



CAMBRIDGE SCHOOL COMMITTEE

(Official Minutes)

Special Meeting

June 16, 2020

Called for 5:00 p.m., broadcast from the Dr. Henrietta S. Attles Meeting Room, Cambridge Rindge and Latin School, 459 Broadway, Cambridge, for the purpose of confirming the recommendations and appointments of the Assistant Superintendent of Secondary Education and the Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Education.

Members Present: Vice Chair Bowman, (~~Absent~~), Member Fantini, (~~Absent~~) Member Rachel, Member Rojas (~~Absent~~), Member Weinstein, Member Wilson, Mayor Siddiqui

Also Present: Dr. Salim, Superintendent of Schools
Dr. Turk, Deputy Superintendent of Schools
Ms. Allen, Executive Director of Human Resources

Mayor Siddiqui in the Chair

A quorum of the School Committee being present, the Chair called the meeting to order at 5:00 p.m.

The Chair read the call of the meeting and explained that this meeting is being televised, votes will be taken and there will be no public comment. The meeting proceeded to the first order of business with the following roll call: Member Wilson YEA; Vice Chair Bowman ABSENT; Member Fantini ABSENT; Member Rachel YEA; Member Rojas ABSENT; Member Weinstein YEA; Mayor Siddiqui YEA.

Mayor Siddiqui turned the floor over to Dr. Salim.

Dr. Salim stated that he is pleased to be able to present both Dr. Nocole Gittens, and Dr. Michelle Madera for the Assistant Superintendent for Secondary Schools and Assistant Superintendent for Elementary Schools respectively. The Superintendent explained that according to MGL Chapter 71, Section 59, we are following the statute stating that the confirmation of the appointments of the Assistant Superintendents are formally voted by the School Committee to approve or disapprove said appointment but shall not unreasonably withhold approval. This is also an opportunity for Committee Members to ask questions of both candidates. The floor was turned back to Madam Chair.

Member Wilson announced she filed a 23(b)(3), with the City Clerk this morning, a disclosure of an appearance of conflict of interest due to her relationship with Dr. Gittens. Member Wilson stated she will not be impartial and not hold any favoritism based on her relationship with Dr. Gittens.

The Mayor suggested starting with two questions per member, beginning with Member Weinstein.

Vice Chair Bowman and Member Rojas both joined the meeting at 5:10 p.m.

Member Weinstein asked Dr. Gittens what she sees as the key measures in this role, what do you want to hold yourself accountable to?

- **Dr. Gittens** answered that the most important measure for her is using the strategic initiatives already in place on equity and access, and engaging learning to close the achievement gap. She recognizes the importance of building strong relationships in order to figure out where we are now

and go forward. She is intentional, feels students should have access to what is appropriate and what will move them toward being independent thinkers and learners. Being a math major, she struggles with the reality that some students do not learn math in elementary school. Elementary math basics are imperative. All students need access to grade level curriculum which will close the gap. She looks forward to working with Dr. Madera to make sure they are both aligned, not just in one subject area, but all subjects in pre K or junior K all the way through grade 12.

Member Weinstein also asked about benchmarks or indicators that can be signposts towards strategic goals showing we are on our way to success.

- **Dr. Gittens** responded that we need to use our curriculum to measure ourselves against benchmarks, examine how we are doing, are we meeting the expectations? MCAS is important, but we should not use MCAS as a summative account. Dr. Gittens wants to be clear that MCAS is not a teaching test, it is a bare minimum measurement test. If students cannot do well on MCAS, there is no expectation to do well on SATs or any other standard tests, nor be accepted to the college of their choice, but this expectation is not just for testing. We need to set our students up for successful lives, to be able to take care of themselves and be productive the world.

Member Rachel asked Dr. Gittens about visions and beliefs, and also asked what she thinks can be done to make CPS become an anti-racist system and how comfortably she can speak her mind to her colleagues and bosses.

- **Dr. Gittens** replied that she is a very outspoken person, and she has a good balance in speaking her mind. Her priority is to know the policies and practices that create gaps, know what things are more of a burden on some populations than on others. We need to pay attention to our existing data. There needs to be mistakes and risk taking to improve the work. The way to start anti-racist work, is by moving against anything that gets in the way. For the people (on every level) that are not ready or willing to come on board and move forward, we can find them another place to work. She emphasized again she has no problem speaking her mind, she expects everyone to be willing to meet somewhere between hammers and marshmallows.

Member Rojas asked what made Dr. Gittens decide to go into education.

- **Dr. Gitten** reported that she successfully worked as a math tutor in the athletic department and would get excited every time she saw the athletes learning.

Members Rojas also asked where she sees herself in five years.

- **Dr. Gittens** hopes to still be in education in Cambridge in five years. She imagines straddling a world that informs where education forms economics and building a strong economy in Cambridge.

Vice Chair Bowman asked who inspired her to do this work?

- **Dr. Gittens** answered that the kids in her family were her first inspirations and she sees her family in everyone.

Vice Chair Bowman says we struggle with accountability what does it look like to you?

Member Fantini joined the meeting at 5:25 p.m.

- **Dr. Gittens** responded she is good for her word and she wants all to do the same. She would take on the task of moving the barriers out of the way to make sure accountability starts structurally at the top and goes all the way to the bottom of the structure.

Member Wilson asked about examples of social/economical equity in Principal evaluations.

- **Dr. Gittens** responded she recognizes how busy Principals are and the last place they get is the classroom. She wants them to set up structures and calendars and be seen in classes. It is not about being rigid, it is intentional. She gives principals permission to build up their teams, including their secretaries so they can find time to get into classrooms. They need to witness learning or witness the deficit in classes.

Member Wilson stated while being over the high school, she wants a sense of how she will balance the current issues of the injustices and lack of support for growth and change for our scholars and where she will start that work.

- **Dr. Gittens**: In a normal world, she'd start with walkthroughs to see what is happening in the classes and hallways, who's in the principal's office; but we live in a virtual world, remote learning is harder to do, it requires more listening than seeing. There will be conversations, meetings in remote settings. Teaching and learning through a computer is not ideal, when teaching is a physical practice; this has been a huge challenge. She admits it's hard to nail down what the next step is. There can be no cross between her role and Principal Smith's role. She will examine behavior to see what causes disconnects and/or why what has happened did or didn't work. Its good kids are resilient, when we acknowledge their hurt and feelings and other missteps, they move forward.

Member Fantini asked what led her to education and asked that she share a few examples of experiences in education, what is she most proud of and why?

- **Dr. Gittens** responded she was a tutor with the athletic department, while studying business in college. She was excited to see the athletes learning, their progress stuck with her and after a short career in business, she went back to school for education, then started teaching in Boston Public in a small school. She committed to being the best in Boston. They got rid of sub separate classrooms, began co teaching and examined the needs of students and paired them with teachers that specialized in the particular needs of the students. She took over another failing school, faltered a little bit and then got on track. She found it is possible to do what you really want to do if you just focus on what you want and stick to it.

Member Fantini asked what people will be saying about her after six months on the job?

- **Dr. Gittens** replied that she doesn't know. They will probably say she is consistent, that she means what she says. There are no surprises with her. Making excuses for why something cannot happen is non-negotiable for her. She feels it is her responsibility to set all students up for success.

Mayor Siddiqui asked about how important is data to you and how do you use it to make decisions?

- **Dr. Gittens** answered it doesn't make any sense to try to make decisions without using informational data. In Brookline, they paid a lot of attention to the achievement gap based on the MCAS data. What they saw year after year, low income is a barrier, it is not insurmountable but it is a challenge. Black students that were better off economically were doing worse than white students that were economically challenged. It was a hard conversation to have, it was uncomfortable. They started the conversations with the principals. They found that the teachers didn't have the time to look at the data and then use it.

Mayor Siddiqui: second question is based on major responsibilities, since we always hear from families, how to you support and engage a large subgroup of families?

- **Dr. Gittens** answered they did a math program review and they made sure they had info from different cohorts of kids. They found that parents don't even know what their kids are supposed to know by the end of 2nd grade. Structures need to be set up for hearing complaints and then moving along to solutions.

Vice Chair Bowman stated that our district struggles with how we talk about and view a certain cohort of children that are usually left behind, wants to hear her thoughts.

- **Dr. Gittens** stated that people seem to be afraid of data. How do we learn to look at it, learn from it and move forward from using it instead of running from it? Until you, as a Principal, are comfortable turning anyone loose in your school and not be ashamed of any classroom, there is more work to do.

With no more questions from the floor, Member Rachel entertained a motion, seconded by Member Wilson to confirm the appointment of Dr. Nicole Gittens to the position of Assistant Superintendent for Secondary Education. On the following unanimous roll call vote in the affirmative, Dr. Nicole Gittens' appointment as Assistant Superintendent of Secondary Education was confirmed: Member Wilson YEA; Vice Chair Bowman YEA; Member Fantini YEA; Member Rojas YEA; Member Rachel YEA; Member Weinstein YEA; Mayor Siddiqui YEA.

The Mayor opened the floor for the next candidate and turned the meeting over to the Superintendent.

Dr. Salim stated that he is pleased to have Dr. Michelle Madera here this evening. She has been serving as the interim Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction this past year, and has been our Director of English Language Learner (ELL) along with other responsibilities. She takes an analytical approach to her work and she will be a tremendous resource to CPS. He is looking forward to the next steps.

Member Rojas asked for a couple of examples that led her to focus on education.

- **Dr. Madera** answered she was studying at Boston University headed to law school, one of her professors stated she would make an amazing teacher, she switched majors and began teaching women in Dudley Street at Alianza el Espanol, a community based school and she loved it. Next she became a bi-lingual Vietnamese teacher at the Jeremiah E. Burke high school. She does not speak Vietnamese, she used different tools to communicate and it worked. More experiences led her to Bilingual Ed and Special Education and she has no regrets.

Member Rojas asked where she sees herself in the next five to ten years.

- **Dr. Madera** believes that in five years she would still want to be in CPS in any capacity and in ten years she would like to retire from CPS with retirement plans to teach on the university level.

Member Weinstein asked what are the key measures and goals that Dr. Madera will hold herself accountable to in this role and your steps to close the opportunity gaps?

- **Dr. Madera** replied that she is accountable to her key goals which are directly related to the district initiatives already in the works, i.e. 3rd grade literacy for all demographic groups, she is heavily committed to the anti-racist work, and looking at building instructional practices in leadership with principals and other stakeholders implementing systems that reap results. She will hold herself and those that work with her accountable.

Member Weinstein asked more specifically to JK-5 our schools that are autonomous, how will you manage sharing best practices across schools?

- **Dr. Madera** responded that she will maintain the integrity of each school ensuring they keep their individual communities, she will also make sure all students are learning at high levels by

removing barriers, planning, implementing and holding herself and all others accountable to making sure the work keeps being done.

Member Fantini asked how she sees her role as the leader of Elementary Education and what do you think is the most important thing that you'll be responsible for as being over elementary education?

- **Dr. Madera** reported she wants to improve academic outcomes. She will provide professional development and support for principals and coaches to share their leadership qualities and support each other as mentors, look at data and plan around it. She will be strategic and look for outcomes. If she doesn't like the outcomes, make adjustments. Everything is trial and error. She wants to look at things in a solutions based way.

Member Fantini also asked about how to accelerate the progress of the closing the achievement gap.

- **Dr. Madera** responded she will continue looking into the universal design for learning UDL, and there will be a lot of training with the Curriculum Coordinators, Principals, and Coaches. They will drink the Kool Aid and bring everything into alignment by getting rid of the barriers and tie in all of the good practices. She will look at our tier 1 systems for the social/emotional and well-being of our students, along with PBIS (Positive Behavioral Intervention Systems), and restorative justice practices. We should be looking at issues as opportunities for improvement instead of looking at issues as problems.

Member Rachel asked how will you monitor and educate educators to be stronger in a remote learning?

- **Dr. Madera** explained remote learning has been very challenging and she will support them at being better in the fall by examining what works, what doesn't work and provide more structure. She will observe the arts, drama and physical education along with the core classes in order to see what is going very well. She wants to help the successful teachers build capacity for the teachers that were not ready for remote learning. ICTS has been amazing with their plans to move forward to include our non-English speaking families.

Member Rachel asked what is your experience working with scholars, families, activists etc. How do these experiences inform your strategy for improving elementary schools?

- **Dr. Madera** explained that she has been in CPS 12 years, she has always been in and out of the classroom, partly because parents have asked her to model lessons and also to evaluate people or support them. She finds that being a very good listener is most important. She has put together summer learning programs because our scholars were vocal about what they wanted and needed, she made it her priority to provide their needs over the summer. There are 70 different language groups in Cambridge, she has Google Translate and many other devices and she is determined to listen, and communicate as needed, there is no reason not to make an effort. She can figure it out. As far as working with families, her coalition work has been around community schools and tying families to different resources for glasses, ESL classes and dental care.

Vice Chair Bowman asked who inspires you in this work and how do you approach your work?

- **Dr. Madera** answered there is no one person who inspires her but various children do. She doesn't care about their origin, social/economic status, or gender, children are very near and dear to her heart. She comes from very limited resources and understands what an opportunity means for family and an entire community; to build future successful opportunities that may have been historically denied, it is the source of her motivation.

Vice Chair Bowman asked as an experienced worker in CPS, what will give you an advantage and what will be some of the blind spots.

- **Dr. Madera** responded that some advantages are that people already know her and she has a reputation for having high standards, some like her for that some don't. Everyone knows that everything she does is centered around children. She knows the different strengths of the schools and principals. Her blind spots are not knowing all the longitudinal data points on all different schools. She spent all of her time on bilingual data, she will now work on that over the summer.

Member Wilson asked what she will do to ensure accountability? What does she think of now and pre Covid-19 as to lack of leadership specifically around cultural proficiency? What approach will you take to reach out to families and scholars at the Peabody School?

- **Dr. Madera** admitted she is not 100% informed of the issues at that school. She will answer broadly since she hasn't been involved with the Peabody school. She believes cultural proficiency is important, it means looking at yourself and understanding where you are in privilege and disadvantages. In a leadership role, culturally responsive curriculum is very important and that work needs to be implemented in all schools. Accountability is not a box to check off, it is a process in a system: we listen, observe, train, support and evaluate along with follow up. Sometimes the follow up is clear and sometimes not clear and needs intentional and progressive intervention.

Member Wilson asked when parents and the community reach out for answers and complaints, what does leadership look like for you, how would you intervene?

- **Dr. Madera** answered that she would begin by listening to all sides. Gather info, investigate with a team, find out what is glaring and not so obvious. There is always follow up with intentional intervention. Again, she is speaking broadly, not being familiar with this school.

Member Wilson wants some clear examples, not generalities of what will she will do to ensure that educators of colors are supported?

- **Dr. Madera** answered that she has supported TOC in the past and those educators know she is approachable, she listens and she follows up. It does not mean she will always be able to do what everyone wants her to do. Most people approach her privately, she will not betray their trust. She does want it to be known that she will support individually and also in large spaces. Support comes in many forms she will take action on the collective need. She is deliberately keeping it broad to ensure confidentiality.

Mayor Siddiqui spoke on the data piece being a weakness she would like a specific example of what Dr. Madera will do to bring it up to speed, and since you've been here twelve years, how has the literacy needle not been moved to close the achievement gap?

- **Dr. Madera** stated her work with ELL has been her strong point. They used data to examine individual outcomes for all students, held data meetings twice a year, went to each school and spoke about every single child, learning on all levels. They figured out how to train the teachers so they know how to increase learning, she will use all qualified adults including custodians of color to find success at the best ways of closing the achievement gap. Our ELL learners excel beyond ELL learners across MA for several years now. They look at the child at every angle, not just at the summative data. Prior to that as Principal, she did the same thing. They looked at the curriculum and the areas they were not performing well in. They all made AYP (Annual Yearly Progress)

The Rules were suspended for the purpose of a roll call vote to extend the time an extra fifteen minutes to 7:00 p.m. On a motion by Member Rachel, seconded by Member Weinstein, on the following roll call vote, the meeting was extended for the purpose stated: Member Wilson YEA; Vice Chair Bowman YEA;

Member Fantini YEA; Member Rojas YEA; Member Rachel YEA; Member Weinstein YEA; Mayor Siddiqui YEA.

Member Rachel asked for a point of information on whether or not the assembly can postpone the vote to appoint Dr. Madera this evening. Mayor Siddiqui asked Madam Secretary, based on the Rules, what would be proper, Ms. Beard responded it would be best to finish the purpose of this meeting entirely tonight. Madam Mayor asked for the pleasure of the Committee, and Superintendent Salim, the consensus was to complete the official call of the meeting.

The meeting returned to the regular order of business.

Mayor Siddiqui asked based on data and her different roles, what elementary schools can she name that have shown an improvement in raising the bar for students?

- **Dr. Madera** answered the Amigos is doing very well, the King Open has raised its level a few years ago and are still on the rise, CSUS is also making strides, she stated it is hard to single out schools but, quite a few are making strides and quite a few need supports in order to make bigger strides in academic achievement for demographic groups.

Member Rachel what supports do you think will help the schools that are in need.

- **Dr. Madera** wants to see RTI (Response to Intervention) better aligned, by itself it tends to over populate tier 2 supports, rather than elevating tier 1 instruction. It needs tweaking and refinement. The way it is structured and carried out varies across schools.

Member Wilson asked what experience do you have with supervisors on speaking your mind.

- **Dr. Madera** reported that she will disagree verbally and strongly yet respectfully. She is not worried about being verbal. She has already been verbal in her role with Dr. Salim on strategic planning. It has taken her a long time to come this far, she doesn't know everything, however she is ready for this level.

Member Wilson also asked how will Dr. Madera support Principals to improve professionalism and professional culture within their school?

- **Dr. Madera** replied that it depends on the principal and what is needed. If we are in a situation where a Principal makes a culturally inappropriate statement she will call it out. She will confront the statement with questions about the Principals' knowledge of the cultural history of the students in her school. She will ask questions about empathy, she will call them out on being unapproachable. She is an anti-racist leader and she knows she cannot be an anti-racist leader if she is afraid to be uncomfortable. The results and feedback have been good and she has been thanked for her approach in addressing the issues.

Vice Chair Bowman asked for a point of information, addressing the fact that we have five minutes left to this meeting and she is not comfortable with delaying this vote, is it possible that we move forward with questions, more quickly?

Member Weinstein asked do you see any path forward or a system in place to move forward for every single child in need.

- **Dr. Madera** said yes, at every school there is a piece missing. There cannot be the same people at data meetings every time because every child does not need the same help and the same people, some need social workers, and nurses, interventionists and family liaisons. Right now there is a committed group looking at the academic and social/emotional aspects, but sometimes it needs more stakeholders, sometimes it medical. She intends to work on that

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Member Rojas entertained a motion, seconded by Member Fantini to confirm the appointment of Dr. Michelle Madera to the position of Assistant Superintendent for Elementary Education. On the following roll call vote, six to one in the affirmative, Dr. Michelle Madera's appointment as Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Education was confirmed: Member Wilson YEA; Vice Chair Bowman YEA; Member Fantini YEA; Member Rojas YEA; Member Rachel YEA; Member Weinstein YEA; Mayor Siddiqui NAY.

Dr. Salim summarized that Dr. Madera brings an understanding of the complexities of this role and can work well with this administrative team and will add an elevated voice for students and families.

On a motion by Member Fantini, seconded by Member Wilson, on the following roll call vote, the meeting was adjourned at 7:00 p.m.: Member Wilson YEA; Vice Chair Bowman YEA; Member Fantini YEA; Member Rojas YEA; Member Rachel YEA; Member Weinstein YEA; Mayor Siddiqui YEA.

Attest: 

Dosha Beard

Executive Secretary to the School Committee