

III.A.

Connecticut State Board of Education Hartford

To Be Proposed:

January 22, 2025

Resolved, That pursuant to Section 10-223e(e)(2) of the Connecticut General Statutes, and in order to address the stability of operations of the Bridgeport Public Schools, improve student performance, and address other needs of the school district, the State Board of Education directs the Commissioner of Education to take the necessary action to implement, on behalf of the State Board of Education, the powers set forth in Connecticut General Statutes Section 10-223e(e)(2), including but not necessarily limited to 1) assigning a technical assistance team to the district to guide district initiatives and report progress to the Commissioner of Education; 2) requiring the board of education to undergo training designed to improve operational efficiency and effectiveness; and 3) requiring the appointment of a Superintendent approved by the Commissioner and/or the appointment of a District Improvement Officer selected by the Commissioner for a term of up to one year, with the understanding that such one-year term may be extended by the State Board of Education.

Approved by a vote of _____ this twenty-second day of January, Two Thousand Twenty-Five.

Signed: _____

Charlene M. Russell-Tucker, Secretary
State Board of Education

**Connecticut State Board of Education
Hartford**

To: State Board of Education

From: Charlene M. Russell-Tucker, Commissioner of Education

Date: January 22, 2025

Subject: Bridgeport Public Schools: Action to Address District Needs

Executive Summary

Introduction

On January 9, 2025, the Bridgeport Board of Education (BBE) Chairperson, Jennifer Perez, and the Interim Superintendent of the Bridgeport Public Schools (BPS), Dr. Royce Avery attended the Accountability and Support Committee (Committee) of the State Board of Education (SBE) to provide a response to several concerns raised in the media. During the meeting the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) presented information on the total state and federal funds received by BPS, the reported BPS budget deficit, special education compliance concerns, and the history of the turnover of BBE's superintendents. The BBE Chair and the BPS Interim Superintendent then had the opportunity to respond to those concerns.

History/Background

On November 19, 2024, the BPS issued a press release that identified a \$38 million dollar budget gap in their 2024-25 budget. The causes of this budget gap were attributed to the “2024-25 school-year budget [that] was adopted with a \$26 million gap, with plans to use \$26 million from the District’s reserve; Federal and state COVID relief funding [that] has come to an end; and special education costs that have increased due to unfunded state and federal mandates.”¹ In December 2024, the district proposed mitigating the budget deficit by reducing staff, including 18 school-administrator positions.²

¹ Bridgeport Public Schools, “Bridgeport Public Schools Addresses \$38 Million Dollar Budget Gap,” press release, November 19, 2024, <https://resources.finalsuite.net/images/v1732300131/bridgeportedunet/ttxwuidfdcypup8zpe2p/RELEASE-BPSAddresses38MillionBudgetGap.pdf>.

² Richard Chumney, “Bridgeport school board eliminates 45 jobs in first round of budget cuts amid \$39M deficit,” *CT Post*, December 17, 2024, https://www.ctpost.com/news/education/article/bridgeport-school-board-cuts-45-positions-amid-19985867.php?utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=twsocialflow&utm_source=connpost.

On December 12, 2024, the BBE and BPS leadership team were invited to attend the January 9, 2025, Committee meeting of the SBE to explain:

- how BPS plans to address the budget deficit;
- how BPS will fulfill its obligation to educate all students, but specifically students receiving services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA); and
- the training that members of the Bridgeport Board of Education have received in recent months including, but not limited to, training on the topics of school finances, policy, and superintendent supervision and evaluation.

On January 9, 2025, BBE Chair Jennifer Perez and BPS Interim Superintendent Dr. Royce Avery came before the Committee to provide responses to the three questions.

Fiscal Operations/Budget

The CSDE began the meeting with a presentation on the amount of state and federal funding available to BPS in 2024-25 and the current balance of those funds as of December 2024. As detailed in the CSDE's presentation, the total funding available to BPS in 2024-25 is \$304,678,406. Despite this funding amount, the BBE narrowly passed, with a 5 to 4 vote, a 2024-25 school year budget that included a \$26 million deficit. Furthermore, minutes from the March 25, 2024, BBE meeting indicate that three members of the BBE opposed the budget because there was not a sufficient opportunity to review the budget. One BBE member requested to be quoted as saying “[the budget] was not properly vetted and gone over,” and “[the BBE] have not had an opportunity to amend the budget.”³

Interim Superintendent, Dr. Royce Avery responded to the questions presented, indicating that BPS has a three-phase plan for mitigating the deficit by reducing positions, reviewing cuts to programming and contracts, and possibly closing facilities pending the result of the BPS facilities study. When the Committee inquired about the rate at which the district is drawing-down funds, BPS Director of Grants Development and Management, Nadira Clarke, commented that the district has not had the ability to draw-down funds that they do not have access to, intimating the CSDE has not authorized the release of BPS grants. Deputy Commissioner Charles Hewes responded with clarification that grants are only approved when a district has aligned grant allocations to their intended purpose. The table below represents a sample of the frequency at which CSDE staff communicated with BPS in support of aligning grant funds to facilitate approval.

³ Minutes from the March 25, 2024, Bridgeport Board of Education Regular Meeting, <https://ct02210097.schoolwires.net/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=26716&dataid=29795&FileName=Approved%20Regular%20Meeting%203-25-24.pdfx>.

Grant Name	Date by which grant application was opened	Date by which BPS started the grant application	BPS's initial grant submission date	Frequency of CSDE contact on required grant edits	Grant approval date
Alliance District Grant (\$37,282,798)	8/14/24	8/19/24	10/4/24	11	Not yet approved
Commissioner's Network Grant (S2) (\$623,300)	8/6/24	8/6/24	9/3/24	4	10/31/24
Commissioner's Network Grant (S3) (\$591,000)	8/6/24	8/6/24	9/3/24	6	12/5/24
SIG Opportunity District Grant (\$1,460,272)	7/10/24	7/12/24	9/27/24	5	1/15/25

Special Education Services

The CSDE shared concerns relative to BPS's provision of special education services and BPS' November 2024 estimate of 31 certified special education staff vacancies. In 2021, a systemic complaint was filed against the district for lack of special education service provisions to students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Through the course of the investigation, it was determined that 89 students across four Bridgeport schools were owed 4,189 hours of special education services. As a result of the complaint, the CSDE directed Bridgeport to conduct an audit of the special education services in the remaining district schools. The audit identified an additional 175 students who were eligible to receive compensatory services totaling 5,370 hours of services. Currently, 504 hours are still owed to nine students.

In 2022, Bridgeport was cited for System Non-Compliance during the CSDE Special Education Data Application and Collection (SEDAC) process. When school districts are found to have noncompliance in 10 percent or more of student IEPs, a citation is issued. Bridgeport was identified as having 528 student IEPs with issues of noncompliance related to Annual Review and Three-Year Reevaluation timelines and Secondary Transition Requirements.

The CSDE is also concerned with a growing number of special education complaints, mediations, and due process hearings filed against Bridgeport. The number of filings has substantially increased year-over-year since 2022. (9 filings in 2022; 23 filings in 2023; 15 filings thus far in the 2024-25 school year).

Pursuant to Section 616(b)(2)(C)(i) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act 2004 (IDEA) and 34 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Section 300.602(b), states are required to make determinations annually on the performance of districts within the state and publicly disseminate those determinations. States are required to compare district level data and performance in relation to state established targets found in the State Performance Plan (SPP), as well as compliance indicators established by the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). Consistent with these OSEP-mandated determinations, there are four categories that districts may be assigned into: (1) *Meets Requirements*; (2) *Needs Assistance*; (3) *Needs Intervention*; or (4) *Needs Substantial Intervention*.

In 2022, Bridgeport was designated as *Needs Assistance 1* with concerns noted for Chronic Absenteeism, Timely and Accurate Data Reporting, and Initial Evaluation Timelines. In 2023, Bridgeport was designated as *Needs Assistance 2* due to the fact that two indicators remained unresolved (Chronic Absenteeism and Initial Evaluation Timelines).

Since 2021, BPS has been attempting to mitigate a significant number of special education compliance concerns. In 2021 however, as was reported during the presentation, the district faces an unprecedented number of special education staff vacancies which raises the question as to whether such measures have been effective and whether the current needs of students with disabilities is being met. During its regular meeting on January 15, 2025, the full State Board of Education heard, during public comment, similar special education concerns presented by parents of BPS students and representatives from the Center for Children's Advocacy.

Dr. Avery responded to the Committee questions by expressing concern with rising special education and transportation costs and reported that BPS continues in its attempts to rectify the special education compliance concerns.

Board Governance/Oversight and Training

The CSDE addressed BPS' history of change in its leadership, identifying that the BBE has employed five superintendents in the past seven years. This has resulted in a lack of continuity in district leadership and adversely affected the district's ability to implement, refine, and perpetuate a coherent vision. Pursuant to Connecticut General Statute 10-157, “[t]he board of education shall evaluate the performance of the superintendent annually in accordance with guidelines and criteria mutually determined and agreed to by such board and such superintendent.” Last year, however, the BBE had difficulty reaching a consensus upon a method by which to evaluate the former superintendent.⁴ The BBE only approved evaluation criteria at the end of May 2024, two months prior to the conclusion of the former superintendent's first year of employment.⁵ The concern raised was the operational effectiveness of the BBE and its ability to supervise and support its superintendents, such that the BBE's interactions have been characterized as “petty politics.”⁶

⁴ Minutes from the Bridgeport Board of Education Special Meeting, May 7, 2024, <https://ct02210097.schoolwires.net/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=26718&dataid=29835&FileName=Special-Meeting-5-7-24.pdf>.

⁵ Draft Minutes from the Bridgeport Board of Education Regular Meeting, May 28, 2024, <https://ct02210097.schoolwires.net/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=26716&dataid=29867&FileName=Draft-Reg-Meeting-Ninutes-5-28-24.pdf>.

⁶ “Bridgeport School Funding Takeover?” interview by Melissa in the Morning, WICC *The Voice of Connecticut*,

BBE Chair, Jennifer Perez provided a record of BBE member training and expressed her hope that the BBE will work together in the development of district goals and policy in an effort to guide superintendent decision-making. The training record indicates BBE members have attended 5 one-time board training sessions as a full board: 1) Board Member Orientation (12/20/2023); 2) Workshop and Presentation related to the roles and responsibilities of the Board (1/27/2024); 3) Board and Cabinet Staff Training Session—Understanding Trauma (4/7/2024); 4) Superintendent Evaluation Workshop (5/7/2024); and 5) Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Training (1/15/2025). In addition, the record shows BBE members have attended individually or in small groups other on-demand trainings, events, and conferences to expand their professional learning. Absent from the record, however, is training for all BBE members on the topics of fiscal and policy oversight, as well as training in the development of board goals.

Committee Meeting Recommendation

As an outcome of the Accountability and Support Committee meeting, a recommendation was made to bring the concerns relative to BPS to the full SBE.

Legal Authority

BPS is an “alliance district,” which is defined as “a school district for a town that . . . is among the towns with the thirty-three lowest accountability index scores, as calculated by the Department of Education.” C.G.S. §10-262u(a)(1). As such, BPS falls within the category of school districts that are deemed to be in need of improvement under C.G.S. §10-223e. In turn, C.G.S. §10-223e(e)(2) invests in the SBE sweeping powers to address the needs of such school districts, providing in relevant part: “Notwithstanding any provision of this title or any regulation adopted pursuant to said title . . . the State Board of Education shall take any of the following actions to improve student performance of the school district . . . and to address other needs of the school or district.” These interventions include, but are not limited to:

- Requiring an operational and/or an instructional audit;
- Requiring the district to “use state and federal funds for critical needs, as directed by the State Board of Education;”
- Requiring “additional training and technical assistance for...teachers, principals, and central office staff members;”
- Assigning a technical assistance team to the school or district to guide school or district initiatives and report on same to the Commissioner;
- Requiring the board of education to “undergo training designed to improve the operational efficiency and effectiveness of the board...as leaders of its district improvement plans” and submit annual action plans to the Commissioner;
- Requiring “the appointment of (i) a superintendent approved by the Commissioner...or (ii) a district improvement officer selected by the Commissioner...whose term shall be for one school year” except that the State Board may extend such period; and/or,
- Any combination of these actions.

Conclusion

Based upon the data presented, there exists a number of significant challenges facing BPS. The BBE Chair and BPS Interim Superintendent, both of whom are new in their role, represent a willingness to take the appropriate action in response to the reported challenges. However, there is a need for urgent action. BPS is home to 19,591 students, of whom 16,887 qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. BPS has 3,987 students with disabilities, 5,537 English Learners/Multilingual Learners, and 292 students experiencing homelessness. The rate of student chronic absenteeism is 29.1 percent. Only 19.9 percent of students met or exceeded performance levels in English language arts, and 12.3 percent met or exceeded performance levels in math on the Smarter Balanced Assessment. In addition to the students' needs, consideration must also be given to the approximate 2,800 BPS educators and school staff. The Bridgeport Education Association published a long list of concerns in September 2024 that represent working conditions in the district.⁷

Section 10-223e(e)(2) of the Connecticut General Statutes authorizes the SBE to take action to improve student performance as well as to address other needs of the school district. This statute expressly authorizes the SBE to take any of the actions listed therein. Furthermore, as fiscal stewards of the federal IDEA grant, the CSDE has the authority to identify the district as a high-risk grantee and impose conditions on the use of funds based upon their special education Annual Performance Report.

Recommendation

For the reasons set forth herein, it is recommended that the State Board of Education authorize the Commissioner of Education to take the actions deemed necessary and appropriate under Section 10-223e in support of the Bridgeport Public Schools.

Prepared by: Dr. Charles Hewes
 Deputy Commissioner

⁷ "Bridgeport Teachers: Help Us Help Our Students," Connecticut Educators Association, accessed January 17, 2025, <https://cea.org/bridgeport-teachers-help-us-help-our-students/>.