The district also received a bonus population recovery grant (\$25,000), which is used for ADA bathroom updates; a Special Education Recovery Grant (\$40,000), which is used for Person Centered Training-Futures Planning; STAR 360, a project monitoring tool for reading and writing; Dyslexia Training for staff; and Outside Evaluations.

Fiscal Year 2022 APR IDEA 611 Federal Funding: Ms. Holian stated these funds are used to increase field trips for students; renovate the YMCA space; and construction services.

Fiscal Year 2022 - ARP IDEA 619 Federal Funding: Ms. Holian stated these funds are used to purchase curriculum materials for preschool classrooms and to provide learning opportunities for students in the community.

2022-2023 Requests to Support Student's Academic and Social and Emotional Needs: Although not included in the Superintendent's proposed budget, Ms. Holian requested a 1.00 FTE Special Education Teacher (\$65,000); six (6) paraprofessionals (\$75,000); and a Registered Behavioral Technician (\$30,000).

C. Curriculum and Instruction

Director of Literacy and Social Studies Laurie Gjerpen and Director of Mathematics and Science Kara Watson presented the Curriculum and Instruction Budget for 2022-2023 in Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction Eric McGurk's absence. Board members were provided with the curriculum program budget summary. Ms. Gjerpen and Ms. Watson highlighted the following areas:

Certified Salaries – Teachers: Dr. McGurk is requesting \$97,131, an increase of \$1,592, for a contractual increase for the district's English Language teacher.

Instructional Supplies: Dr. McGurk requested \$78,000, an increase \$19,500. Ms. Watson clarified the curriculum program budget summary states, for the current year, the budget is \$58,500; however, the budget actually started at \$78,500 and \$20,000 was moved from that account to another account to cover the cost of the Griswold band room; therefore, it is a decrease of \$500 from the current budget.

Other Certified Salaries: Dr. McGurk is requesting \$72,100, an increase of \$2,100 to support curriculum writing projects.

Teaching and Learning Software: Dr. McGurk is requesting \$88,301, a decrease of \$9,626. The TalentEd platform is moving into District Technology Coordinator Craig Szymanski's budget.

In-service: Dr. McGurk is requesting \$78,950, a \$0.00 increase, for professional development presenter fees and in-house professional development presentations.

Out of District Meetings and Conferences: Dr. McGurk is requesting \$24,500, an increase of \$1,470, for registration fees for teachers, administration and staff for professional development.

Staff Travel: Dr. McGurk is requesting \$4,000, a \$0.00 increase, for district staff who travel throughout the day to different buildings within the district. The mileage fee is set by the Internal Revenue Service.

Non-Instruction Supplies: Dr. McGurk is requesting \$4,500, a \$0.00 increase, for supplies for district meetings, including new teacher orientation costs and resources for new teachers as they join the district.

Administrative Supplies: Dr. McGurk is requesting \$20,000, a \$0.00 increase, for materials to support professional development and curriculum writing and review.

Textbooks: Dr. McGurk is requesting \$67,527, an increase of \$7,027, for licenses for World Language Spanish textbooks; online access for chemistry and physics; and an EMS course textbook.

Dues & Fees: Dr. McGurk is requesting \$5,000, an increase of \$5,000, for professional associations for the administration. For the current year, dues and fees were prepaid

Dues & Fees: Dr. McGurk is requesting \$600, an increase of \$600, to participate in the Connecticut Library Association, for purchasing library materials at discounted rates. Last year, the district saved over \$4,000 in purchases by using consortium rates that are identified through the Connecticut Library Association.

Field Trips: Dr. McGurk is requesting \$2,000, a \$0.00 increase.

#### D. Board of Education Overall Review

Superintendent Benigni stated he hopes, from the presentations on Monday evening and tonight, the Board has an overall picture of the Budget. Superintendent Benigni referred the Board back to the stacked bar graph as a great pictorial of the overall budget. He stated approximately 3.6% is for contractual obligations to maintain staff and programs and the approximate additional 1.1% is for various new items added to the budget, some of which are essential, to maintain the operating systems within the district. Superintendent Benigni stated the budget is unique as there are no new staff or program requests, and when the administrators prepared the budget, they kept it as lean as possible while still maintaining the level of education the Berlin community has expected.

### **III. RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS FROM JANUARY 10 BOE MEETING**

#### A. Queer Theory Taught in Curriculum

Superintendent Benigni addressed the Queer Theory being taught in the high school curriculum and responded to questions from Board members. Superintendent Benigni provided Board members with the description of the course, which is a UCONN ECE college level course, which students have the option to take and pay for at the high school. As far as Queer Theory being taught to all students, Superintendent Benigni stated Queer Theory is taught as a component of the course to analyze literature within an assignment within the course. Superintendent Benigni stated the assignment uses Disney and Pixar to demonstrate the way male or female characteristics are imparted on a character. It is one of the lenses students are taught to look at and analyze literature. Superintendent Benigni stated the Queer Theory is not part of the curriculum. It is part of an assignment in the UCONN ECE college level course that students elect to take. Superintendent Benigni stated, if it is the Board's collective decision that this course be documented differently, that a can take place.

During this Agenda Item, a short recess was taken from 7:12 p.m. until 7:18 p.m.

#### B. Learning for Justice: Social Justice Standards

Ms. Dennis read, from the Board of Education website, the purpose of the Equity and Social Justice Advisory Committee. Ms. Dennis stated this is a difficult topic, the Committee was a charge of a past Board Chair and the Board of Education has been attempting to manage the Committee.

Superintendent Benigni stated he was unaware Social Justice Standards were uploaded on Atlas Rubicon until Monday evening; however, he stated as the Superintendent, it is under his purview and, therefore, he takes responsibility. At tonight's meeting, Superintendent Benigni logged in to Atlas Rubicon and stated, unbeknownst to him until Monday evening, listed under adopted standards is Learning for Justice, Social Justice Standards. Superintendent Benigni explained how and why they were listed. While logged in to Atlas Rubicon, Superintendent Benigni demonstrated that none of the standards are linked to any courses. He stated, although these standards are listed as adopted, they are not embedded within the curriculum at this moment. Superintendent Benigni stated tomorrow morning these standards will be removed.

Ms. Dennis stated the Board of Education has changed three times since the Equity and Social Justice Advisory Committee was initiated. She stated, over the past seven months, the Board has been doing its best effort to manage this situation because this work is very important to some but can also be very divisive and polarizing. Ms. Dennis stated the Committee structure has not functioned as anticipated by the previous Board Chair, and at this time, the Board has to reevaluate the structure moving forward. Ms. Dennis stated she does not want to sit at the head of this table and continue to put the Board in a position where it takes away from the work it does to support all students. This has been a huge challenge and has taken much time outside of Board meetings. Ms. Dennis stated the Committee will be dismantled to allow this Board of Education an opportunity to determine its next steps.

**IV. ADJOURNMENT**

**At 7:51 p.m., a motion was made by Ms. Sisti, seconded by Dr. Sassu, to adjourn.**

**FAVOR: ALL  
MOTION CARRIED: 6:0; including President Dennis**

Respectfully submitted,

Tracy Sisti, Secretary, Berlin Board of Education