
Superintendent selection process

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Dear School Committee Members,

I'm writing with concern about how the superintendent search process has progressed over the last 2 weeks. I have been following this process as an involved and invested parent of 3 children under the age of 10. I was very surprised that the committee rushed to proceed to negotiate with a candidate on 11/24, late in the evening, on a week shortened by a major holiday, ahead of the published schedule without adequate time for public comment. Multiple community meetings and interviews with this committee for both candidates all happened between the dates of 11/17 and 11/20. Most of these meetings were not recorded, and only the interviews with the school committee were posted for the public to view only days before the decision was made. One of these meetings was not posted until 11/23.

As Mr. Schlichtman found in conducting focus groups with the community, there is a public need for the school district to have leadership that prioritizes transparent and open communication, as well as leadership that can do a deep dive into the provision of special education services with an eye to reform. There is a perception, but no data collected, that special education is administered unevenly across the district. The fact that this has not been robustly investigated to date is an indication of how the district prioritizes its energy and resources. Also, in the midst of a global pandemic, Arlington needs steady and wise leadership from educators on how best to support children in the schools, which is easier to come by with experience.

I submitted favorable reviews of both candidates on survey monkey after watching unrecorded public meetings between the dates of 11/17 and 11/20. However, after viewing the recorded school committee interviews, when they were both available on 11/23, I felt that one candidate was clearly better prepared for the job of superintendent in Arlington.

Dr. Greer's direct communication style, willingness to be accountable, and her experience overhauling Cambridge's special education department were impressive. Her responses to the questions centered the children in the schools. She also has experience with a successful high school building project. She is familiar with town governance and how to work within this system. Her skill set and experience was very much in line with the issues facing Arlington's schools. I was very surprised that the timeline for selecting a candidate was cut short to proceed with an offer to the other, less experienced candidate. I feel this is incongruent with the committee's prior decision to extend Dr. Bodie's contract because the committee felt that experience was paramount in the high school build. In addition, there was no comment at all about the reasons behind not pursuing Dr. Greer as superintendent, only vague references to something that was disclosed in closed meetings. This hardly inspires public confidence in the decision.

Dr. Homan did present herself well, and is well regarded, but she faces a steep learning curve as she has not yet led a school district and would need a lot of guidance from the existing administrators and town manager to get a handle on the job. APS would benefit from a change in leadership in the schools, and this will be more of a challenge if the new leader is shaped by the existing structures.

I was disappointed to see the committee refuse to participate in a reasoned debate on this most important issue that will touch every family in the community, or even take time to consider the views of other members. Mr. Schlichtman was on the search committee and had a very broad perspective from the community to share with the school committee. Instead of hearing him out, he was accused of muddying the water for no reason and trying to make others look bad. Several members stating their minds were fixed and unchangeable was also disappointing. This attitude is reflected in our wider society when discussion of uncomfortable subjects is shut down. Refusing to hear other views and perspectives cements the status quo and only works to the advantage of those who hold disproportionate power.

As a parent, I observe this in the schools, too. Views and needs that are not considered mainstream or align with the majority are ignored by the school administrators, and this is reinforced by a subset of parents who share the same values, and actively silence other parents. Principals hold parent sessions, solicit questions on a google form, and then proceed to hold a Q&A forum where many submitted questions are ignored and there is no open discussion permitted, or way to provide feedback. The prospect of a Superintendent like Dr. Greer, who spoke many times of talking to teachers, families, and students to make collaborative decisions filled me with hope in changing the culture of the school to be more inclusive.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been so difficult to navigate for everyone, and I empathize with your elected, volunteer committee to have been put under unprecedented scrutiny as you are responsible for the administration and provision of public education. The health issues and implications of schools are huge responsibilities on your shoulders, and I do not believe that you have had adequate support and information on which to base your decisions. That said, I have observed some commonalities in the decisions and plans being made, and which people are being heard and which people are being ignored.

Parents paying for afterschool programs are heard, and their outdoor space protected from the public. Parents of families involved in athletics are heard, they are considered worthy of having interaction with other students. Hybrid cohort A families were successful in changing the school calendar. Other less powerful segments of the population have their questions and concerns ignored, including parents of special education students and English language learners, and they are left to navigate all the difficulties raised by the COVID-19 pandemic on their own, and try to make the best decisions for their family, as that is the only guidance and support provided by the schools.

I strongly encourage the town to provide school committee members with training in Implicit Bias. As your committee makes decisions that touches the lives of every child in the schools, it would be a responsible use of resources to make sure there is training and education in how to make equitable decisions that are for the greater good of the town as a whole, not only certain segments of it. Also, there is training in the corporate world about a growth mindset would be an asset to help the committee function in a more productive way, to consider other viewpoints and to adapt to the ever-changing world we are all in at this time. One training program is this one: <https://neuroleadership.com/scalable-learning-solutions/grow/>

Arlington clearly values its schools and has voted several times in the years we have lived here to increase our taxes to support school initiatives. We also elect members to the school committee to oversee these efforts and the administration. As these are public funds and public forums, everyone should have a voice, and differing perspectives should be heard and given fair consideration. My hope is that adjustments can be made to how the school committee operates in order to be more inclusive of the diverse perspectives of the Arlington community in its decision making process.

I appreciate your service and consideration.

Best Regards,

Janna Moreau
Bishop Parent