Connecticut State Board of Education
Hartford

Accountability and Support Committee

Thursday, October 29, 2026
450 Columbus Blvd
Plaza North, Hearing Room B
Hartford, Connecticut

Draft Meeting Minutes
(Approved on: _____)

I. Call to Order

Pursuant to the notice filed with the Secretary of the State, Committee Chairperson Erin D. Benham, called the meeting to order at 3:28 p.m.

Committee Members Present:

Erin D. Benham
Donald F. Harris, Jr.
Kristen A. Record
Dr. Seth D. Zimmerman

Committee Members Absent:

CSDE Staff Present:

Dr. Melissa Jenkins
Dr. Charles Hewes
Jennifer Webb
Matthew Cerrone
Greg Dresko
Dr. Michelle Graveline
Ruby Rodriguez

Guests Present:

- Dr. Royce Avery, Interim Superintendent of Schools, Bridgeport Public Schools, Bridgeport
- Nestor Nkwo, Chief Financial Officer, Bridgeport Public Schools, Bridgeport
- Margaret Hughes, Chief of Teaching and Learning, Bridgeport Public Schools, Bridgeport
- Jennifer Hoffman, Senior Specialized Instruction Officer, Bridgeport Public Schools, Bridgeport

II. Approval of Minutes

Harris, Jr. moved, and Zimmerman seconded, that the Committee approves the minutes of September 16, 2026, Accountability and Support Committee meeting.

Vote:

In Favor:	Harris, Jr., Zimmerman, Benham, and Record
Abstained:	0
Opposed:	0
Absent:	0

III. Update on Bridgeport Public Schools:

Deputy Commissioner for Academics and Innovation, Dr. Charles E. Hewes, opened the item by situating the work with Bridgeport Public Schools (BPS) within the Commissioner's seven priority areas. He provided an overview of the Connecticut State Department of Education's (CSDE) Technical Assistance Team (TA Team), established in February 2025 to support district operational stability, strengthen student performance, with particular emphasis on students eligible for special education and related services, and address other identified district needs. Dr. Hewes reviewed the progression of the state's intervention, including the July 2025 publication of a forensic audit conducted by CliftonLarsonAllen (CLA), which identified 34 recommendations related to governance, oversight, budgeting processes, and resource allocation. From October 2025 through June 2026, BPS received support from Public Works, LLC, in addressing the audit recommendations. In July 2026, Dr. Avery and the TA Team established overarching goals across four key areas: general and special education; fiscal and human resources; facilities and maintenance; and school climate.

In the area of general and special education, the district has adopted the Connecticut Literacy Model and secured increased CSDE funding to support instructional and leadership coaching aimed at implementing a multi-tiered system of support for Tier 1 literacy instruction in grades K–6. District leaders are also participating in the Connecticut Master Class for the Science of Reading, and onboarding structures have been established to support new teachers and special education staff. Moving forward, the district will focus on strengthening systems to monitor the implementation and effectiveness of professional learning at the classroom level, building on its existing instructional learning walks, which accounted for approximately 700–900 observations during the previous school year.

Regarding facilities and school climate, Bridgeport Military Academy was successfully relocated prior to the start of the school year to accommodate the advancement of school construction. Through the district's partnership with CSDE under the Learner Engagement and Attendance Program (LEAP), chronic absenteeism declined by approximately two percentage points, from 33 percent to 31

percent, over the past year. Looking ahead, the district will work to better integrate its capital improvement plan and identified facility needs into the budget development process to support long-term planning and resource allocation.

In the area of fiscal and human resources, the district has continued to make progress in addressing the recommendations outlined in the CLA forensic audit. At the conclusion of Public Works, LLC's engagement in June 2026, 10 recommendations had been completed, with that number increasing to 15. The district has also made progress in workforce stability, reducing educator vacancies from more than 120 to approximately 30 or fewer, including seven special education vacancies as of early October. Additionally, training on the Munis and Allovue financial management systems has commenced.

The TA Team highlighted that the previous year's budget development process identified 27 efficiency opportunities, representing approximately $12 million in potential savings. Emphasis was placed on institutionalizing these practices as part of the district's routine operations to ensure their sustainability beyond individual leadership or staff transitions. While remaining recommendations are in progress, one longer-term priority involves developing a fiscal year 2028 budget adjustment plan that would distinguish revenues from expenditures rather than balancing them on a single line item. This effort will require continued collaboration with the City of Bridgeport. The district is also advancing five additional recommendations identified by Public Works, LLC, including the development of procedural manuals and the initiation of related staff training.

Dr. Royce Avery, Interim Superintendent of Schools, opened his presentation by thanking the Committee and acknowledging the contributions of his executive cabinet, principals, staff, students, and broader school community. Reflecting on his 35 years in education and two-and-a-half years serving as interim superintendent, Dr. Avery described the position as one of the most challenging of his career and emphasized the importance of approaching the district's work as a collective effort. He introduced the district's three-phase roadmap—Listening, Rooted in Purpose, and Every Student—which reflects its progression toward a renewed focus on student outcomes. Building on this framework, Dr. Avery outlined three district priorities for the current school year: strengthening Tier 1 academic instruction, addressing fiscal challenges and advocating for additional resources, and improving special education and multilingual learner services.

Dr. Avery highlighted several indicators of district progress, including a reduction in teacher vacancies from approximately 150 in November 2024 to 28 at the time of the presentation. To support workforce stability and retention, he meets monthly with small groups of teachers and principals to better understand their experiences and identify areas for improvement. He also noted that approximately 10,000 of the district's 19,000–20,000 students receive special education services, multilingual learner services, or both, underscoring the significant service demands facing the district. Although BPS secured approximately $35 million in additional funding for the current year, the district continues to face an identified funding gap of approximately $40–$45 million, necessitating further budget reductions. Dr. Avery also acknowledged the recent two-percentage-point decrease in chronic absenteeism as an area of progress.

Priority 1 – Tier 1 Instruction and Literacy: Dr. Avery identified the integration of the Connecticut Literacy Model and the Science of Reading, supported by Hill for Literacy, as the foundation of the

district's academic improvement efforts. The district's overarching goal is to ensure that every student is reading proficiently by the end of third grade. He emphasized that improving literacy outcomes requires a coordinated, district-wide commitment involving the Board of Education, school administrators, teachers, families, and community partners. This includes policy updates at the Board level, strengthening principals' roles as instructional leaders, and expanding access to literacy resources for families, particularly students who may have limited access to technology at home. Dr. Avery reported increased consistency in instructional practices across classrooms in grades K–8 and emphasized his personal participation in all required Science of Reading training sessions. He also highlighted progress in family engagement, noting that the district's special education family partnership group has grown from one or two participants to approximately 20–25 regular attendees.

Priority 2 – Fiscal Stewardship: Regarding fiscal stewardship, Dr. Avery discussed the findings of the state-sponsored forensic audit, noting that while no mismanagement of funds was identified, the audit revealed several procedural, policy, and operational areas requiring improvement. The district continues to meet weekly with the CSDE TA Team and monitors progress on the 34 audit recommendations through a color-coded tracking system identifying completed items and those requiring continued attention. An updated status report was submitted to CSDE the day before the Committee meeting and was shared with the Committee members.

Dr. Avery outlined several operational improvements implemented in response to the audit findings. These include transitioning to a school-based budgeting model, allowing principals to identify school-level needs and access and manage their budgets through the Allovue financial management system. Ongoing training is provided during monthly district-wide administrator meetings to support implementation. The district has also established revised grant procedures clarifying the requirements for School Improvement Grant (SIG), Alliance District, and operational funds, and developed a new budget book with a calendar aligned to municipal budget timelines.

Additional work remains underway to strengthen financial oversight and accountability, particularly regarding school activity accounts. The district anticipates that this effort will take approximately two years as it transitions to an electronic tracking system through Munis and consolidates accounts with a single financial institution. Other corrective actions include addressing duplicate staff email accounts identified through the audit, conducting annual training on district systems—including Allovue and PowerSchool—and developing a new teacher playbook to support staff onboarding and operational consistency.

Priority 3 – Special Education and Multilingual Learners: Dr. Avery described the district's efforts to strengthen special education services by transitioning from a primarily complaint-driven and compliance-focused approach toward a more comprehensive and proactive service delivery model. Key areas of focus include regulatory compliance, maintaining appropriately certified staff, strengthening paraeducator development, improving curriculum and Individualized Education Program (IEP) development, and expanding family engagement. To address staffing challenges, the district is also pursuing partnerships with universities to establish a pipeline for recruiting and developing special education teachers.

In multilingual learner services, the district's bilingual department introduced a new K–12 English as a Second Language (ESL) curriculum, supported by comprehensive professional development and the

integration of language objectives across instructional settings. Dr. Avery noted that the district continues to address the evolving needs of a substantial newcomer student population, with new students arriving daily. He also highlighted the district's partnership with CSDE through the Learner Engagement and Attendance Program (LEAP), supported by nearly $5 million in funding during the current year, as well as family survey results indicating increased levels of trust in the district.

As part of the district's facilities and student support efforts, Dr. Avery reported on the successful relocation of Bridgeport Military Academy, which resulted in the school having 15 classrooms across three wings and allowed construction activities to proceed. He noted that the transition was completed without any complaints received between June and September.

Chair Benham opened the floor for Committee questions and discussion. Mr. Harris, Jr., Committee member, acknowledged the district's progress and requested additional information regarding chronic absenteeism and student discipline. In response, the district reported that chronic absenteeism concluded the previous school year at 31 percent. Regarding student discipline, the district has retrained principals on practices intended to reduce out-of-school suspensions and limit the number of suspension days assigned per incident. The district also implemented a stipulated expulsion agreement, developed by a comprehensive high school principal, which provides students with an opportunity to remain in school under agreed-upon behavioral and attendance conditions. Dr. Avery reported that expulsions decreased significantly during the 2025–26 school year compared with 2024–25 and have remained at the reduced level. He also identified several broader challenges affecting students and families, including increased mental health needs, the loss of nearly 1,000 students between the previous and current school years amid concerns related to immigration enforcement, and the financial pressures associated with the high cost of living. He emphasized the importance of maintaining a visible leadership presence in schools and throughout the community.

Ms. Record, Committee member, recommended that the district review a recent CSDE bulletin addressing the integration of literacy into elementary social studies instruction and asked what additional strategies were being implemented to achieve the district's chronic absenteeism goal of 25 percent for the current school year. The district explained that executive directors responsible for supervising principals are being more closely connected to district-level and school-based literacy teams. Regarding attendance, school-based attendance teams are now subject to increased accountability, including requirements to document meeting agendas and minutes, with district personnel participating in meetings to monitor progress. Schools are also examining the underlying factors contributing to absenteeism, including student illness, concerns related to immigration enforcement, and barriers such as access to school uniforms.

The Committee also discussed the district's approach to using data to inform professional learning through the Professional Development and Evaluation Committee (PDEC), including training and support for special education paraeducators. Ms. Hughes explained that current professional learning priorities include strengthening the connection between standards-aligned curriculum resources, including HMH and Wonders, and the district's instructional framework, as well as refining small-group "What I Need" instructional blocks. The district gathers staff input through end-of-year and beginning-of-year surveys and teacher focus groups. Ms. Hughes also noted that active PDEC participation has resumed following a period of limited engagement under previous leadership. Additionally, the district has aligned its interim assessments with Smarter Balanced and is using

Focused Interim Assessment Blocks (FIABs) and Interim Assessment Blocks (IABs) to support item-level progress monitoring.

Ms. Hoffman provided an overview of professional learning and support for paraeducators, noting that August training addressed data collection and behavior management. The district is exploring asynchronous training opportunities and continues to gather paraeducator feedback through weekly school visits. Teachers have also received training on effectively collaborating with paraeducators in the classroom, and contracted paraeducators are required to complete training before entering school buildings. The district further maintains ongoing recruitment efforts by conducting teacher and paraeducator interviews every Thursday throughout the school year.

In response to a question regarding the district's ability to maintain its budget development timeline following delays during the previous year, the district confirmed that a Board-adopted budget calendar is now in place. A Committee member expressed concern that recommendations related to budget training for department heads and principals remained in progress. Dr. Hewes explained that the foundational components have been established; however, the recommendation remains classified as in progress while the team evaluates whether the training is being effectively implemented and applied throughout the budget development process.

Committee members also raised questions regarding the sustainability of professional development and onboarding practices, particularly given the district's ongoing staff turnover. The district outlined its onboarding structure, which includes three days of new teacher orientation followed by five days of district-wide professional development. Additional supports include mentoring programs for teachers and administrators, as well as documented procedures and systems intended to maintain operational consistency despite staff transitions. Dr. Avery acknowledged continued workforce challenges, including high staff mobility and the availability of higher salaries in neighboring districts, while noting that some special education teachers who departed during the previous year have expressed interest in returning.

The Committee further asked how the district monitors whether Science of Reading training is being translated into classroom instruction with fidelity. The district described its use of benchmark assessments administered three times annually, supplemented by ongoing progress monitoring and flexible instructional grouping. Classroom implementation is also monitored through instructional walkthroughs using the CSDE Turnaround Office walkthrough checklist and rubric, which the district adopted for district-wide use three years ago. Dr. Avery noted that, in the absence of instructional coaches, principals serve as the primary drivers of school improvement and receive approximately five days of training each August to support their instructional leadership responsibilities.

A Committee member expressed concern regarding the pace and long-term sustainability of the district's improvement efforts, noting that 15 of the 34 CLA recommendations, along with five additional recommendations identified by Public Works, LLC, had been completed. The member also raised concerns regarding the classification of certain recommendations as complete when implementation appeared to be nearing, rather than fully achieving, completion. Dr. Avery acknowledged the complexity of the work and emphasized that meaningful and sustainable improvements require time, particularly given the district's limited financial resources. He also discussed constraints affecting professional development, including staff availability during the

summer and contractual limitations on compensated training time. The district explained that teachers currently receive two hours of monthly professional development during scheduled half-days, in addition to approximately 90 minutes of building-level training after school each month. Principals receive approximately three hours of professional development monthly.

Committee members acknowledged the challenges facing the district, expressed appreciation for BPS's continued engagement and collaboration with CSDE, and thanked Dr. Avery and his team for providing the Committee with an update on the district's progress and ongoing improvement efforts.

IV. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 4:49 p.m. Vice Chair Benham moved to adjourn, and Harris, Jr. seconded the motion. The next Accountability and Support Committee meeting will be held on November 17, 2026.

Prepared by: Ruby Rodriguez