



## **Charter Revision Commission Special Meeting Minutes**

Tuesday, September 28th, 2021

7:00 pm – 8:30 pm

*This was a 100% electronic meeting.*

I. Call to Order – Meeting called to order by Chairman James Woulfe at 7:04pm

II. Roll Call

<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Attendance</b>
James Woulfe	Chair	Present
Raul De Jesus, Jr	Vice Chair	Present
John Gale	Secretary	Present
Alexander Aponte	Commissioner	Present
Arunan Arulampalam	Commissioner	Present
Steve Bonafonte	Commissioner	Absent
Vicki Gallon-Clark	Commissioner	Present
Kamora Herrington	Commissioner	Absent
Kenneth Kennedy	Commissioner	Absent
Kathleen Kowalyshyn	Commissioner	Present
Melvin Medina	Commissioner	Absent
Yadira Rivera	Commissioner	Absent
Bruce Rubenstein	Commissioner	Present
Eon R. Smith, Esq.	Commissioner	Absent

a) Chairman Woulfe called a quorum.

i) Also Present: Attorney Steve Mednick, Dr. Leslie Torres-Rodriguez, Hon. Ayesha R. Clarke, Hon. Nick Lebron, and Atty. Brig Smith

III. Approval of Minutes from September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2021 meeting.

a) Chairman Woulfe entertained a motion and discussion on the approval the meeting minutes.

b) Commissioner De Jesus made a motion to approve the meeting minutes and it was seconded by Commissioner Kowalyshyn.

c) The motion passed unanimously.

IV. Panel discussion regarding the Hartford Board of Education

a) Presentation 1: “Setting a legal context” with Atty. Brig Smith – General Counsel, City of Middletown

i) Atty. Smith introduced himself as the General Counsel to the City of Middletown, CT. He remarked that he would be providing an overview of the legal context around boards of education from his experience in Middletown as the city went through the charter revision process. He remarked that Boards of Education are a unique entity because they are governed by state law and municipal charters. Smith used the simile comparing Boards of



Education to a platypus, and the difficulty in determining if it is a mammal or not, similar to a Board of Education being questioned if it is a state entity or a municipal entity. He remarked further that the courts have upheld that Charter Revision Commissions must comply with state-wide mandates when making changes regarding the Boards of Education in their localities.

- ii) Atty. Smith remarked that a Board of Education is responsible for the care and maintenance of school buildings, but they are owned by the municipality according to CT general statutes.
  - iii) Atty. Smith remarked about the experience of Middletown's Charter Revision process. Middletown is one of a few municipalities where the chief officer, the mayor, has hire/fire authority over the Board of Education non-certified employees. Middletown is interested in giving hire/fire authority of non-certified employees to the superintendent. The challenge they have encountered is that the non-certified employees of the Board of Education are in the same union as the regular city employees.
  - iv) Commissioner Gallon-Clark asked if Atty. Smith could go into more detail about the changes Middletown is seeking in their Charter Revision process.
    - (1) Atty. Smith remarked that Middletown is attempting to move towards a model where the superintendent has hire and fire authority over BOE employees, which is standard to other municipalities in Connecticut. Currently the power is with the mayor.
- b) Presentation 2: "Where are we now, and where are we going?"
- i) Panelists:
  - ii) Dr. Leslie Torres-Rodriguez: Superintendent of Hartford Public Schools
    - (1) Dr. Torres-Rodriguez remarked that her role as superintendent is governed by Connecticut General statute 10-157a and is the executive officer over the Board of Education, including implementation of policies put forward by the Hartford Board of Education.
    - (2) She remarked that there are monthly Board meetings and weekly communications for metrics they are monitoring. She remarked that there are requirements for formal communication and reporting to the Board of Education. She remarked that she has biweekly meetings with the mayor and senior staff. She remarked that there are several shared services such as MHIS, and the Office of Corporation Counsel.
  - iii) Hon. Ayesha R. Clarke: Chair, Hartford Board of Education
    - (1) Chairwoman Clarke spoke about her role as Chair of the Hartford Board of Education. She remarked that her role is to preside over the governance of meetings. She remarked that she is responsible for committee appointments and calling special meetings. She remarked that as chair she is responsible for all public facing communications.
    - (2) She remarked that she will raise issues she has been made aware of by constituents during the biweekly meetings with the Superintendent. She remarked that there is not a formal relationship with the Hartford City Council.
    - (3) She provided a recommendation to clarify the relationship between City Council and Board of Education in the Charter.



- (4) Chairwoman Clarke spoke about her experience with the composition of the Board, and desire for there to be more elected positions than appointed positions. She shared an interest in exploring changing when the Board of Education is elected, because it can disrupt the structure when members are elected in November and begin in January which coincides with the middle of the school year. She recommends that the Board of Education election be changed so that the term does not begin in the middle of the school year.
- iv) Hon. Nick Lebron: Chair, Labor, Education, Workforce & Youth Development Services Committee
- (1) Councilman Nick Lebron began his remarks by speaking to the breadth of laws around education in Connecticut. He emphasized his belief that there isn't a clear distinction between the role of the Board of Education and a municipality.
  - (2) Lebron spoke about his experience working in the field of education, and his role of the chair of the LEWYD Service committee on the Hartford Court of Common Council. He remarked that the topic of education has seldom been raised in the committee he presides over. He remarked his belief that the Court of Common Council serves as a rubber stamp on items coming from the Hartford Board of Education School Building Committee. He remarked his belief that there is not enough communication between the superintendent and the Court of Common Council, stating further, his belief that this is an issue that should be addressed.
  - (3) Lebron remarked that in his experience as an elected official, members of the community do not fully understand the difference between the role of the Court of Common Council and Board of Education. He shared his recommendation to the Charter Revision Commission research ways to improve the relationship between the two legislative bodies. He provided the example of the Oregon Public School System which uses joint task forces between their Board of Education and legislative body. He also emphasized the importance of the clear distinctions between the two legislative bodies to prevent interference.
- c) Chairman Woulfe entertained questions and comments from the Commissioners to ask of the panelists.
- i) Commissioner Gallon-Clark asked Dr. Torres-Rodriguez to provide more information on the shared resources, specific to Metro Hartford Information Systems.
    - (1) Dr. Torres-Rodriguez clarified that MHIS is a shared resource between the City of Hartford and the Hartford School District. She remarked that it provides information systems technology such as, internet, communication systems, but it does not provide instructional technology such as Smartboards or projectors.
  - ii) Commissioner Gallon-Clark asked Councilman Lebron, and Chairwoman Clarke, if they believe there is room for strengthening the partnership between the City Council and Board of Education.
    - (1) Councilman Lebron said he believes that many issues overlap between the bodies and could be addressed from a systemic approach through collaboration.



- (2) Chairwoman Clarke remarked that she believes there are opportunities for greater collaboration can occur. She remarked that in her experience the relationship between City Council and Board of Education has been a 'bully approach,' but she is open to learning more about ways that other municipalities strengthen collaboration between the two. She remarked that there is intersectionality on many issues that can be addressed by several organizations, and not necessarily exclusively to the City Council and Board of Education. She remarked that several task forces mentioned are occurring, but they need to improve communication and bring more members together.
- iii) Commissioner Gale asked Dr. Torres-Rodriguez if there are other areas for shared resources, and if that should be incorporated into the Charter.
  - (1) Dr. Torres-Rodriguez mentioned that they have reviewed the potential for shared human resource services. She mentioned that challenges arose around the additional certifications required for individuals working in the school district and the interdependency with the State Department of Education. She referenced the need for reliable information system services and described the distinction between the MHIS, and the educational instruction technology. She described that at times, it is an additional step for the education system to work with two systems.
- iv) Commissioner Gale spoke about the use of school buildings after school hours, and if there is anything in the Charter that could be changed, to allow the Board of Education to work with the city on the use of buildings.
  - (1) Dr. Torres-Rodriguez remarked that she is unaware of any restrictions on the use of buildings during after school hours. She described that there is a process for school use approval by community partners, and the topics of liability and staffing.
- v) Commissioner Gale asked Chairwoman Clarke if there is anything in the Charter that can be changed to improve the relationship between Board of Education and the City Council.
  - (1) Chairwoman Clarke remarked that she did not know of any area in the Charter where a formal relationship between the two bodies needs to be added. She believed that the Board of Education bylaws is where a relationship could be formalized.
- vi) Commissioner Gale asked Chairwoman Clarke about her perspective on the Board of Education election system where he believes, the Hartford Democratic Town Committee has a lot of influence in choosing the Democratic candidates who appear on the ballot and are elected. He asked about the idea of having a non-partisan Board of Education.
  - (1) Chairwoman Clarke remarked that she believes there should be greater participation in the Board of Education election process and believes that the other elected positions get more attention and public engagement. She believes some of this comes from a lack of understanding the structure and purpose of the Hartford Board of Education.
- vii) Commissioner De Jesus asked where there could be greater collaboration between school district and the city.
  - (1) Dr. Torres-Rodriguez remarked that there is an opportunity for shared understanding about what the priorities are city-wide. She believes it is good practice to know about initiatives and priorities that overlap from city departments and the school district.
  - (2) Chairwoman Clarke remarked that she has an interest in providing training for families of students. She believes this is an investment into the city that could be a collaboration with the city and school district.



- (3) Dr. Torres-Rodriguez spoke about the idea of addressing policy with an equity lens, and that it would be an opportunity for collaboration.
- viii) Commissioner De Jesus asked if there are communications between the school district and the city, around appointments and the skills needed on the Board of Education.
  - (1) Chairwoman Clarke remarked that there are occasions when there is conversation with the Board of Education and the Mayors office, on the needs of the BOE, around qualifications, such as financial, and school construction experience. She remarked there have been other occasions when they have not been consulted when an individual has been presented for appointment.
  - (2) Dr. Torres-Rodriguez concurred that this has been her experience as well.
  - (3) Councilman Lebron remarked that there is no formal communication with the City Council on the matter, but there is informal communication around an appointee's reflection of the Hartford community. He remarked that in his experience the informal conversations around appointments to the Hartford Board of Education have been around race and ethnicity of the appointee, and if they reflect the Hartford community.
- ix) Commissioner De Jesus asked if there are specific required skills that the Board of Education needs among its appointed and elected officials. He remarked that within the Charter the commission can make changes to required qualification of Board of Education members.
  - (1) Chairwoman Clarke remarked there are certain skills such as governance which can be taught. Certain knowledge of contractual obligations and school finances are important. She suggested having a requirement for at least one appointed official to have financial budgeting experience. She also advocated the importance of having someone with a background in the policy development process.
  - (2) Dr. Torres-Rodriguez spoke about the important qualification of performance monitoring in the strategic planning perspective. This would strengthen the accountability system that is already in place including the Board of Education Evaluation which is statutorily obligated.
- x) Commissioner De Jesus asked about the potential use of alternates on the Board of Education in the absence of other members.
  - (1) Chairwoman Clarke remarked that it takes approximately 1.5 years to learn the nature of the work that the Board of Education does in the district. She supports the helpfulness of an ex-officio member if they have an understanding of the district and the Board but does not support if the individual does not have the background to make an informed vote.
- xi) Commissioner Rubenstein commented on the low voter turnout for the Board of Education Election. He asked the panelists their perspective on increasing the number of elected members, and on at-large districts versus area districts.
  - (1) Councilman Lebron remarked a strong interest in changing the system to generate more attention to the election and increase voter turnout. He suggested moving the Board of Education to an election year that receives more voter turnout, such as the Presidential election year. He also cautioned that nine elected members of the Board of Education may prove more challenging for the role of the Superintendent.



- (2) Chairwoman Clarke shared that she would like to see an increase in the number of elected members on the Board of Education. She shared that she supports an at-large election system.
- (3) Dr. Torres-Rodriguez remarked that she agrees with Councilman Lebron's perspective that a fully elected BOE in regards to building capacity of the Board members. She shared that in being Superintendent for five years, she has had five board chairs during her tenure.
- xii) Commissioner Rubenstein asked how we could increase engagement with parents in the appointment process.
  - (1) Councilman Lebron shared that he believes a change to the structure could lead to and increased interest, if it is changing the election year, number of appointments, or appointment authority, to increase voter engagement.
- xiii) Chairman Woulfe asked Chairwoman Clarke about the issue of Board of Education members joining the BOE in the middle of the school year based on time of the election.
  - (1) Atty. Mednick remarked that it is standard practice for elected Board of Education members to take office at the same time as other local elected officials which typically begins in the January. He remarked his belief that there is no prohibition in state law to moving the term start date to another point in the year, such as the start of the fiscal year. He remarked that this would lead to an eight-month period from when an individual is elected and when the term begins. He raised the similar illogical situation in which the city council is elected in November and begins their term in the middle of a fiscal year.
  - (2) Chairwoman Clarke spoke about her experience where new elected officials can disrupt the flow of business by the Board of Education. She suggested that this is an issue that the Commission could investigate.

V. Adjourned at 8:49pm<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This meeting was recorded and published by Hartford Public Access Television. A digital recording of the meeting can be found at the following link- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j5ZYuPgceAY>