

SCHOOL COMMITTEE

(Official Report)

Special Meeting

April 10, 2018

Called for 6:00 p.m. in the Dr. Henrietta S. Attles Meeting Room, Cambridge Rindge and Latin School, 459 Broadway, Cambridge, for the purpose of confirming the appointment of the Assistant Superintendent of Student Services.

Members Present: Ms. Bowman, Ms. Dexter, Mr. Fantini, Ms. Kelly, Mr. Kimbrough, Ms. Nolan (ABSENT), and Mayor McGovern

Also Present: Dr. Salim, Superintendent of Schools
Dr. Turk, Deputy Superintendent of Schools
Ms. MacDonald, Assistant Superintendent of Early Education
Ms. Spera, Interim Assistant Superintendent of OSS
Mr. Maloney, Chief Operating Officer
Ms. Spinner, Chief Financial Officer
Ms. Allen, Executive Director of Human Services
Ms. Liss, Educational Liaison to the Mayor
Mr. Dan Monahan, CEA President

Mayor McGovern in the Chair.

A quorum of the School Committee being present, the Chair called the meeting to order at 6:00 pm.

The Mayor read the call of the meeting and informed the assembly that Ms. Nolan is not able to be in attendance because of a conflict of vacation plans and the late scheduling of this meeting. He then turned the meeting over to Dr. Salim who introduced Ms. Alexis Morgan as his recommendation for the new Assistant Superintendent of the Office of Student Services. He explained the process included representatives from CPAC, educators, parents and interviews at the cabinet level and virtual site visits with Ms. Morgan's co workers in California. He asked all Members to go around the table and introduce themselves.

Ms. Morgan thanked us for having her and explained her career over the past 10 years. She has worked in a variety of urban school districts ranging from districts as small as 22 schools to as large as 66 schools. She has provided comprehensive supports and services for students with exceptionalities, disabilities, gifted students and ELL students.

The chair opened the floor for questions.

Vice Chair Kelly asked what have you done to encourage open, ongoing dialogue with individual parents of students with special needs, Parent Advisory Council members, etc., and to assist parents in understanding and accessing available special education services?

Ms. Morgan answered that she makes sure that parents have a voice in the process from beginning to end and that administration understands what the vision for the parent is. Some parents may not have a full understanding of their child's disability, and she tries to fill in the gaps by using teachers and administrators to educate the parents to better understand what is going on. They work to collaborate with parents to make sure they are not the only ones driving the child's experience. The most important thing is to maximize the student's potential.

Mr. Fantini asked about her experience in the Camden City School District, he can see, as an instructor, she achieved 85% proficiency while she worked in ELA and special needs. How would she apply that system in Cambridge, what interventions would she take?

Ms. Morgan answered that in the Camden Public School system, her role was that of an inclusion teacher co-teaching with a general education teacher for students that were behind in all subjects; her co-teaching team looked at how to approach co-teaching using multiple models and by knowing the content and then the tools that needed to be used. She and a co-teacher co-assessed their students; they provided a variety of techniques which included going outside of the district to figure out how to do the work.

Ms. Bowman noted that she has extensive experiences from many other states, which is a positive thing to bring to Cambridge; she asked about her experience of work with advanced learners or the gifted programs in other states, what designations does she know about that we don't have?

Ms. Morgan answered that early in her career in Camden City; there were no gifted students and talented program. She identified at least 5 students as exceptional. She went outside of the realm, educating herself by going to conferences that had these programs in place to learn about giftedness. There are laws, but not necessarily funds for these students. She explored the different means of supports and what they can look like for exceptional students. She convinced the school district that there is a need to provide for these students. It can happen in a variety of ways: Sometimes it might mean early entry into college or kindergarten. She needed her students to be exposed to curriculum compacting. There are alternative ways that can be found to meet the needs of these students and understanding and measuring these students capacity of mastery.

Ms. Bowman asked a follow up question, the intersection between a kid with dyslexia and high capability of achievement, how do you blend these issues together and make sure they operate on an advanced level.

Ms. Morgan answered the student needs a flexible schedule. It is imperative to redesign the master schedule to fit the student. Give support to the teachers, administrators and parents for individualized teaching standards. Always ensure that equal attention is given to the strengths and weaknesses of the student. She would make sure there will be a unique staffing approach for the students.

Ms. Bowman stated that Black and Brown kids often get pushed to areas that identify them as a learning challenge, if that is not the case, what are your strategies to redirect the student when they should be elsewhere?

Ms. Morgan stated this is something she is familiar with in her work. She tries to bring the misplacement to the attention and awareness of the teachers when students are singled out for their ethnicity or social/economical status. Sometimes the practices and policies that are in place don't always support children of color. Some inequities are reinforced in the schools; she does not want it to become the norm. It needs to be identified as a problem in the first place in order to change and redirect these students to their rightful place.

Emily Dexter thanked her again for coming, stating the conversation so far has been wonderful. She asked nationally, a disproportionate number of African American male students are designated as having special needs. Why do you think this situation occurs, and what do you think needs to be done to effectively address this situation? Emily also wants to know whether she has any examples of what should be done instead?

Ms. Morgan stated she tries to make sure that the RTI practices are in place. She would need to know if there are problems with the tier 1 instruction and make sure the tier 2 supports are in place, make sure the interventions are in place and being practiced, Ms. Morgan stated that sadly, although this is espoused it is not always practiced. Provide coaching with monitoring. She noticed the teachers felt as though there were not enough hours in the day, there are structural barriers that have to be addressed. Some teachers need to recommend a student for AP, she loves that Cambridge has Level Up and access to Honors for all students. When they did it elsewhere, the students did not feel like they could succeed. They needed a lot of work on self image and the use of different strategies and tools to increase their self esteem.

Emily asked if there are certain things that make for a successful inclusion classroom.

Ms. Morgan answered that best practices with inclusion classrooms and any classroom is accepting learner diversity and learner vulnerabilities. These are the principles that Universal Design for Learning are based on. In inclusion classrooms, she likes to identify and remove the barriers that may be in place. There needs to be a positive safe climate that allows the students to feel safe and equipped to take risks so they can increase learning and therefore success.

Mr. Kimbrough asked about culture in a school district. Many students that are on IEPs are insulted in class and on the playground. How do you change the culture for children with learning challenges?

Ms. Morgan answered some children are incredibly sensitive and nurturing about providing scaffolding in order for the challenged student to be successful. We need to measure soft skills, and the students habits to persevere because it gives us another lens into what the students needs. Sometimes when they are removed from inclusionary settings, they end up coming back and we realize that more could have been done in the general education environment. Our students don't often do well with lectra style teaching. We have to reconstruct our identity as teachers.

Mr. Kimbrough commented that he is interested in her thoughts on the high stakes exams, SAT, MCAS PARCC and the increase in 504 and IEP referrals.

Ms. Morgan answered in two parts to his question. She spoke first on the high stakes assessments. She stated she would come back to the referrals. On the high stakes exams, there are pros and cons for students with disabilities. In the past special needs students were not held to the same standards as general ed students. There were no textbooks for special needs students, they were not expected to learn or excel. Once the academic and social emotional issues were addressed, the students began to thrive with the supportive way that we teach today. As a result, our special needs students are expected to learn and pass these tests. That was the pro. The cons of high stakes exams were that many students were sent on referrals to Special ED settings that did not belong there.

Vice Chair Kelly asked in what circumstances do you tend to recommend out-of-district placements? What are your thoughts on bringing students who are in out-of-district placements back into the system?

Ms. Morgan stated that it breaks her heart when parents come in excited and then become deflated when they cannot follow the conversations when they are met with unfamiliar acronyms. When the parents are not able to support and help their children that is distressing for both the parent and child. The parents should have a meeting with a trusted person in the school before they come to the IEP meeting. The parents need to know what is going to happen in the IEP meeting before the actual meeting. In past practices where she has been, the systems need to do a better job of communicating with our families. Sometimes students are silent while they are bombarded with information they cannot process fast enough. How does the parent know the child is able to thrive with information retention? She does not want to speak to practices that may not be happening in CPS, but there is a stigma attached to Special ED in most places.

Vice Chair Kelly asked about her experience with out of district placements.

Ms. Morgan stated that many schools want children in out of district placements because of behavior and parents want out of district placements because they don't feel their kids needs are being met. Those are the two primary reasons for private placements. Students need to be in a smaller setting sometimes. Sometimes they don't feel supported by the district. Sometimes we impose our own ideas of what is needed. Working in Newark, they were able to get the students back in the system, and then they had to work on how to keep them in the system. Sometimes, more training is needed with the support staff, if the IEP is in place. There may be several elements that need to be in place.

Vice Chair Kelly asked for her thoughts about emotional and mental health – when students are looking for attention

Ms. Morgan responded that in high poverty areas, too many kids go untreated. Her experience has been to partner with community health agencies for partial if not full health treatments. They made it a priority to work with the health agencies and have the agencies go into the schools to provide the appropriate services.

Ms. Bowman wants to know about her experience in Camden, New Jersey regarding teaching parents to use data for interventions.

Ms. Morgan responded they had parent teacher meetings, but the parents were not exposed to what was happening in their students classrooms. They had to redesign the monthly meetings so the parents would know what was being addressed in the classrooms. The parents didn't know about benchmarks and there was confusion about how to support their child at home. The parents were trained. As educations levels increased, the work became more complex for the parents. In some cases, the parents may not be able to help the kids because they can't do the work either. Parents were then educated so they would be able to help facilitate meeting their child's needs.

Mayor McGovern appreciates her answer about working with parents. His work has been in out of district placements. No parent hopes their child has special needs, as a result parents have trauma too. He liked her mentioning Level Up. He asked what experience she has in general education and what constitutes honors. We are getting away from working in silos.

Ms. Morgan answered that in her work, she partners with the Office of Curriculum and Instruction to identify the barriers that are already in place in order to provide training to the teachers. They worked to reduce barriers between the two ed plans by first working in the Curriculum and Instruction area and then from the OSS and finally they combined the two. When talking about silos, it cannot be on the shoulders of only one department. The central office needs to stand together, shoulder to shoulder.

The Chair stated since you've seen some of what happens in Cambridge, what do you think is great and what is not so great?

Ms. Morgan responded one strength is the Innovation Design Lab. She admires and embraces this approach. She has watched some of the videos. She likes the collaboration of the teachers being able to get information and work with the central office on their findings; it is the key and is unparallel to what has been done in other districts. These models make her excited for an opportunity to work in the CPS district.

Mayor McGovern asked about health centers, the work on the city side and the school side with partnership collaboration. What is her experience in bringing stakeholders into the school system?

Ms. Morgan answered that she has experience in this by bringing different stakeholders into the district in Newark, going out into the communities and seeking help to bridge the gap between the two entities. Partnerships need to be continually monitored and supported. You cannot just establish it and then forget about it expecting it to keep going on its own. You have to be careful of who you partner with and constantly monitor the partnership. Sometimes there can be too many cooks in the kitchen.

Mr. Fantini is curious about her experiences with large departments and what her leadership style is.

Ms. Morgan answered that in Newark public schools, she managed a staff of 20 personnel. She supported the deaf and hard of hearing program. She feels her team will speak to her leadership approach as working together as problem solvers equally, no one is at the top to fix the problem, it takes a collective of the group to go out together and seek solutions. There are no easy answers already in place, collectively they seek solutions.

Mr. Fantini asked about when the parents wants the kid out of district and the system feels the kid needs to be in the district. How do you handle that?

Ms. Morgan wants to ensure there is a consensus of educational goals and whether or not we can supply what is needed, then examine whether or not due process has to be met. In order to reach a resolution to this, we need to have a partnership with the parent. Have an open door policy and let the parent observe the classroom, they cannot be isolated, and they are the expert on their child.

Emily asked what is your definition of disabilities, and how do you feel about boys being twice as likely than girls to have a disability.

Ms. Morgan stated that her definition of disability is a functional limitation, going by the standard definition, anything that adversely affects the child's performance (13 categories defines disability). There are a number of boys that are more likely than girls to be defined as having a disability. We need to be more understanding of what our days look like to see what can be done. Boys mature differently, and at a later stage. We need to structure our classrooms to support those nuances. If we keep stressing what they don't know how to do, they will stay in special ed., if we begin to stress their strengths, boys will populate general ed more quickly and strongly.

Emily asked for a recommendation of the pro active things that can be done when students act out.

Ms. Morgan stated we need to approach mindfulness and wellness. Have the students identify their feelings in order for others to support the students. Do restorative practices and live up to and meet the consequences for our behavior. Do not have the students sit for too long. They need to be able to move around. There are multiple approaches we can use.

Mr. Fantini moved, seconded by Ms. Bowman, on the following roll call vote, to confirm the appointment of Alexis K. Morgan as the Assistant Superintendent of OSS Ms. Bowman YEA; Ms. Dexter YEA; Mr. Fantini YEA; Ms. Kelly YEA; Mr. Kimbrough YEA; Ms. Nolan ABSENT; Mayor McGovern YEA.

On a motion by Mr. Fantini, seconded by Ms. Bowman, it was voted to suspend the Rules for the purpose of reconsideration of the foregoing vote. The Rules having been suspended for the purpose stated, on a voice vote, the motion to reconsider the foregoing vote, hoping the same would not prevail, failed of adoption.

Motioned by Ms Bowman, seconded by Ms Kelly, the meeting adjourned at 7:20 p.m.

Dosha E. Beard
Executive Secretary to the School Committee

Distributed Documents/Handouts (on file in the School Committee office)

- Potential Questions to Explore with OSS Finalist Candidate
- Resume of Alexis K. Morgan