

MEMORANDUM

To: Arlington School Committee

From: Kathleen Kelly, Field Director, MASC
Glenn Koocher, Executive Director, MASC

Date: August 28, 2020

RE: Focus Groups Summary Report

This is a summary report of the focus groups and a general summary of the findings of the on-line survey developed by MASC to facilitate the work of the Arlington School Committee in its search for a new superintendent of schools. It is designed as a guide for the school committee to develop a profile of the desired superintendent, as well as a tool for candidates to prepare for the application and interview process.

MASC facilitated 16 community meetings that included administrators, teachers and staff, members of the community at-large, recent alumni, parents of English Language Learners, members of the special education parent advisory council and parents with interest in children with special needs, and civic leaders from the town meeting and the finance and capital planning committees. Overall over 220 people participated in live interviews while more than 1,000 people took the on-line survey.

Arlington is a five square mile town, six miles northwest of Boston, with a population of 45,000. It has a public school system with 6,000 students, in 10 operating buildings, served by 900 employees. It is contiguous to a major highway exiting Greater Boston and readily accessible to the extensive social, cultural and recreational venues of New England. It has a highly engaged network of socially conscious, politically astute, and enthusiastic parents and community members, making this a highly desirable district.

The Arlington School Department is a major component of town government. In Massachusetts, school districts are departments of municipal government and, with the exception of regional school districts (including the Minuteman Regional Vocational Technical School district of which Arlington is a member), they are overseen by school committees with fiduciary and educational responsibilities. As a town department, the Arlington Public Schools share a significant element of fiscal oversight with a town manager, a town Finance Committee, and a Representative Town Meeting.

The Arlington Public Schools (APS) are overseen by an active and engaged school committee of seven members who are recognized as a high functioning governance body with a good understanding of its role and its relationship with the superintendent. The Town of Arlington operates with a town manager; the municipal appropriating authority is a Representative Town Meeting of 252 elected members. Superintendent of Schools Kathleen Bodie will retire in June 2021 after ten years leading the district and following a successful career as an educational administrator in Arlington. Under her leadership, and with the active engagement of the school committee, the town has enjoyed a collaborative relationship

with the board and senior education staff. An examination of student performance data will show that academic achievement is sound, but an achievement gap exists in some key cohorts. Overall, the district has been free from any form of sanction status under the state's rigorous system of accountability, regulation, and punishment.

Relationships with the local collective bargaining units are also described as constructive and respectful. Just as the community is actively engaged in civic life, and process is an important part of local governance, so, too, are the teachers involved in a thoughtful and effective collaboration with the superintendent on most of the important decisions for the education of children. The school committee members are experienced and diligent in understanding their policy making and fiduciary responsibilities, and both superintendent and board members have been good examples of how to work collaboratively.

The Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC) has also maintained a close working relationship with APS and is serving as the superintendent search consultant. The level of community engagement was demonstrated by the turnout at focus groups and with the on-line survey. A full summary of all survey responses will be archived with APS for subsequent review.

The district maintains an active web site with links to further general and school-based data.

OVERARCHING THEMES

Feedback from stakeholders has presented several important themes and areas of consensus to guide the search process and new superintendent in the transition and assumption of the next administration.

COVID-19. For the future record, it is important to note that the COVID-19 pandemic dramatically reshaped local school districts from late March 2020 into the summer and most likely into the fall and winter. Getting students back to school in remote learning or in-class format is a major challenge for the faculty and school committee. The possibility of a resurgence of the temporarily tamed disease (in Massachusetts, but not in most of the country) will hover as a cloud over all local public school districts and could affect the superintendent selection process as the community expresses its concern over the health and emotional wellbeing of students, faculty, and families, as well as the cost of returning to class under the special protocols and regulations in place for an indefinite period.

The next superintendent may face such important challenges raised by interviewees and survey responders as:

- Moving back and forth between delivery systems for students and faculty working between the extremes of full return to school and fully remote learning.
- Addressing the effectiveness of the temporary schooling models to maximize the success of instruction on one hand, and compensating for the setbacks that might take place under a disrupted school year.
- Developing budgetary and policy guidance for the school committee and the school district as many governance, operational, and fiscal protocols need to be changed quickly and nimbly.
- Working with the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to mediate the historically troubled relationship between state and local educators.
- Negotiating or renegotiating collective bargaining agreements because of the COVID emergency.

- Earning the confidence of the community to send children back to school and to retain APS as the education vehicle of choice. Currently, Arlington hosts parochial schools for students seeking a religious platform for the children, but the town loses few students to the often-predatory charter schools who often selectively recruit from local districts. Fortunately, Arlington and APS enjoy good relationships with the community and parents in particular.

Support of the Town. Arlington, as was noted, boasts a highly engaged population, an active town meeting, supportive municipal administration and a respected town manager. The town is currently building a new \$291 million high school, having secured 77% of the vote in a 2019 special election to cover the local share of construction. Arlington has also approved a series of fiscal stability plans to finance town and school operations, tied to four separate Proposition 2½ override votes to maintain adequate funding for schools and town services. The most recent operating override, for \$5.5 million, was approved with 68% of the vote during the same 2019 special election that approved the high school building project. This respectful support of the town has been earned as the result of long-term, consistent and transparent government and the success of students. There are, to be sure, areas of great concern, and among them is that many parents who want to engage further or contribute to their children’s schools are not always utilized.

Enrollment Growth: During the past eight years, Arlington has experienced a 24.5% increase in enrollment (4,858 in 2012, 6,047 in 2020). The enrollment growth has occurred as families with children have moved into, and remained in, smaller homes and condos that haven’t traditionally been occupied by families with children. The town funded four projects that were not supported by the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA). In 2016, Arlington voters approved a debt exclusion to renovate the mothballed Gibbs School (\$25 million) and add six classrooms to the newly-built Thompson School (\$4 million). The addition of six classrooms to the Hardy School (\$3.5 million) was funded out of the town’s FY2018 capital budget, without a debt exclusion vote, and a (\$11.6 million) renovation of the Stratton School was completed in 2017. Combined with the new high school, designed for 1,755 students, Arlington’s expanded facilities should provide sufficient room to educate anticipated enrollment growth through the next decade. The School Committee, municipal officials, and members of the community pointed with pride to the cooperative relationships, and community support, that resulted in the community’s broad support of these efforts.

Student Population: The district’s enrollment growth, and the surge in housing prices in the region, has been aligned with changes in district demographics. Compared to 2012, the White population has declined from 77.3% to 70.5% of the student body. During that time, there has been an increase in Asian (10.3% to 13.0%), Hispanic (5.0% to 6.1%), and Multiracial (3.6% to 6.8%) students in the schools. 12.7% of students are identified as having a first language that is not English, and 4.8% are English Learners. Arlington parents include a significant number of graduate and post-graduate students, researchers, and high-tech workers from abroad. East and South Asian languages predominate the home languages of English language learners. School Committee and community members have expressed the need to improve connections, and level of services, for students and families from homes where English is not the primary language.

Need for Vision, Imagination, and Creative Thinking: Arlington has functioned effectively for a long time and is not completely distanced from an outdated culture, in some circles, of tolerance of adequacy

rather than aspirations for excellence. Members of the community are also aware that there can be, as part of a culture of contentment, especially among longer-term residents, an absence of initiative, creativity, or even vision. The next superintendent should be able to address the future with sufficient energy to please the larger numbers of new Arlingtonians who want to overcome those areas where contentment and lower expectations exist.

Expectations for Students. Teachers and parents largely outlined their expectations for students as ambitious and rigorous, but several also explained that their prioritization of social and emotional wellness is equally as high. There was a consciousness prevalent that excellence is an important goal, but the community does not want the reputation for pushing students at the expense of their mental health as is the case in some of the other competitive districts. Related to this were the comments from many stakeholders that a culture of contentment works to the disadvantage of students in the middle, or young people who are socially isolated, or students from underrepresented constituencies.

Dedicated and Effective Faculty. Students, parents, and faculty members themselves were unambiguous in commending the faculty in general for their commitment to students and to the district. A long history of patronage-free hiring, professional development, and leadership at the school and district level was cited among the reasons for the respect given to teachers, paraprofessionals, and staff. Responders noted the respect for students, high expectations, and commitment to their jobs as reasons for public support. This was emphasized by students, including recent alumni, who participated in a focus group of their own.

That said, many parents and students recognized that students “in the middle” may not benefit as much as high performers and students with special needs as was noted, above. Teaching quality, while generally commended at all levels had its exceptions, and the responsiveness to parent concerns among individual school administrators, generally commended, was cited by some parents and survey takers as inconsistent.

Communications. The current administration is recognized as thoroughly competent and dedicated to students, but low key and uncommunicative in many respects. Parents and faculty repeated a theme that the next superintendent must have an effective strategy for identifying issues, sharing information on the process of addressing them, and updating the public regularly on developments and key areas of concern. The superintendent was, however, commended on one hand for not upstaging the principals, teachers or students as the most important clients of the public school system. On the other hand, responders want a superintendent who will be visible in buildings, in the community, and with students to bolster the leadership skills one brings to the job.

As the district prepares for its “back-to-school” planning, stakeholders want a lot of information immediately. This is an exceptional crisis, but responders explained that during the year replacement of staff, reassignments, curriculum decisions, strategic planning, and financial issues remain key areas of interest and worthy of updates.

Strategic Leadership in a New Era. The transition provides an opportunity to take a thoughtful view of the future and a clear vision as well as a strategic plan to achieve necessary change around best practices for teaching and learning, using data to make informed decisions, effective use of personnel, program expansion or restructuring, and ensuring that the high school will be well prepared to take

students to college and career given the potential to exploit the excitement of a new high school complex.

Special Education. Responders and a broad consensus of those who participated in focus groups were clear that issues of special education need to be addressed as a highest priority for the next superintendent. Parents and community members were consistent and specific about what they believe are systemic and structural problems that have festered for a number of years. They include:

- Inconsistency among schools as to the access to and quality of special education services.
- Special concerns about service coordination in “transition grades” where changes of schools are required.
- Failures to accommodate the concerns of parents on behalf of their children with special needs. Several participants viewed their status as parents and the services to their children “as afterthoughts.”
- Undue burdens placed on parents in order to secure services for their children.
- Loss of special educators who leave for better paying positions in other districts.
- Equity issues where savvy and economically advantaged families are able to pressure the system or identify alternative services that might not be available to more disadvantaged students.
- Unsatisfactory translation services.
- Lack of a local resource inventory for parents of children with special needs.

These concerns ran the gamut from information sharing with parents, assignment of students within their Individual Education Plans (IEPs), quality of services, and general support. They were frequently echoed by parents in the general focus groups whose children do not require special education services.

However, parents of special needs children and faculty members are deeply appreciative of the faculty who provide direct services to their children and these families see the faculty as dedicated to the students, despite structural and systemic flaws in the administration of special education.

This will be an important area for the superintendent search committee to probe with candidates and for the school committee to prioritize for the next administration. Responders recommended that a strong relationship with parents of special needs children will be important.

School Structure and the New High School. There was general consensus that the current structure of seven neighborhood K-5 elementary schools, one school exclusively for grade 6, a middle school for grades 7 and 8, and a single 9-12 high school represents the best configuration considering the configuration of the district’s buildings. Some special education parents expressed concern about students having to make four transitions to pass from K-12, with an emphasis on SPED services for students passing through the sixth grade.

Arts and Extracurricular Activity. In this period of fiscal uncertainty, many responders commended various academic departments and individual instructors. Students spoke highly of science, math and language arts, but cautioned that students at risk might not feel as strongly. There was general consensus that the arts programs are a high priority with the students and parents and, in a time of economic crisis, they fear that highly regarded programs like music (singing is unhealthful during a virus pandemic) or fine arts, and drama (again, speaking at an audience is a risky practice in a pandemic) might be in peril. The next superintendent was encouraged to be mindful of this concern.

Early Education and Literacy. Parents and faculty put considerable emphasis on early education and the future of the youngest learners. There were helpful citations about source of emerging science on best practices and overall strategies for children. It was strongly recommended that a discrete early education and literacy program be part of a strategic plan for the future.

Equity and Diversity. The face of APS is largely white, including its students and faculty, but a meaningful number of students from underrepresented populations attend the schools. Fellow students note that students of color are at risk of being isolated. In particular, several responders called for special attention to both students who require special education and others who are English Language Learners on the party of the superintendent and principals.

The district has made significant efforts to bring educators of color into the district. Over the past three years, three African-American leaders have been hired by the district (Assistant Superintendent, Chief Financial Officer, Gibbs School principal), but the district's efforts to hire more teachers of color has been a challenge. The school committee views this as a structural problem made worse by the state's requirements for educator licensure, which discourages candidates from out-of-state from applying for jobs in Massachusetts. In response, the Arlington School Committee sponsored a resolution, adopted by the MASC delegate assembly in 2019, calling on the elimination of the testing requirement for licensure.

Teachers and parents called for more training on cultural competency as many examples were cited both in groups and discreetly of how students may feel excluded, disrespected, or ignored. Students believe their teachers are well intended but not always well suited to understand minority students or children at social and economic risk. Several parents note the absence of role models for minority students, and there were frequent examples of inappropriate, however unintentional, remarks or actions that undermine the morale of these children.

There were also some important comments about the equitable distribution of resources. The next superintendent would be well advised to inventory some of the key areas of resource sharing. One parent raised, with the agreement of others, the phenomenon of "opportunity hoarding" that occurs when underrepresented students are inadvertently excluded from activities, higher level classes, or social contact. While the district has eliminated structural barriers to higher-level courses at the high school, the district needs to encourage more students to take advantage of its offerings.

As noted above, the balance between what is provided to the most advanced learners and those in the middle needs investigation. As one responder noted, "Some students are undermotivated, even as they perform adequately. This isn't good."

Student Support. Students emphasize the need for more guidance and counselling services, especially for those "in the middle." They appreciate what they have, but they also fear that students at risk or who are not over-achievers are underserved on the counselling front – a criticism of the pure numbers and not of the quality of guidance or counselling services currently available. Additional information is included in the section on special education.

METCO. Arlington hosts students from the METCO program who are bussed daily from Boston to several suburban communities. This program is supported, but advocates are particularly concerned about the program in light of social distancing requirement on buses and the special strain on students who must learn remotely. There is also concern that these students may find themselves isolated

because they are both minority and “not from here.” Some districts (i.e., Bedford) have an extraordinary and enviable relationship with METCO students and families; Arlington responders were aware of the success of other districts and would like Arlington to strive to emulate proven practices from other communities.

Using Data Effectively. As has been discussed by the school committee and noted by parents with experience in research and change, the district should be making better use of the data it has, or could have, to make informed decisions. In the interest of transparency, more of the available data should be shared with the community. Several parents and school committee members who are expert in use of data and research-based strategies called for better informed decision making. This is also referenced in the section, below, on the superintendency.

Relationship with the School Committee. The superintendent and school committee relationship is frequently misunderstood by the public. The relationship in Arlington is described as one with a high degree of mutual respect. The community sees a committee that embraces its role as a board of directors, in the context of the Education Reform Act of 1993. There is a significant desire to see a stronger line of communication and information sharing between the superintendent and the community. Several responders see the school committee as “the place with the table” at which subjects that are not discussed there may not be presented to the public at all. Others note that the strong relationship between the town and the school system is, in part, due to the engagement of school committee members with community leaders and citizens at large. The credibility of the superintendent and the committee is viewed as a key to approving the budgets, debt exclusions, and operating overrides that have driven the district’s success. The next superintendent should value this relationship.

THE NEXT SUPERINTENDENT

A portion of each focus group was spent on the skills and abilities as well as personal characteristics of the next superintendent. There were several consistent themes. As the chart of prioritizations shows, vision, student-centered and student well-being, student achievement, social justice/anti-racism, communications skills, and the ability to attract and retain high quality educators were the six most highly ranked characteristics cited, followed by skills in organized thinking, collaborative management and distributive leadership (delegation).

Several comments from responders help expand on what teachers, parents, students, community leaders and school committee members are seeking.

It is important to note that the three most highly rated priorities for the next superintendent as identified by more than 1,000 survey takers who ranked their top three factors were a) a visionary to create positive change and growth; b) values the social/emotional wellbeing of students; and c) student academic achievement. In aggregating a single ranking of the three selections, student wellbeing was the top choice.

Here are summaries of the key areas covered in the live focus groups and in the surveys.

An Expert Communicator Who Will Share Information. Communication was a recurrent theme as parents, students and faculty have called for regular and relevant information to be provided throughout the year on matters of interest and concern. They call for a candidate for the superintendency to be able to explain how the person will communicate, the venues and vehicles that will be used, and the frequency with which information will be shared.

Understands School Budget and Finance. Several responders, including municipal leaders, believe the superintendent should understand how a school budget is built and how to explain the financial plan to others. This priority was also tied to strategic planning and cited as a reason for the success of the five-year financial plans: specifically, that planning and budget are coordinated in a coherent way. The state's Chapter 70 funding system, various other sources of revenue including the Special Education Circuit Breaker program, and federal revenues (more important in FY 2021 because of the COVID related stimulus bills, including one still in the pipeline) are important elements of financial planning for the foreseeable future. A superintendent who understands these revenues and can explain them to the public is at a distinct advantage. A leader who can work with the school committee to integrate state and federal funds strategically and collaboratively will be invaluable.

A Good Explainer. Arlingtonians rely on the superintendent to be a prominent civic leader. A big part of this status is in the ability of the superintendent to explain complex concepts to the public, many of whom do not want to hear "eduspeak," condescension, or oblique dodging of answers to important questions. The most successful superintendents are the best communicators who were the best teachers and building leaders.

Overcome Resistance to Change. The next superintendent should be able to explain to the public how that leader will overcome the inevitable resistance to change that permeates many school systems. This was a demand articulated by many parents.

Visible and Engaged in Arlington. Faculty and students want to see and know the superintendent and would like their leader to be a presence at school events and in town affairs. In response to specific questions, few people insist that the superintendent live in Arlington.

Experience as a Teacher/Educator. There was broad consensus that the next Arlington superintendent should have experience in the classroom or directly with students (i.e., counsellor, therapist, or specialist), and they urge the school committee to avoid non-traditional candidates.

Student Centered Leader. As the survey highlights, parents, teachers, and students value a superintendent who will prioritize the needs of students as persons and learners and not as data. Many responders cited student health and emotional wellbeing as a priority and explained that the district has done a good job to date working with students to strive for excellence without inappropriate pressure. However, several comments and student feedback called out for special attention to students in the middle who might be underserved and whom the district may need to focus more carefully.

Understands Value of Cultural Competence and Diversity. Responders and focus group attendees were insistent that the superintendent be experienced in working with diverse groups and can demonstrate experience in hiring and retaining a diverse faculty, serving a diverse student population, and working with community groups serving underrepresented populations. Session participants with special

interest in diversity and cultural competence noted that the candidate must be able to demonstrate specific achievements or met goals in this category.

Understands the Appropriate Use of Data. There was wide recognition that data to inform decision making and to help improve educational practice of teachers and administrators are important, but there were several thoughtful comments about having a superintendent who can also put data in perspective as one of several tools to improve student outcomes.

Advocate for APS, Students and Families. Responders expect the superintendent to be an advocate before the town meeting, but they also want someone who can speak to state and congressional leaders. A strong undercurrent, brought to a new level of discussion by COVID, is the extent to which standardized testing might be reconsidered in light of the loss of instructional time or the disruption of the lives of students, their families, and their teachers.

Intellectually Curious Leader. Stakeholders want a leader who can ask questions, probe around the status quo, and propose new and thoughtful ways to do things differently, *if* change is required, and not just for the sake of change. They would like a superintendent to could inspire students.

Targeting Equity. There were many statements on equity, particularly as it applies to students in the middle. Particular advocacy was made for a superintendent who understands the needs of those in special education and who are English Language Learners, but also for students for whom high expectations are essential but who might not perceive that their teachers share that goal. Also, equity means many things, and knowledgeable responders want a superintendent who will recognize this, integrate this goal into the everyday life of APS, and understand some of the more subtle elements including the cultural, economic, ethnic, and racial factors need to be integrated into the approach, such as, for example, opportunity hoarding.

Maintain Collegiality with the Faculty. Responders explained their goal of having a superintendent who knows the value of the collective bargaining process as a tool for collaboration, and a leader who has a genuine respect for teachers as professionals.

Understands Special Education. As noted above and as explained in detail, the superintendent will need to take on significant improvement in special education services including building a relationship with parents to work on concerns. This will occupy a considerable amount of time in a superintendency transition and will not be allowed to go unaddressed.

Summary of Rating of the First, Second and Third Most Important Challenges Facing the Superintendent

	1 st	2 nd	3 rd
Visionary to Create Positive Change and Growth	14.09	8.98	8.61
Values Social/Emotional Wellbeing of Students	13.53	14.59	11.05
Prioritizes Student Academic Achievement	13.15	5.52	3.93
Commitment to Social Justice and Anti-Racism	9.70	6.64	5.71
Effective Communication with Staff, Students, Parents, and Community	6.81	7.11	8.05
Attracts and Retain High Quality Educators	6.62	5.24	6.74
Able to Think Carefully, Specifically, and in Systems-Oriented Fashion	4.76	5.71	5.24
Collaborative Team Manager and Team Leader/Delegate Effectively	3.26	3.46	3.28
Strong Background – Curriculum, Design, Implementation	2.80	5.24	4.87
Experience as Classroom Teacher	2.80	2.53	3.00
Experience Working with Diverse Populations	2.61	3.65	3.75
Strong Organization and Management Skills	2.61	4.49	3.65
Strong Interpersonal and Community Relations Skills	2.61	3.65	4.40
Demonstrates Leadership on SPED	2.33	2.34	2.81
Understands Diverse Points of View and Background	2.24	2.43	4.40
Innovative instructional Methods	2.15	1.78	2.62
Commitment to LGBTQ+ Students and Students of Color	2.05	4.77	5.43
Can Deal Effectively and Fairly with Others	1.96	3.84	4.21
Demands High Level of Performance and Accountability	1.40	3.46	2.25
Experience in Quick, Effective Action in Crisis/Emergencies	1.21	1.22	1.97
Strong Budgeting and Management Skills	0.65	1.31	2.25
Strong Background on Information Technology and Implementation	0.56	1.03	1.03
Experience Managing Construction Project	0.09	0.65	0.37
Prioritizes Standardized Test Scores	0.00	0.28	0.00
Experience in Capital Panning	0.00	0.09	0.09

The on-line survey provided dozens of potential questions for the next superintendent. They will be provided to the search committee for review.