

January 14, 2025

SCHOOL COUNCILS AD HOC SUBCOMMITTEE – VIRTUAL MEETING

**School Councils Ad Hoc Subcommittee Report
Tuesday, January 14, 2025 at 5:30 p.m.
Broadcast from the Media Studio
454 Broadway, Cambridge, MA**

Called for the purpose of a review of the School Council Handbook and Policy and an overview of the School Council Ad Hoc Subcommittee purpose and plan.

Subcommittee Members Present: David Weinstein (Chair), Vice Chair, Caroline Hunter, Member Elizabeth Hudson

Others Present: Interim Superintendent, David Murphy; Dr. Michelle Madera, Assistant Superintendent of Elementary and Early Education; Dr. Ray Porch, Director of Family and Community Engagement; Jackie Piques, Communications Director

Chair Weinstein started the meeting at 5:30 p.m. by confirming the meeting is live and introducing the new Confidential Secretary for the Office of the School Committee, Aunjalee Galloway.

The Executive Secretary admitted participants from the waiting room and confirmed everyone is present.

Chair Weinstein outlined the meeting's agenda and goals for the discussion which included:

- Review of the School Council Handbook and Policy and an overview of the School Council Ad Hoc Subcommittee purpose and plan
- Opportunity for public comment and responses to questions when possible, and to determine next steps

Chair Weinstein highlighted the agreements of the meeting (below):

- Speak and listen from the heart (respect)
- Step up/step back (watch air time)
- Expect and accept non-closure (work in progress)
- Bike rack (list of things that are important but should be addressed another time)
- Public comment would be limited to 3 minutes to allow for a broader discussion.

Chair Weinstein turned the meeting over to Interim Superintendent David Murphy who presented the following slides:

During the presentation, Interim Superintendent Murphy shared the following highlights:

- The law requires school councils to be advisory bodies with representation from parents, caregivers, staff and community members
- The goal is to ensure inclusive decision-making and proper representation across the school community
- The administration's objectives and priorities around school councils.
- The district aims to build infrastructure to support fully functioning school councils in each school community.
- There is a focus on ensuring representative voices at the table and fostering a spirit of collaboration and culture building
- The district recognizes the need for modest modifications to address varying challenges and contexts in which school councils operate

January 14, 2025

SCHOOL COUNCILS AD HOC SUBCOMMITTEE – VIRTUAL MEETING

- Recruiting community representatives is challenging due to the high number of schools in Cambridge
- Demographic representation within councils does not yet reflect the diversity of school communities
- Enhancing efforts to recruit diverse members and ensure councils mirror school demographics
- Increasing student participation to amplify their voices and provide educational leadership experiences
- Leveraging the unique role of family liaisons to bridge gaps and offer administrative
- School councils primarily serve to advise school leaders rather than make binding decisions
- Emphasis on balancing inclusivity with the accountability of school leadership
- The district has prioritized using school councils as mechanisms to advance racial equity
- Efforts are ongoing to increase transparency, access, and inclusivity, particularly for underrepresented groups

Interim Superintendent Murphy paused for discussion. **Chair Weinstein** highlighted that the handbook outlines the main responsibilities of the school council. A key outcome is the subcommittee's role in supporting the coordination and implementation of school improvement plans, recognizing that such support is vital. Additionally, the handbook includes forms and flyers summarizing state laws, ensuring that the subcommittee operates effectively and aligns with best practices.

Dr. Porch emphasizes the importance of racial equity within school councils focusing on diversity among staff and ensuring councils reflect the school's community. In addition, he acknowledges that full representation hasn't been achieved and highlighted the need for better information, commitment, and transparency. Dr. Porch underscored making school councils more accessible by working with leaders to encourage participation especially from underrepresented groups. Dr. Madera raised that while the district is not perfect in this area, it remains committed to increasing inclusivity in the advisory process. She emphasized the importance of providing all families with a voice and striking a balance to make the school council experience open and welcoming for everyone.

Interim Superintendent Murphy continued that Family and Community Engagement is apart of the core standards for assessing progress. He proposed modest policy changes, such as clearer election processes and improved transparency, to strengthen the councils' role in developing effective school improvement plans.

Public comments began with each speaker allotted three minutes, timed by the Executive Secretary. The following caregivers Caitlin Dube, Lilly Havstad, Christian Henry, Carroll Magill, Piotr Mitros, Missy Page, Dawn Pinchasik, and Anna Shin shared the sentiments:

- The importance of communication among school council co-chairs and collaboration on future agendas
- Cross-conversation across school councils to build best practices and consistency
- The need for school councils to be inclusive decision-making spaces and the importance of translation services
- Better timelines for formulating school improvement plans and budgets to allow caregiver participation before decisions are finalized

January 14, 2025

SCHOOL COUNCILS AD HOC SUBCOMMITTEE – VIRTUAL MEETING

- Addressing the reality on the ground by engaging directly with parents, attending meetings, and investigating where violations occur
- Supporting school councils in encouraging the use of SIP funds by the end of the fiscal year to avoid underspending
- Creating a mechanism for school councils to interact, either through informal reach-outs or a formalized process for regular gatherings
- The need for the school committee to provide advanced notice for agenda items related to upcoming school committee meetings and increased accessibility to zoom

Chair Weinstein gave space for committee members to reflect on public comments. **Vice Chair Hunter** agreed that school council members should all collaborate. Interim Superintendent David Murphy speaks to translation services. He addressed the importance of eliminating language barriers in school engagement and encouraged exploring all platforms to ensure access for all families. In addition, he highlighted the need for increased engagement with school improvement budgets in Cambridge.

Dr. Madera agreed that committee members are often notified of things after the fact. She continued that school improvement plans are developed using various data points, and leadership teams need to be more thoughtful about sharing data with parents and action plans with educators. Dr. Madera shared that school improvement plans are allocated for technology, not left unused. Dr. Porch briefly addressed issues with communication between school committee members and mentioned that they've been working with ITCS to improve this. He also encouraged considering the unique needs of individual school communities.

Chair Weinstein expressed appreciation to the group and concluded the meeting at 7 p.m.