

THE SCHOOL COMMITTEE OF THE CITY OF BOSTON



Boston Public Schools Superintendent’s Performance Evaluation Dr. Brenda Cassellius, School Year 2019-2020

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| Evaluator’s Name | Michael O’Neill |
| Date of Completion: | July 29, 2020 |

| RATINGS | DEFINITIONS |
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| HIGHLY EFFECTIVE (Exemplary) | Performance far exceeded expectations due to exceptionally high quality of work performed in all essential areas of responsibility, resulting in an overall quality of work that was superior; and either 1) included the completion of a major goal or project, or 2) made an exceptional or unique contribution in support of unit, department, or district objectives. This rating is achievable by any employee though given infrequently. |
| EFFECTIVE (Proficient) | Performance consistently exceeded expectations in all essential areas of responsibility, and the quality of work overall was excellent. Annual goals were met. |
| DEVELOPING (Proficient) | Performance consistently met expectations in all essential areas of responsibility, at times possibly exceeding expectations, and the quality of work overall was very good. The most critical annual goals were met. |
| MINIMALLY EFFECTIVE (Needs Improvement) | Performance did not consistently meet expectations – performance failed to meet expectations in one or more essential areas of responsibility, and/or one or more of the most critical goals were not met. A professional development plan to improve performance must be attached, including timelines, and monitored to measure progress. |
| INEFFECTIVE (Unsatisfactory) | Performance was consistently below expectations in most essential areas of responsibility, and/or reasonable progress toward critical goals was not made. Significant improvement is needed in one or more important areas. A plan to correct performance, including timelines, must be outlined and monitored to measure progress. |

UNDERSTANDS ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES AS SUPERINTENDENT

Corresponds to DESE Standard IV: Professional Culture

- Demonstrates discretion and tact in their leadership
- Understands the political and ethical context to position
- Interacts effectively with the School Committee, City Council, and State on policy.
- Is able to effectively articulate the position of, and be a proxy for, the School Committee
- Interacts with the public and external stakeholders with respect
- Builds trusting relationships with their staff
- Acts with integrity

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| | HIGHLY EFFECTIVE |
| X | EFFECTIVE |
| | DEVELOPING |
| | MINIMALLY EFFECTIVE |
| | INEFFECTIVE |

COMMENTS:

In a difficult environment for a newcomer to Boston to understand, Dr Cassellius had a reasonably good first year. She has had a good start in working with the School Committee, City Council and state and is developing her vision for the District, with input from each. She represents the District well publicly, especially to our students and parents, who clearly see her passion and commitment. Still to be developed will be building a more effective senior team, and developing how she can collaborate and create buy-in across the district professional staff, from central employees to school-based staff, as well as to deepen her relationships with the foundational, business and non-profit partners. Success in this role is measured with progress over years and takes time to develop. Dr Cassellius has started in the right direction and will continue to evolve with the help and support of the School Committee, district professionals and the greater community.

I do note right up front that my observations and comments, while my own, are informed by personal interactions throughout the year with the Superintendent and her team. However, to balance my perspectives, and in keeping with the practice we ask of our district employees in their role as evaluators, I have also had a number (approximately 20) of conversations with district staff, school leaders, teachers, students, parents and members of the greater education community in Boston (non-profit partners, business community, foundations, CBO’s, etc.). The purpose of those conversations were to hear different perspectives, viewpoints, reflections, experiences and suggestions on areas of strength, opportunities for improvement and suggested next steps. Thus my written comments are informed by those conversations and due diligence, along with my personal experiences.

COMMITMENT TO ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE AND INNOVATION

Corresponds to DESE Indicator I-E: Data-Informed Decision-Making, and Indicator IV-A: Commitment to High Standards

- Understands the educational landscape of the Boston Public Schools and can speak to strengths, challenges, and successes
- Understands education policy direction of the Boston School Committee and can effectively articulate them to the public
- Is committed to improving education for all students in the Boston Public Schools, especially those in historically marginalized populations
- Recognizes the importance and appropriate role of school-level autonomy and shared responsibility between schools and central office departments
- Demonstrates a sharp focus on data in the continuous improvement of student performance
- Is committed to supporting teachers and schools to share best practice and research to improve academic achievement

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| | HIGHLY EFFECTIVE |
| X | EFFECTIVE |
| | DEVELOPING |
| | MINIMALLY EFFECTIVE |
| | INEFFECTIVE |

COMMENTS:

Dr Cassellius has brought a deep understanding of educational challenges, and a strong experience set of tackling tough issues. She has not shied away from uncovering and tackling the deeply embedded systems that have held Boston back from improvement. However, real change will come when all involved are heard, understood and know that their feedback and thoughts are valued and included. Work remains to build that district and city-wide buy-in and commitment to together make this happen.

PRODUCTIVITY, ORGANIZING AND PLANNING

Corresponds to DESE Standard II: Management and Operations

- Understands related position functions and performs daily activities without supervision
- Establishes effective and challenging task priorities
- Schedules time with staff effectively and resolves conflicts
- Manages calendar request in a timely manner
- Meets deadlines, demonstrates effective time use and simultaneous handling of several assignments
- Appropriately organizes work so others can find work in progress and/or necessary files and information, when necessary
- Ensures all contact whether by telephone, email, or mail with colleagues, families, and students is positive and productive in nature - constructive criticism followed by problem-solving suggestions
- Responds promptly, within 24 hours, to all internal and external requests whenever possible
- Shows initiative and demonstrates learning and expanding knowledge to further enhance performance

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| X | HIGHLY EFFECTIVE |
| | EFFECTIVE |
| | DEVELOPING |
| | MINIMALLY EFFECTIVE |
| | INEFFECTIVE |

COMMENTS:

Dr Cassellius has been very effective at being available to School Committee, District and community members. She has been gracious with her time to learn and plan. She has been quite visible in the media and community and has been quite public on-line, especially in the time of COVID-19. The role of Superintendent can be overwhelming, especially when learning the role and the city. My concerns are more about burn-out and overload, as the job and role has been all consuming. Work/Life balance is critical for the long-term success.

FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY AND BUDGETARY CONTROLS

Corresponds to DESE Indicator II-E: Fiscal Systems

- Uses resources effectively and conservatively and is a good steward of resources
- Forecasts accurately and maintains budgetary projections consistently
- Controls operating costs effectively, optimizing human and other capital
- Is resourceful in securing funding to accomplish goals and ensure team has capacity to follow through

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| X | HIGHLY EFFECTIVE |
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| | MINIMALLY EFFECTIVE |
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COMMENTS:

This, to me, was one of the top highlights of the past year. Dr Cassellius deserves strong credit for working with Mayor Walsh and the city budget team, and for the Mayor agreeing to provide a three year framework for increased support for BPS. She showed strong leadership on that matter, as well as for the thoughtful budget process. There are always concerns about individual budget decisions and different points of view, but the process was data-based, deliberative, inclusive and reasonable. The coming year is an opportunity to bring more collaboration in the financial decision-making process with more of her management team.

JUDGMENT/DECISION MAKING

Corresponds to DESE Indicator II-D: Law, Ethics, and Policies

- Identifies and evaluates issues, reaches sound decisions and generates alternatives
- Takes into account the effects/impacts of decisions
- Understands the political nature of the position and takes care to see all sides
- Seeks prior advice and approval if needed before taking action
- Demonstrates well-balanced thinking between taking “risks” and practical consideration

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| | HIGHLY EFFECTIVE |
| | EFFECTIVE |
| X | DEVELOPING |
| | MINIMALLY EFFECTIVE |
| | INEFFECTIVE |

COMMENTS:

This was difficult to evaluate as I have two viewpoints on this. We asked Dr Cassellius, based on her experience and expertise, to come to Boston to help us improve. She has committed to that effort, and as a professional educator who is deeply, deeply committed to equity and equality, she has an incredible sense of urgency to correct issues that she feels have contributed to Boston not improving as much as we would like and need. However, she has also learned that Boston is used to collaboration, and work is required to create buy-in and a shared sense of mission. In her desire for create improvement in Boston (and for the most part I agree with much of what she has focused on for improvement), she has not been as sensitive to how to get that improvement done. I feel obligated to state I do have some concerns over her approach and decision-making on issues regarding alt ed and food service in particular, however, from a bigger picture her decision making, while thoughtful and understandable, would potentially be more successful if she works to gather more advice before taking action, including encouraging and welcoming viewpoint that may not align with her expectations or viewpoints. Hearing a range of voices and viewpoints is critical before making final decisions. She can benefit from a heightened awareness of how she is perceived to receive feedback, especially when a subordinate is presenting an alternative viewpoint. The benefit of hearing a range of viewpoints, especially from deeply experienced colleagues and professionals, must be valued and encouraged, to best position the Superintendent to make informed and effective decisions that lead to reasoned improvement.

COLLABORATION/TEAMWORK

Corresponds to DESE Standard III: Family and Community Engagement and Indicator IV-E: Shared Vision

- Is a good team player - demonstrates positive, motivated behavior, provides support, accepts guidance, and keeps an open door
- Keeps others informed of the status of initiatives, including the Strategic Plan, on a consistent basis
- Uses and values the talents of other staff and/or team members
- Provides support and feedback to team members
- Participates fully and collaborates with internal and external stakeholders
- Modifies individual objectives and desires to support the efforts of the team
- Demonstrates openness to new ideas and suggestions
- Shares responsibility for outcomes and workload equity
- Is dependable and can be counted on

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| | HIGHLY EFFECTIVE |
| | EFFECTIVE |
| X | DEVELOPING |
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| | INEFFECTIVE |

COMMENTS:

Dr Cassellius had many highlights in this area in her first year, along with showing some areas for continued improvement. The Strategic Plan effort was inclusive, thoughtful and collaborative, with Dr Cassellius working hard to have buy-in and shared ownership with the School Committee and the BPS community. It evolved, for the better, due to feedback and Dr Cassellius showed an openness to that feedback.

However, that process was not the same for other key decisions, with the work on high school redesign planning, alt ed and even food service seemed to be more done in small groups, without the feedback or inclusion of those most involved and most impacted. As such, the outcomes are not best reflective of work that will generate buy-in and successful implementation. Unfortunately, in a district of 56,000 students and 10,000+ employees, the Superintendent cannot force change on her own, but rather needs to provide the leadership that inspires the entire city to rally to her vision and work together to make it happen. That does not happen in one year in any city and Boston is particularly resist to change (even as it cries for it), thus intentional, deliberative work in year two should be done on building a senior team that works well together, building a system to encourage and receive a range of feedback, and building a system that provides for collaboration and buy-in so that improvement is done together.

FOCUS ON EQUITY AND EXCELLENCE

Corresponds to DESE Indicators I-D: Evaluation; II-D: Law, Ethics, and Policies; III-C: Communication; and IV-A: Commitment to High Standards

- Supports and actively builds a culture of excellence and equity
- Engages diverse stakeholders in decision making
- Provides effective supervision to direct reports through clear expectations, appropriate levels of feedback and support, and accountability for results.
- Ensures that all contact whether by telephone, email, or mail with colleagues, families, and students is positive and productive in nature - constructive criticism followed by problem-solving suggestions

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COMMENTS:

Dr Cassellius has an incredible focus on equity, clearly a core and deeply held value to her and I have learned by interacting with her on this matter, discussing the issues and listening to her viewpoints, experiences and expertise. Boston is lucky to have her commitment on this issue.

As stated previously, it is a potential area of focus for the coming year on how to build a senior team that is valued, experienced, works well collaboratively and is in an environment that fosters feedback, especially when presenting alternative viewpoints. Additionally, it is important to balance a sense of urgency and presentation of facts with an understanding of how ideas are received and processed, with the goal being the focus is on improvement together.

It is always a challenge to develop a senior team, particularly when individuals (and communities that support or work with the individuals) can attempt to define, or imply, the relative importance of a role or a position by the reporting line of authority. Best practices nationally show that a Superintendent should aim to have no more than 8-10 direct reports, maximum, yet, in Boston practice, that is often met with fierce resistance. A balance can be achieved by insuring that access is not dictated by reporting lines. That input into key decisions, even when presenting alternative viewpoints is both wanted and respected and that joint decisions on implementation are reached with consensus when possible. However, teams also have to realize there is only one Superintendent. If they feel their input is heard, valued and considered, and see some aspect of that recognition in the final decision, then they too have an obligation to respect the Superintendent’s decision and to move to faithfully implement.

Change is hard and “muscle memory” from past practices are difficult to overcome. The BPS

educational community have an obligation to “assume good intent” and work with the Superintendent to do the job we collectively asked her to do, improve BPS for our students and families. However, trust is earned slowly, but lost quickly, so for the Superintendent to continue to improve over her first year in the role and to truly settle in for the long term, which is best for BPS and our students, a measured approach to lasting change, by investing in the district and community buy-in and support during the decision making process to a greater degree, will pay strong dividends for our youth in the coming years.

COMMUNICATION AND INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

Corresponds to DESE Indicator IV-C: Communications

- Conveys clear and concise communications, listens well and responds appropriately
- Is tactful, candid, and consistent in words and actions
- Comprehends the importance of interacting positively with stakeholders
- Analyzes complaints and takes steps to address issues immediately
- Demonstrates flexibility with unavoidable tension and pressure
- Demonstrates respect at all times

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| | EFFECTIVE |
| X | DEVELOPING |
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| | INEFFECTIVE |

COMMENTS:

Dr Cassellius, in every interaction with the School Committee, city and district employees, students, parents and community members that I have witnessed, has been highly effective. Engaging, thoughtful, professional, committed, respectful, but not afraid to take tough position, to call out inequities, to show her heart and passion for this work and for our youth, etc.. An opportunity for continued evolution in year two will be a sensitivity to the quiet perception that arises occasionally that she can sometimes “listen” but uncertainty can persist if she is “hearing”. This can be an excuse sometimes if an advocate of a particular viewpoint is not happy with the ultimate decision, but, like a persistent weed in a beautiful lawn, it can also take root and spread if attention is not paid to the cause. In the absence of information, mis-information can often (and sadly) flourish. Boston can sometimes struggle with a Superintendent who is trying to publicly air an issue to honestly gather feedback, as this is a city that is deeply suspicious that key decisions are made behind closed doors and that any point put forward by the Superintendent means the decision is made. Thus great care is always needed to be very mindful of the power of the written and spoken word by the Superintendent. I write this knowing Dr Cassellius is mindful of that, but it needs to be discussed openly to share the concerns I have knowing the difficult balance Dr Cassellius is trying to reach: showing an openness to gathering input and starting difficult conversations while still learning how it has been received in the past when predecessors have also attempted to do the same thing.

Lastly, I do note that while I stated above that every interaction I have witnessed has been highly effective, feedback from a number of individuals in the education community in Boston regarding smaller meetings or discussions with the Superintendent has shown that occasionally the focus has ended up being on, to paraphrase Maya Angelou, not what the Superintendent said, or what she did, but how she made them feel on the topic. The Superintendent has a tremendous sense of urgency, which is commendable, and necessary. She also is deeply experienced and is bringing a fresh lens to longstanding practices that in many cases have results that are not in line with what we need for our district to improve, and she feels the need to call out those practices and to shine a light on results.

Again, commendable and necessary. The challenge is the best way to change those results for the better will often be by getting buy-in and commitment from those in the discussion. We have great people throughout our district who also have deep experience and commitment, and the good intent is also there. Acknowledging that is also an important part of the discussions. Reaching a collective “yes” and shared commitment to improve through the team in place may be both a faster path to success for our youth, and more likely to also result in lasting change. Thus, a suggestion for year two would be a heightened recognition of that challenge and of the understanding that Boston is, in many respects, a small city, and conversations that get replayed and retold (and of course can evolve in that process) can impact perceptions and willingness to do the hard work of change for our students’ sake.

GOAL PROGRESS (SEE EMPLOYEE DEVELOPMENT PLAN, ATTACHED)

Ratings: Exceeded, Met, Significant Progress, Some Progress, Did Not Meet

| Goal # | Goal Rating | Comments |
|--------|-------------|--|
| 1 | SP | For student learning goal, strategic plan work was excellent, however COVID implications slowed a number of other steps that were planned in this area, thus Significant Progress was made, but outside factors did not allow for a fully met goal outcome. Additionally, I believe a number of the steps in this goal are not necessarily realistic for a first year goal (such as a full redesign of our high schools). |
| 2 | Met | For professional growth goal, visiting every school, many multiple times and beginning to build relationships across the city exceeded expectations, as is the work to begin to focus on anti-racist behaviors. However, while progress was made in building relationships with school leadership team, this is more than a one-year effort. That and focusing on building a strong leadership team would benefit from another year as a key goal. Thus the combined Met rating. |
| 3 | Exceeded | In the first year as Superintendent in a new city, to be hit with a once in a century public health pandemic can certainly be deemed unprecedented. Yet BPS, under Dr Cassellius' relentless leadership adjusted and in a triage situation, exceeded many of national peers with similar circumstances. |

OVERALL RATING (Consider progress toward goals and performance categories)

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| | HIGHLY EFFECTIVE (Exemplary) |
| X | EFFECTIVE (Proficient) |
| | DEVELOPING (Proficient) |
| | MINIMALLY EFFECTIVE (Needs Improvement) |
| | INEFFECTIVE (Unsatisfactory) |

ED EVAL ONLY: STANDARDS RATINGS

(Place an 'X' in the appropriate rating box for each standard)

| E | P | D | U | |
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| | X | | | Standard I: Instructional Leadership |
| | X | | | Standard II: Management and Operations |
| | X | | | Standard III: Family and Community Engagement |
| | X | | | Standard IV: Professional Culture |

Employee Development Plan (EDP)

Identify and describe 2-3 areas of strength and 2-3 areas for continued growth based on the categories above, as well as how you arrived at these areas.

| Areas of strength | Areas for continued growth |
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| Commitment to Equity, equality and excellence | Understanding how Boston works, not as an excuse to stop from making change, but to better effect change in a positive and lasting way. |
| A true educator, knows curriculum, instruction and learning inside-out. | Building a strong, balanced senior and overall management team (including school leaders) that involves consensus building, an welcoming of varied viewpoints and has the credibility and support to implement tactically. |
| Sense of urgency, desire to improve BPS, phenomenal work ethic and commitment to Boston, professional representation of Boston and BPS in media and in person. A truly caring and decent person who students see the authenticity of and therefore they relate well with and to, critical for their self-worth as well. | <p>Stronger and deeper collaboration and involvement from the business, non-profit, cultural, health and higher education institutions, CBO's and foundations to work together towards a shared commitment to improve BPS.</p> <p>Work/Life balance with a heightened recognition that this work is a marathon, not a sprint and the most effective superintendents who have built lasting change for improvement have done so over time with focus on team-building, collaboration and shared purpose.</p> |

Create 2-3 goals from the competencies evaluated in the process.

Develop SMART goals: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented, and Time-bound.

| Goal # | Goal | Measure of Success |
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