

APPROVED
STATE OF CONNECTICUT
MUNICIPAL ACCOUNTABILITY REVIEW BOARD (MARB)

REGULAR MEETING MINUTES
Hartford Subcommittee of the MARB

Meeting Date and Time: Thursday, November 18, 2021 10:00 AM – 12:00 PM

Meeting Location: This was a virtual meeting. Meeting materials may be accessed at the following website: <https://portal.ct.gov/OPM/Marb/West-Haven-Committee-Meetings-and-Materials>

Call-In Instructions:

Telephone Number: (860) 840-2075

Meeting ID: 259 403 477

Members in Attendance: Kimberly Kennison (OPM Secretary designee), Christine Shaw (State Treasurer designee), David Biller, Stephen Falcigno, Mark Waxenberg, Robert White

Other MARB Members in Attendance: Thomas Hamilton (Chief Financial Officer, Norwalk Public Schools)

City Officials in Attendance: Superintendent Torres-Rodriguez, Phillip Penn, Jennifer Hockenhill

OPM Staff in Attendance: Julian Freund

I. Call to Order & Opening Remarks

The meeting was called to order at 10:02 AM

II. Approval of Minutes:

a. October 21, 2021 regular meeting

Ms. Shaw made a motion to approve the minutes with a second by Mr. Waxenberg. The minutes were approved by a vote of 5-0-1, with Mr. Falcigno abstaining.

III. Presentation: Norwalk Special Education Reform Initiative

Thomas Hamilton, Chief Financial Officer for Norwalk Public Schools, gave a presentation on Norwalk Public Schools' experience in reforming special education services. Following a consultant's critical assessment and report on the provision and management of special education services in 2015, the district developed a multi-year plan for making improvements. The 3-year plan addressed six priority goals in the consultant's report. Commitments to fund investments in special education services over the three-year period were made by the City Council and Board of Education. A number of in-district special education programs were developed as a result of the plan and the investments. Although the overall number of special education students have continued to increase, the number of out-of-

district placements have declined from 137 in 2015/16 to 66 in 2021/22. The programmatic changes involved significant investment in special education staffing, with the number of special education teachers increasing from 84.5 in 2015/16 to 120.9 in 2020/21. The rate of increase in total special education costs during that time, however, have been brought to 1% to 2% per year after years of increasing in the range of 8% to 12% per year. In determining which services to develop in-house, the consultant looked for the best opportunities to operate at scale and in an efficient manner. The district recognized that there will always be a need for out-placements, particularly for students with specialized needs.

Members discussed the loss of control for the Hartford district once an Open Choice student has been outplaced for special education. Mr. Hamilton added that early in the process, a position was created in the Finance office to monitor and track all special education contracts as a way to gain a full understanding of the district's spending on special education. Mr. Hamilton and Superintendent Torres-Rodriguez noted the different demands on the Hartford district due to Open Choice options available to families in the Hartford region.

IV. Review and Discussion: Special Education

Superintendent Torres-Rodriguez described some in-district special education programs that have been developed in Hartford and others that are in development. The district currently services 286 students across 15 in-district programs. Mr. Waxenberg asked if the district has data on the impact on the number of outplacements as a result of creating more in-house options. Ms. Kennison asked about the district's planned investments in special education from ESSER funding. The funds were specifically designated to address students at higher tiers of needs, but have been put on hold for the time being. What has changed is the frequency of regular education students with behavioral and mental health needs.

Superintendent Torres-Rodriguez suggested that the programmatic effectiveness analysis that was part of the consultant study in Norwalk would not be applicable to a Hartford study. She said the issue is around financial stability and impact. She referenced a study that speaks to ensuring a continuum of services which the district has been working on for several years.

Members discussed interest in additional information on the district's plans for special education programming and data related to special education services. Requests were also made for the district to provide its suggested legislative solutions that would help in the management of special education services and costs. Members agreed to compile their requests for information and provide them to the Superintendent in writing.

V. Update: BOE Health Insurance Consultant

Based on the latest discussions regarding BOE health insurance at the Subcommittee and the full MARB meeting, OPM has begun searching for a consultant under State contract that could provide an analysis of the current cost of health insurance benefits and the projected impact of a transition to the State Partnership health plan. If a suitable consultant currently under State contract cannot be identified, a procurement process for engaging a consultant may be necessary.

VI. Review and Discussion: Mitigation Measures Action Plan

Ms. Hockenhill provided an update on the City's budget mitigation measures. She indicated that payments for special duty services have been more timely. A recently implemented workers comp program in Public Works featuring a triage nurse call has helped to reduce the number of claims.

VII. Other Related Business

None.

VIII. Adjourn

A motion to adjourn was made by Mr. Waxenberg with a second by Mr. Falcigno. The meeting adjourned at 11:50 AM.