

MEMORANDUM

To: Lowell School Committee

From: Glenn Koocher, Executive Director, MA Association of School Committees

Date: March 20, 2019

RE: Report of Focus Groups

INTRODUCTION

As part of the process to select a new superintendent, the Lowell School Committee asked the MA Association of School Committees (MASC) to conduct a series of focus groups with various stakeholder constituencies. In all, 23 sessions were scheduled, during which over 250 individuals participated in live discussions. All participants were asked the same questions, but everyone was invited to add individual comments at their discretion. Those questions included:

- What are the strengths and particular assets of the district that need to be preserved, expanded, and cultivated during the next administration?
- What are the areas for growth, development, and change, and what would be on your wish list for the next 3-5 years and beyond?
- Referring to your experiences as stakeholders, what are the characteristics and attributes that would be desirable in the next superintendent?
- What else would you like to add to provide insight to the school committee, search committee, candidates for the superintendency, and the successful candidate?

Specific information about Lowell, its schools and its administrative structure are provided in a brochure prepared by the Lowell Public Schools (LPS) in collaboration with MASC. It is accessible on the MASC web site at www.masc.org.

KEY THEMES FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS

One very interesting aspect of the meetings with constituents was the consensus of responses. There were very few contradictions to comments on the key points and central themes. It does appear that stakeholders are thinking alike and speaking consistently about their goals and concerns for the district and for the future of Lowell.

Commitment to the Success of Lowell. Participants take pride in their schools and in the city itself. They cited several innovations and a history of looking forward. In fact, Lowell High School was the state's first coeducational secondary school when it was founded in 1831. Faculty members, despite significant challenges, embrace their positions and affirm their commitment to remain in Lowell and work with its

children and families. Parents spoke highly of the city and their pride in being there and being part of the future for which there was cautious optimism.

Diversity as an Asset. Lowell has been a place where immigrants have arrived in various waves over decades and become part of the fabric of the city. There was a broad consensus that this is at the heart of what Lowell has become and the faculty is committed to it. Several responders noted their particular pride in having family who immigrated to Lowell. Still, the large population of English Language Learners represents a special responsibility which teachers and principals seem to embrace. They also acknowledge economic diversity as a challenge to “gateway cities” like Lowell that need additional funding just to maintain level services.

Empowering the Constituents Representing Lowell’s Diverse Population. Advocates for students believe that empowerment of parents is an important objective given the continued migration of students into the district. They call for a more broad outreach program to work with ELL constituencies. Lowell personnel often rely on a description of the 30-30-30-10 factor. (Thirty percent of the students are white, 30% Asian, and 30% Hispanic. The balance includes a growing population of African immigrant students and a range of others.) A high school administrator explained there are over 60 languages spoken by students at LHS.

Strength of Individual School Faculties. It is not unusual for the faculty to speak well of itself, but in the case of Lowell, parents also spoke highly of the teachers and principals who educate their children. Teachers and administrators gave highly detailed examples of how they fulfill their missions during a period of cutbacks and shortfalls. They articulated a strong commitment to their diverse student bodies, but also pointed to disparities that exist among schools. This is not to say there was high morale or absence of complaints noted. Many concerns were noted. The loss of classroom supports, reductions of paraprofessional positions in previous years, and frustration with the influence of politics and patronage in the past were mentioned frequently, but with emphasis that teachers, aides, principals and others work with focus on supporting the children in the district. There was clear respect for their students and parents at an unusually high level. The presence of a high number of native Lowell people among the ranks at every level and among all positions was cited as an asset that reinforces the commitment to the district, but, also, a liability to the “outsiders” who lack the familial and political relationships to the city’s political power structure.

Several veteran educators warn of a higher volume of retirements in 3-5 years, and they are concerned that these positions be filled and not left vacant or eliminated.

Collective Bargaining is Important. Collective bargaining has its friends and foes. There are those who believe that the entire education reform movement is based on hostility to teachers’ unions, while teachers argue that bargaining requires administrators to be more collaborative and create more partnerships that will be more effective because of it. The next superintendent should be briefed thoroughly on the various contracts with administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, clerks, custodians and other classified employees working under written agreements. The superintendent should also understand the philosophy behind bargaining in order to succeed in a district with a long labor history.

Funding Shortfalls and Resulting Cuts. Lowell provides what is regarded as fair compensation to its teachers, according to many faculty interviewees. Unlike some districts, staff do not flee the LPS for other higher-paying positions, because the compensation structure is viewed fairly. They note that individuals have been valued and prioritized over other cost cutting tactics deployed by other districts. While faculty appreciate this, they point to certain elements that undermine morale. In many cases, positions often go unfilled when they are vacated rather than resorting to layoffs. However, parents and faculty members cited significant cuts to services and programs for students including the elimination of library faculty across the district with the exception of the high school. There have been reductions in paraprofessional positions. Some key central office positions are unfilled. Faculty members explain how they have accepted additional elements to their work to cover for these losses, but they were clear in the need for significant infusions of funds to restore important services. There was some sense that the city should do more to generate the funds, while others believe the state should recalibrate the foundation budget system to fill the gap.

Five Schools will Require “Turn-Around Plans. Lowell has five schools, including Lowell High School, that are designated as “in need of improvement” under the state’s accountability and assessment system. The district will have three years to effect a successful transition in each school out of sanction status. However, educators see this as a “formidable but surmountable” challenge based on the success of earlier school turnaround efforts. They are concerned that these schools at risk have the financial support and independence to structure their renaissance without excessive interference. The next superintendent will need to monitor carefully the legitimacy of this wish to manage their own turnaround with the obligations of the central office to oversee the process.

Several knowledgeable stakeholders advised that successful school improvement involves appreciating the role of teachers, allowing educators to opt-out if they find strategies unacceptable, tailoring curricula to the project, setting the right goals, establishing pre and after-school services, establishing collaboration with social and economic agency partners, and allotting or finding sufficient additional funds to secure these elements. Contributors were also adamant that the district would achieve success without the intervention of the kind of external consultants who enter with an agenda or preconceived notion of the right strategy.

Central Office and the Schools. In a district of almost 15,000 students, it is common for faculty to view the Central Offices as somewhat removed from the day to day life in the classroom. However, because of the tight knit nature of the faculty and its relationship to Lowell and their colleagues in the school department, there is a measure detante. School faculties would like more flexibility relative to the day to day operations and general goal setting as well as accountability while the central office personnel push back because of the nature of the state accountability system and the need to keep the pressure on educators to improve outcomes. However, several key positions are unfilled and functions working with fewer staff, including human resources which was cited as having a significant impact. Several parents and faculty members urged the creation of 360-degree evaluations in order to implement the long promised (by the state) teacher and parent input into evaluations.

A parent observed to a room with a lot of agreement, “Having the skeleton crew in the central office is less a distraction than an opportunity to bring in new leadership and effect needed changes.”

Desire for a Superintendent Who Will Stay and Lead. The district has had a series of superintendents who have stayed for three years or less and two of whom, over the last decade, who left unwillingly. Faculty and parents note that the principals and students shield the students from the impact of changing district leadership, but they note that strong, enlightened, and caring leadership will have an impact only if it is installed for the long term. Administrators see the superintendent as one creating the leadership team of the future and who will be able to manage the complex administrative challenges and to build strong relationships with the community, faculty, and Middlesex Community College and the University of Massachusetts-Lowell.

Clarity About Who is in Charge of What. There was a great deal of frustration expressed by contributors about the problems of working within an educational bureaucracy, particularly one that is understaffed and where lines of authority are ambiguous or freely crossed even by some of the same people who call for clear lines of authority.

Equitable Distribution of Capital and Financial Resources. Another consistent theme from responders was the need to scrutinize the conditions of buildings, policies relative to student assignment, and the contract related practices of transfer and reassignment of teachers and paraprofessionals to address a problem of resource allocations. MASC is always cautious when addressing the issues of “equity” because it can be easy to state but difficult to define and implement. In Lowell’s case, several instances were stated about high risk students attending particular schools, underperforming faculty being transferred to certain schools in past years, and general resource distribution being imbalanced. This is a frequent set of concerns in most Massachusetts districts, but participants in focus groups see this as a special challenge for the next superintendent.

Concerns About the High School. The city hosts a single general high school, and based on comments from a wide range of participants, the faculty is committed to its students and the city. A new high school will be constructed in phases over the next seven years. It will be constructed on the current site in the downtown area – the end result of a highly publicized and controversial process of site selection that defined much of Lowell politics for several years. Now, the decisions have been made and the process of getting a new complex is underway.

Two major themes around this emerged from the focus groups: 1) that the new complex be built efficiently and well and that disruptions to student and community life be minimized; and 2) that steps be taken to ensure that a greater number of students are well served to achieve high performance levels. Large schools are always at risk for students “falling through the cracks.” It was the sense of many responders that outstanding students can do well, but, perhaps, not as well as in other districts, and this is a cause for concern. Also, Lowell High School services an extraordinarily socially, economically, racially and linguistically diverse population, and a high risk student base will demand resources and services.

Positive Comments about Special Education Services. Of those who participated in focus group discussions, there was a highly unusual level of support for the special education services in the district. Articulated by the faculty and reinforced by comments from parents, the quality of services to special needs children are regarded as high and the level of collaboration and transparency with parents is appreciated. Staffs are viewed as advocates for children and the administration is well regarded as focused on the mission for students more than the desire to withhold services for the purpose of saving money. During the week of focus group meetings, it was announced that the director of special education had resigned. This should bring special focus to the future of the program and a point of interest for the next superintendent.

Making the Lowell Public Schools the Schools of Choice. Parents have choices: parochial, non-sectarian private, and charter schools. Charters, in particular, divert state funds and disrupt the economy of scale that comes from running a two-tiered, but singly funded state system. Most stakeholders do not realize how much charter schools divert from Chapter 70 financial aid – the full average per pupil cost per student and not, as is widely believed, a lesser amount. Most educators and members of the public want an environment where parents would return their children to the Lowell Public Schools.

Special Facets of Plan-E and the Role of the City Manager. Lowell is one of three cities operating under a ‘Plan-E’ form of government. Under Plan-E, the city council elects one of its own members to serve as mayor who chairs both the council and the school committee. As a result, veterans of municipal government point to the support for public schools from a system where local elected officials often move from the school committee to the city council. The city also appoints the city manager who has very carefully defined authority over the operations of the administration of city government. The authority of the city manager is similar to the authority of the superintendent of schools, both of whom are legally authorized to oversee municipal government, especially personnel. In addition, the city has done well in terms of economic development, but reaping the success of urban development requires years of patient and consistent planning, just as meaningful improvement in student achievement requires well planned, focused and collaborative work in the schools and central office.

Politics and Schools. As is the case with virtually all Massachusetts urban school districts, many educators come to work in one school system and remain throughout their career. Prior to the modern education reform movement, local residents received an unofficial but real preference in obtaining positions as teachers and, subsequently, promotion to the principal and central office administrative ranks. As is also the case, the faces of the faculty reflect the city as it was decades earlier. As new immigrants come into the city, and as the population diversifies, the faculty rarely resembles the students. Moreover, as the preponderance of faculty are drawn from the municipality, it is the community that now raises questions of diversity and the disadvantage of not having a connection to the city’s political forces.

This is not to question the competency of the faculty. Stakeholders were virtually unanimous in commending the principals and teachers and noting the support of paraprofessionals and support persons.

These same constituents, parents, and educators criticize the role of politics in the school system, but , on the other hand, they describe their own willingness to use their local connections, end-run the chain of command, take their concerns directly to the school committee, encourage the use of the school committee as a forum to advocate for their personal and professional advantage, and, without the deliberate intent to do so, undermine the authority of the central office, and, counterintuitively, argue for a superintendent who will end the practices that undermine progress.

Most focus group participants are looking to the school committee to lead the way in appointing, and, more importantly, supporting a superintendent who will effect this change.

They also note that any superintendent who comes to Lowell from another district will be at a distinct disadvantage by not having the knowledge of local history, understanding of the depth of current relationships, and the familiarity with the individual school, constituency, and community priorities. As one knowledgeable individual said, “Lowell has a lot of political pot holes, and the newbie needs not to step in one.”

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS

STRENGTHS OF THE CITY AND THE DISTRICT

As noted above, the community and faculty stakeholders noted the following strengths:

- A proficient and committed faculty. This was a general consensus as noted above. Educators appreciate their colleagues, parents support the schools and respect the teachers and building leaders, and the faculty is stable and supportive of the students. They note that faculty are “in it for the right reason” and “home grown” and that this argues that they have a good, ongoing understanding of student concerns.
- Students may obtain college credits through the dual enrollment program and, if successful, can obtain an undergraduate degree in three years.
- The Knowledge Bowl is an important program for middle schoolers and is a popular event for students. Proponents fear that programs like this could be sacrificed in the interests of time.
- There were theme schools that were referenced frequently as assets to the district. There is a program for the arts, STEM (science, technology, engineering and math), and a community school model. Also, there are three “therapeutic schools” serve students with high level special needs.

AREAS FOR GROWTH, DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE

(Several additional issues to fulfill unmet needs are incorporated into the section, below, on Characteristics of the Superintendent)

- Financial issues have resulted in:
 - Loss of elementary and middle school library time.
 - Limits to art, music, and related arts curricula in the lower grades.

- Reductions that took place in previous years of school resource officer time in schools.
- Consolidation of positions, adding to the workload.
- Many important positions are unfilled.
- While social and emotional needs of students are prioritized, there is a great call for additional student mental health and counseling services.
- Although constituents praise the work of schools and teachers, the stress of working in a fiscally tight environment and the growing demands of children in distress bring less job satisfaction to the workplace.
- There is a need for benchmarks to monitor student progress.
- There is a need for a vision that is well defined and carried out.
- Where there are short-term assignments during transitions in school or classroom leadership, or transfers of faculty, children have less opportunity to build relationships with students or teachers. This was raised in reference to language in the collective bargaining agreements that may require principals to accept transfers-in who were not their first choices, or in situations where there is rapid turnover in certain schools.

THE NEXT SUPERINTENDENT

- Someone, preferably with experience as a superintendent or ranking central office administrator, with an understanding of urban district schooling and the experience of serving an economically as well as culturally diverse community. This would include an understanding of “gateway cities” and appreciated the unique social and emotional disruptors such as anxiety, depression, and even fear that new residents can feel.
- Involved and visible. Several participants noted they appreciated the opportunity to have contact with the superintendent, and there was wide consensus that educators would like to see the superintendent visit their buildings. Parents also noted that for a variety of reasons, including being pulled in various directions at the same time, the superintendents, whoever they may have been, was not accessible to them.
- Bilingual and Bicultural. A number of interviewees stated a goal of finding a bilingual leader and one who is comfortable with at least one of the cultures of Lowell’s students and families.
- Done some homework about Lowell. There was no real consensus about whether the next superintendent should come via an internal promotion or from outside the district. However, stakeholders believe that preparation for this position would be essential to being successful given the many complexities, relationships, and challenges of a large, urban district.
- Background in education, preferably in a classroom or with direct service to children (i.e., SPED). Stakeholders, as a whole, want someone who has worked in a classroom or directly in a school with children. This view was strongly held by teachers and paraprofessionals, but less so among others.
- Knowledgeable about collective bargaining and managing union-organized staff in ways that can bring about mutually agreeable strategies and “win-win” outcomes.

- Familiarity with school building projects is important. The segmented reconstruction of the high school will require familiarity with the many elements of a major project including safety, scheduling, access, and watching over the construction appropriately.
- Knowledgeable and able to explain a school budget. Several attendees are also looking to the superintendent to find additional money to protect and even restore some of the cut services.
- Able to find new money. To complement general budget savvy, participants see the need for greater financial strength through grants, partnerships or statewide advocacy.
- Committed to civic engagement and parent empowerment. Lowell officials are also considering new strategies to make local elected boards more diverse. Several strategies are possible, but they are not necessarily within the responsibilities of the superintendent. However, voter empowerment was also an expressed goal of parents and advocates for them.
- An appreciation of the laws, regulations and principles of special education so as to continue the user-friendly culture of the SPED department and its compliance with state requirements.
- Appreciates and supports co-curricular activities and arts and enrichment as valuable components of high quality education of children.
- Authenticity and caring. The next superintendent should demonstrate a strong appreciation for people and a caring nature for children and families.
- A leadership style that:
 - Personifies high expectations for children and teachers.
 - Skills that not only personify exemplary leadership styles, but also “motivate courageous followers.”
 - Administers transparently and demands the same from subordinates.
 - Balances top down and bottom up management, and the pros and cons of each.
 - Delegates to subordinates and supports them in their work.
 - Understanding of, and interest in, innovation and change
 - Builds collaboration among educators and with parents and community and can use these contacts to build a truly diverse staff at all levels.
 - Is able to say, “No,” without burning bridges.
- A communications style that:
 - Is founded on a goal of clarity.
 - Understands media and how to use it.
 - Can produce information quickly and accessibly.
 - Uses humor and good naturedness appropriately.
 - Will be as well known to the clerks and custodians as to teachers, paraprofessionals and principals.
 - “Someone who would want make me want to stay in Lowell.”