



**OFFICIAL MINUTE S OF THE REMOTE
BOSTON SCHOOL COMMITTEE PLANNING RETREAT**

October 12, 2021

The Boston School Committee held a remote planning retreat on October 12, 2021 at 6 p.m. on Zoom. For more information about any of the items listed below, visit www.bostonpublicschools.org/schoolcommittee, email feedback@bostonpublicschools.org or call the Boston School Committee Office at (617) 635-9014.

ATTENDANCE

School Committee Members Present: Chairperson Jeri Robinson; Vice Chairperson Michael O’Neill; Dr. Hardin Coleman; Ernani DeAraujo; Lorena Lopera; Rafaela Polanco Garcia; Quoc Tran; and Student Representative Xyra Mercer.

School Committee Member Absent: None.

Boston Public Schools (BPS) Staff Present: Superintendent Brenda Cassellius; and Senior Advisor Megan Costello.

DOCUMENTS PRESENTED

Agenda

PowerPoint: School Committee Planning Retreat, October 12, 2021

CALL TO ORDER

Chairperson Jeri Robinson called the meeting to order and led the pledge of allegiance. Ms. Sullivan called the roll. Ms. Lopera, Ms. Polanco Garcia, Mr. Tran, and Ms. Mercer were present. Mr. O’Neill, Dr. Coleman, and Mr. DeAraujo joined the meeting shortly after the roll call.

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Ms. Robinson said that tonight's session was being streamed live on Zoom. It will be rebroadcast on Boston City TV. It will also be posted at bostonpublicschools.org/schoolcommittee and on YouTube. She announced that simultaneous interpretation services were available in Spanish, Haitian Creole, Cabo Verdean, Vietnamese, Cantonese, and Mandarin. The interpreters introduced themselves and gave instructions in their native language on how to access simultaneous interpretation by changing the Zoom channel. Meeting documents and translations were posted at www.bostonpublicschools.org/schoolcommittee. Ms. Robinson apologized that the Committee was unable to secure American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation for the session and announced that the closed caption feature had been enabled.

Ms. Robinson reviewed the agenda. The Superintendent offered brief welcoming remarks about the value of holding periodic retreats.

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Ms. Robinson reviewed the four major responsibilities of the Boston School Committee:

- Defining the vision, mission, and goals of the Boston Public Schools
- Establishing and monitoring the annual operating budget
- Hiring, managing, and annually evaluating the Superintendent
- Setting and reviewing district policies and practices to support student achievement.

She invited members to offer reflections on the professional development training provided by the Massachusetts Association of School Committees (MASC) on September 25, 2021. Mr. DeAraujo spoke positively about the training and the importance of understanding roles and responsibilities and the separation of powers between the Committee and the Superintendent. Mr. O'Neill thanked MASC Executive Director Glenn Koocher for leading the training which he described as valuable. He noted that it's important to understand how Boston differs from other school districts.

PRIORITY TOPICS AND AGENDA SETTING

Senior Advisor Megan Costello reviewed the following list of recurring agenda items:

- Capital Budget Update (tentative - March 16, 2022)
- Financial Update (tentative - Dec 14, 2022)
- Massachusetts School Building Authority Statements of Interest
- SpedPac Annual Report
- Opportunity & Achievement Gaps (OAG) Task Force Update
- School Quality Working Group (SQWG) Update
- English Language Learners (ELL) Task Force Update
- Boston Student Advisory Council (BSAC) Annual Update

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- Exam Schools Admissions Policy Update (June 2022)
- Wellness
- Superintendent Evaluation
- MA School Choice Program Hearing and Vote (May 2022)
- MassCore (Quarterly)
- Preliminary Budget Recommendation (Feb 2, 2022)
- Final Budget Vote (March 23, 2022)
- ESSER Update
- Student Information Sharing Update

Members and the Superintendent reviewed the list and suggested adding the following items:

- Internal Audit Update
- Hiring Update, which should include diversity and protected categories
- MCAS results
- State Accountability
- Start of school
- Summer learning
- Enrollment update
- Labor Relations/collective bargaining/legal issues
- Employee performance evaluations
- Monthly budget updates
- Citations (e.g. doctorates, National Board Certified Teachers, Educators of the Year, etc.)
- Facilities (immediate and long-term needs)
- Strategic Plan Update
- Monthly update by student representative regarding the Boston Student Advisory Council (BSAC)

Ms. Robinson briefly reviewed the following priority topics suggested by the members:

- Communication (among the district, Committee, parents and community)
- Transitions/Grade Configurations
- Transformation Schools
- Science/Tech/Voc Ed Strategy
- Teacher Training
- Facilities
- High Schools
- English Language Learners, native language instruction
- Out-of-School Time
- Literacy
- Educator Diversity
- Special Education
- Superintendent's Performance Evaluation (spring)
- Task Force updates (spring)

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Dr. Coleman noted that many of the topics are operational and cautioned the Committee to be intentional about organizing this extensive list of topics in a coherent manner. Ms. Robinson agreed. Ms. Mercer spoke about the importance of incorporating student voice and securing voting rights for the student representative. The Superintendent clarified that the BuildBPS update scheduled for October 27th will include a formal recommendation to close the Irving and Timilty Middle Schools and the Jackson-Mann K-8 School, as presented to the Committee last spring. Chief of Finance Nate Kuder plans to provide the Committee with quarterly updates on BuildBPS. Ms. Robinson asked Ms. Costello to provide a summary sentence or two describing each agenda item. The Superintendent suggested scheduling a December retreat about her Academic Vision. Ms. Robinson suggested that the Committee examine public participation at the Committee's remote budget hearings vs. in person. Dr. Coleman reminded the Committee that public turnout at budget hearings is largely tied to whether or not budget reductions are being proposed. The Superintendent said that Chief of Operations Indy Alvarez and her team are updating the BuildBPS Master Facilities Index. Dr. Coleman suggested that BPS partner with an external architectural firm to create a master campus plan and set goals for the next 10 years. Ms. Robinson spoke about the importance of tracking school performance. Dr. Coleman suggested that the Committee review School Improvement Plans.

Ms. Robinson briefly reviewed the Committee's three active task forces:

- English Language Learners Task Force, est. 2009
 - Monitoring Body, Meets Monthly
 - Three active subcommittees
- Opportunity & Achievement Gaps Task Force, est. 2015
 - Monitoring Body, Meets Monthly
- School Quality Working Group, est. 2013
 - Monitoring Body, Meets Quarterly

The Superintendent spoke about her previous professional experience working with school boards that have standing committees. She explained that these Committee member-led committees can be established to address specific topics of importance and may include students, parents, teachers, advocates, etc., providing the public with an opportunity to engage in the governance of the district. Standing committees periodically report back to the full Committee and may make policy recommendations. She made the distinction between standing committees and task forces, which typically have a specific charge and duration. She suggested that the Committee may want to consider establishing standing committees in the areas of finance and/or personnel.

Mr. O'Neill spoke about the different styles of governance utilized among school boards across the country. He described the Boston School Committee as having traditionally acted as a committee of the whole. He said that standing committees allow for public input and a deeper dive into issues but then school board meetings tend to become more perfunctory. Mr. O'Neill suggested examining the pros and cons of each style through the Council of Great City Schools.

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Dr. Coleman spoke about the distinction between task forces being more time-bound and standing committees dedicated to ongoing monitoring. Mr. DeAraujo expressed support for utilizing an external consultant to examine the issue. The Superintendent encouraged the Committee to examine task force membership in an effort to maximize diverse voices. Ms. Robinson asked Dr. Coleman to share his reflections on task force structure at the Committee's next retreat in January 2022, which will hopefully be co-led by A.J. Crabill, director of governance for the Council of Great City Schools.

Ms. Robinson briefly reviewed the goals and values approved by the Committee in April 2021.

The goals are in five areas with 5-year targets set for all students:

- Early Literacy
- Achievement for English Learners
- Achievement for Students with Disabilities
- Critical Thinking in Math, Science and Literacy
- College, Career, and Life Readiness

The values are in the following areas:

- Student Voice & Family Engagement
- Community Partnerships
- Equity & Eliminating Opportunity Gaps
- Diverse & Effective Staffing
- Social, Emotional & Physical Supports

Dr. Coleman suggested that at each meeting, the Committee use a coherent and useful data dashboard to examine progress on one of the Committee's goals to allow for mid-course corrections.

Ms. Polanco Garcia suggested evaluating how BPS communicates with families. She emphasized the importance of providing interpretation for families at school site council meetings. She spoke about the value of district staff welcoming families in their native language. Mr. O'Neill recalled that at the Committee's recent retreat, Ms. Polanco Garcia mentioned that she had preconceived notions about the Committee that have shifted now that she is a member. He suggested embedding the Committee's goals and values into the meeting agendas. He suggested that the Committee explore holding meetings with the community outside of regular meetings. Ms. Robinson suggested that members join school-based equity roundtables via Zoom. She also suggested that members call school leaders to express gratitude for their hard work. Mr. Tran recommended adding benchmarks for the goals and values. The Superintendent said that her Office of Data and Accountability team is working towards that goal using a data dashboard.

Dr. Coleman spoke about the importance of moving towards becoming an outcome-driven

district. He noted that the Committee is scheduled to vote on the Superintendent's performance goals at its next meeting and said the Committee should be comfortable with the selection of those goals as the standards by which it will evaluate the Superintendent this school year.

Ms. Mercer spoke about the importance of hearing from diverse student voices, particularly those who are less traditionally engaged at school-and-district level. The Superintendent spoke about the importance of reviving the student representative's monthly student update and suggested that Ms. Mercer consider using social media to lift up student voice. Ms. Mercer advocated for student voting rights and a stipend. The Superintendent and Ms. Lopera recalled that MASC Executive Director Glenn Koocher had raised potential conflicts of interest complexities if the student representative were to receive a stipend. Ms. Robinson encouraged Ms. Mercer to participate in an affinity group for student representatives coordinated by the Council of Great City Schools.

MEETING STRUCTURE

Ms. Robinson shifted the conversation to meeting structure, specifically content and time management. She said that the length of the meetings, which often stretch for five or six hours, can be difficult for all involved. She emphasized the importance of the Committee receiving reports from the district in advance. Ms. Costello explained that MA emergency legislation permits public bodies to hold remote meetings until April 1, 2022. She said that she will keep the Committee informed about any updates to the legislation.

Dr. Coleman observed that much of the public comment presented at Committee meetings is related to operational matters and is referred to the Superintendent and her team for follow up. He said that forming standing committees could allow the public to be effective partners and lessen the frustrations presented at Committee meetings. He spoke about the need to shift from problem-identifying to problem-solving.

Ms. Lopera spoke about her perspective as a new member. She said that public comment is often viewed by families as a last resort for assistance; she encouraged the Committee and the district to find better mechanisms to hear the community clearly. She suggested helping families understand where and how they can be most effective and where and how the Committee can be most responsive.

Ms. Polanco Garcia spoke about her experience as a parent testifying to the Committee. She explained that at the time, she did not understand why the Committee did not respond to public comment. She said that the Committee must continue listening to public comment and the district must follow up with concerns raised by families.

Mr. DeAraujo described the length of meetings as being counterproductive. He suggested that the Committee examine public comment practices in other school districts. He emphasized the importance of receiving presentations in advance to provide members with adequate time to conduct a thoughtful review of the materials and formulate questions.

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Mr. O'Neill said that school boards across the country have seen an increase in engagement since shifting to remote meetings during the pandemic. He suggested that the Committee consider holding forums on specific topics or having Committee members hold remote office hours to allow for members to engage in more exchanges with families. He recalled the Committee's 2012 process to reexamine public comment and suggested that the Chair invite a subset of members to gather best practices and make recommendations to the full Committee.

Ms. Robinson recommended that the Committee form small groups to explore the following topics and report back to the full Committee with recommendations:

- public comment
- standing committee & task force structure

Ms. Robinson asked the Superintendent about the content of her Superintendent's Report. The Superintendent spoke about the length of the report growing during the pandemic in light of the many timely updates that needed to be presented to the Committee and the public. She said that she would like to return to presenting data on the Committee's goals. Dr. Coleman expressed support for focusing on the data. Mr. DeAraujo suggested using a data dashboard-type format. He requested that the Committee receive the Superintendent's report in advance of the meeting.

Ms. Costello spoke about finding a balance between providing historical context and keeping presentations brief. She suggested that some data can be provided in the form of an appendix.

Ms. Robinson suggested holding a future discussion on grants. Dr. Coleman suggested that the Committee consider receiving quarterly reports on the equitable distribution of grants rather than maintaining the Committee's current practice of voting to receive individual grants. The Superintendent said that she will ask Chief of Finance Nate Kuder to make suggestions. She also said that she will present a report to the Committee in the near future about equity as it relates to school fundraising. She suggested that her team present the Committee with an annual report on the evaluation of grant effectiveness and quarterly reports on equitable grant distribution.

Ms. Robinson explained that the Committee is currently budgeting approximately one hour for each report to allow about 20 minutes for the presentation and about 40 minutes for members' questions. She suggested including some information in the form of a preamble and/or limiting the number of presenters.

Ms. Lopera said that if the state legislature should require the Committee to return to in-person meetings without the ability to offer a hybrid option, the Committee must provide interpretation and translation to ensure family participation. Ms. Costello said that she anticipates that the state legislature will establish new legislation that will provide for either a remote or hybrid option.

Mr. DeAraujo suggested that the Committee consider adding additional support staff to track members' inquiries.

The Superintendent suggested that the Committee explore using various software tools that are designed to support school boards.

NEXT STEPS

Ms. Robinson recommended that the Committee form small groups and report back to the full Committee regarding the following topics:

- Public Comment
- Standing Committee and Task Force Structure

Next steps:

- January Retreat
- Goals and Values
- Ongoing Policy Review

The Superintendent spoke about the importance of the Committee's ongoing efforts to index the district's policy manual and suggested asking the Opportunity and Achievement Gaps Task Force to review the policies or establishing a standing committee for policy review.

Ms. Lopera expressed hesitation at volunteering for a subgroup because her term on the Committee is coterminous with the acting mayor and her future status is currently unknown. Ms. Robinson said that she will follow up with members individually and welcomed input from Ms. Lopera and Ms. Polanco Garcia.

PUBLIC COMMENT

John Mudd, Cambridge resident, advocate, testified regarding the strategic and academic visions and advocated for a policy ensuring access to native language instruction.

ADJOURN

At approximately 9:12 p.m. the Committee voted unanimously, by roll call, to adjourn the retreat.

Attest:



Elizabeth Sullivan
Executive Secretary