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To: Cambridge School Committee  
Fr: David Murphy  
Date: 3-2-26

**Re: Appointment of Melissa Bolden as Director of Family & Community Engagement for the Cambridge Public Schools**

Following my appointment as Superintendent in October of 2025, a hiring process for the position of Director of Family & Community Engagement, which had been vacated the previous summer, began in earnest. A representative screening committee overseen by Assistant Superintendent Manuel J Fernandez and then-Acting Assistant Superintendent Leslie Jimenez-Sandoval was convened, including caregiver representation, educators, school leaders, representatives from the City of Cambridge and student leaders. About 13 candidates were invited to interview with this group, with five candidates being forwarded for consideration by the district's leadership team. The candidates faced multiple rounds of questions and were asked to complete a complex performance task that gauged candidates' abilities to develop a plan focused on the district's work of improving our family partnership practices.

Three finalists were then identified who interviewed with a panel consisting of myself, Mr. Fernandez and our Director of Communications, Jackie Piques. The finalists also participated in a confidential focus group of caregivers representative of various CPS schools.

The applicant pool for this position was strong, diverse and deep. In the end, after considerable deliberation and with a great deal of enthusiasm, I have decided to appoint **Ms. Melissa Bolden**, currently the Head of the Division of Youth Programs with the City of Cambridge Department of Human Services Programs as the next Director of Family & Community Engagement for the Cambridge Public Schools.

Ms. Bolden has spent the last 21 years serving the families and children of Cambridge in various capacities with DHSP. She has spent the last five years as a member of the DHSP leadership team overseeing the city's five Youth Centers. She spent considerable time interacting with and coming to know the Cambridge Public Schools while also enjoying a valuable external perspective on how we are serving the children of this community. Throughout the search process, she left our team and the community members with whom she met impressed by the specific examples of systems improvement and programmatic enhancements she has been able to instill while at DHSP.

As we continue the work of aligning our practices with the dual-capacity organizing principles at the core of the professional learning that our administrators have been engaged in since last summer, we are working to elevate improved family engagement as a core strategy for improving the educational experiences (and resulting outcomes) for all students. I believe that the institutional knowledge and constructive partnerships that Melissa has cultivated during her time at DHSP will position CPS to advance our mission through this imperative role.

I have invited Melissa to join us at the meeting of the school committee on Tuesday evening to introduce her to the community in this new capacity. Please reach out with any questions. Thank you.



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To: Cambridge School Committee  
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Date: 3-3-26

**Re: Preliminary Datapoints and Response to Motion # 26-032 (Third Grade Reading & Promotion Policy)**

I would like to express sincere gratitude to the members who have offered Motion # 26-032 and acknowledge the moral and organizational imperatives that our team believes underlies its consideration by the school committee. Prior to this evening's discussion, I believe it is important for some of the factual considerations to be circulated across the committee. My inclusion of this information is not intended to deter the conversation. Indeed I believe the fierce urgency of bringing about systemic improvements is why it is important to provide this data beforehand.

Since the meeting notice was publicly published on Friday of last week, there has been a significant amount of concern generated about unintended consequences and the complexity of strategies intended to eliminate achievement and opportunity gaps. Any reservations being expressed about this conversation pale in comparison to the concerns we have about long-standing inequities that manifest themselves as outcome discrepancies seemingly interconnected with race and poverty. Our responsibility is to build systemic practices and hold ourselves accountable to ensure consistent quality experiences for all students.

**Current Efforts to Address Literacy Proficiency:**

CPS is currently in year two of the implementation of an aligned, science of reading-based, ELA curriculum across grades 1-5. The implementation of this curriculum, generally speaking, takes three to five years to fully implement and is often accompanied by initial regression as educators develop new practices and hone new skills to maintain consistency.

CPS has seen accelerated growth data on our reading screener across a multitude of demographics in the majority of schools and achievement data has either improved or held steady. In addition, concerted efforts are currently being made to ensure coordinated planning and professional learning takes place, particularly for educators supporting our high-need population, i.e. Special Education and multi-lingual learners and students identified as being economically disadvantaged. As should be clear from the data below, these efforts to ensure that students in designated high-need categories are benefiting from the approach toward curriculum alignment are crucial to avoiding the type of learning gaps this motion aims to address.

In discussing students who have matriculated into fourth grade before the potential implementation of this policy, Motion 26-032 calls on CPS to employ "intensive, evidence-based reading intervention" to support students who are below grade level. This exact description is consistent with recent investments in evidence-based early childhood assessment and intervention programs, alongside the aforementioned new curriculum. As with any new high-quality instructional materials, there is a period of time necessary to learn and refine the types of intervention systems and calibrating how they work in conjunction with the newly aligned curriculum. But this ongoing work is why we believe we are seeing several positive trends.

### **Current Promotion and Retention Policy:**

It is not accurate to say that the CPS policy grade level promotion is dictated solely by age. The actual promotional standard, which is consistent with most districts' policies, is based on what the school principal determines to be in the "best interests" of the student. Policy IKE does allow for caregivers to have a dispositive voice when the question of promotion or retention is implicated. The physical and contractual class size limitations in Cambridge also play a significant role in ways that are somewhat specific to CPS. In practice, it is true that virtually no students are retained at the elementary school level. But it is important to note that this is not merely a default position. A large body of research indicates that it is rarely in the best interests of children to repeat an entire grade level. Because the language of Motion 26-032 seems to fully take into account the individualized decision-making that is necessary in specific cases, I will not spend any additional time in this analysis discussing the substantive merits of retention because I think it is more important to address some of the relevant data points.

### **Current Data on SY 25-26 Third Graders:**

In looking at our mid-year data with respect to grade-level-readiness through i-Ready for SY 25-26 third graders, only 27 general education students (meaning no IEPs and no designation as English Language Learners) are currently below grade level (of those students, the majority are currently one grade-level below expectations). If we include students who have an IEP, that number increases to 67 (out of 509 third graders with winter i-Ready Reading scores). 13% of students with below grade level reading scores at a critical juncture in their elementary years is unacceptably high, and it requires deep reflection about how we implement instruction across all preceding grade levels to bring this percentage down.

### **Limitation on Both Mid-Year and Cumulative Assessments in Predicting Future Success:**

With comparable numbers from preceding years, and taking into account the changed variable of a more aligned curriculum and set of expected practices, we also looked at how students who were formerly below grade level have fared in their subsequent grade level. In response to the types of intensive, evidence-based reading instruction that Motion #26-032 calls for and that CPS is putting into practice, we currently see that, of the four current fourth grade students who ended third grade below grade level expectations on the ELA MCAS, all students are making accelerated progress toward grade level proficiency. Specifically, these students are currently performing one grade level below expectations as measured by iReady at the midpoint of their fourth grade year, and show promising movement toward grade level proficiency. If the year was over, this would not be acceptable, but it is not over and there is still almost half the school year remaining for the intervention strategies being employed to help those students reach grade level readiness.

Pointing to the small number is not intended to suggest CPS does not have significant systemic challenges we need to address, and I am grateful to the urgency the school committee feels on these issues. But the remedies should not only be commensurate with the challenges, but they should build in support for the specific students for whom our current practices and systems are inadequate. The 27 general education students who are currently in third grade with below grade level reading scores are spread across nine of 11 elementary schools and proportionately representative of the racial and socioeconomic composition of CPS. Where we see disproportionality with respect to students reading below grade level is within our populations of students who are designated as high need. For instance, the four general education students who were "not meeting expectations" on the SY 24-25 third grade MCAS represented 1.2% of their similarly situated peers, whereas the 38 students on IEPs represented 28% of their similarly situated peers.

Again, this is not to say that either the 1.2% or the 28% are acceptable. The goal is for all students to be grade-level ready, especially in elementary literacy. But the strategies need to be based on the supports known to bring improvement in light of the specific circumstances students find themselves in and/or adjustments to the prescribed timeline. This may involve building and expanding on existing support foundations, including refining academic summer programs, expanding Excel tutoring to second grade, and engaging in better progress monitoring practices of school day interventions. All of this can and should be part of a comprehensive strategy.

The differences in learning needs are why strategies to bring students to grade level readiness need to be driven by specific student interests. All third graders are not identically situated of course, but there is at least one variable that every third grade student shares: **at one point they were all Kindergarten students, first grade students and second grade students**. The urgency that has prompted this discussion is a demand for CPS to examine the practices we are putting in place to improve early childhood education, particularly the supports we are affording students who are or will be designated in high-need categories. There is more we can do on this and addressing these gaps will be the most effective way of ensuring the very real harms contemplated by Motion # 26-032 will not come to fruition.

Again, I am grateful to the members who have brought forth this motion, and I speak on behalf of our entire team when I say we are eager to pursue whatever strategies are necessary to yield more equitable and higher quality educational experiences for our students and the more consistent outcomes data that will surely follow.