



The Research Bureau

The Right Stuff

No sooner did Worcester Public Schools Superintendent James Caradonio announce his impending retirement than politicians and other opinion makers began offering their advice on whether the School Committee should choose the “inside candidate” or conduct a national search. But addressing that issue first may be putting the cart before the horse. Perhaps the School Committee, whose most important responsibility is to select the next superintendent, needs to assess the challenges facing the Worcester Public Schools, and then search for the individual who can best address those challenges, whether he is already employed by the district or needs to be recruited from elsewhere.

In 2007, 33 of Worcester’s public schools, enrolling more than 80% of the district’s students, were identified by the Massachusetts Department of Education as needing improvement, corrective action, or restructuring in math, English language arts, or both, either in the aggregate or for subgroup (e.g. Black, Hispanic, limited English proficient) performance. These assessments signify that a school has not made adequate yearly progress (AYP) to be on track for all students to reach proficiency on MCAS by 2014 as required by the Federal No Child Left Behind Act. Each negative assessment requires the school to implement additional changes in its operations culminating in restructuring which must include major changes in school governance, organization, and staffing. Fourteen Worcester schools, including all four middle schools are currently implementing restructuring plans approved by the Massachusetts Board of Education. There are also wide disparities between white and Asian students and all other subgroups. In addition, among 22 urban districts in the Commonwealth, Worcester ranks in the middle or slightly below in its MCAS performance in all grades. While MCAS is only one measure of performance, it is the only standardized measure used throughout the Commonwealth and the exams are based on statewide curriculum frameworks that have been implemented in all districts.

The academic challenges facing the district as a whole and the subgroup achievement gap in particular indicate the need for a superintendent who has experience working with an urban population and success in dealing with the achievement gap and in turning around underperforming schools. With so many schools in need of fundamental reforms, the successful candidate should be able to evaluate existing programs and eliminate those that are not meeting their goals. For example, he or she must evaluate the programs teaching English to those for whom it is not their native language to determine which is most successful in enabling students to receive all their academic instruction in English as quickly as possible. The new superintendent must also have the negotiating skills to make necessary changes in school governance and student instruction.

The School Committee's choice of a new superintendent affects the entire community. While students, parents, and school personnel are directly affected by the choice, the quality of the public schools affects the quality of the future workforce and the attractiveness of the City as a place to live and to invest. Recruiting the right candidate to run the Worcester Public Schools is as important as having the right City Manager: their salaries are comparable, and the budget and the number of employees for the Worcester Public Schools are larger than those of all other departments combined. Finding the right superintendent is much more important to Worcester's future than where he hails from!

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