

Mayor Walsh directs his school chief to listen to grievances of principals and high school heads

Superintendent Cassellius facing strong criticism from scores of school leaders

By **Malcolm Gay** Globe Staff, Updated July 17, 2020, 8:14 p.m.

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Superintendent Brenda

Cassellius JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

One day after Boston school principals delivered [a pair of blistering letters](#) highly critical of Boston Public Schools Superintendent Brenda Cassellius, Mayor Martin J. Walsh urged his schools chief to meet with the leaders to hear their grievances, saying their role is crucial to the success of the district.

After meeting with Cassellius Friday morning, Walsh said the superintendent had pledged to reach out to the city's school-based leaders.

“Clearly, the school principals have some issues that they’re worried about, and the superintendent needs to sit with them and talk to them about what those concerns are,” Walsh said Friday on WGBH’s Boston Public Radio.

Calling the city’s school leaders “extremely important,” Walsh added, “They need to be supported. They need to feel supported to have a good district.”

Concerns about Cassellius’s leadership have been building for months among the city’s K-8 school principals and heads of high schools, but they burst into public view Thursday when the city’s high school leaders delivered a wide-ranging rebuke of Cassellius’s plan to redesign the city’s high schools. Cassellius wants to overhaul the curriculum at seven of the city’s open-enrollment schools by fall 2021, while also expanding their student bodies to include seventh- and eighth-graders.

The Boston High School Heads Association, which represents the leaders of the city’s more than 30 high schools, called the plan “deeply flawed” and “a top-down exercise in poor planning.” They called on Cassellius and the school committee to abandon the proposal, which they characterized as “divorced from any authentic analysis of data.”

That same morning, a second harsh assessment reached Cassellius when the district’s K-8 Principal Association delivered a letter summarizing a survey of the overall working climate in the district. The summary letter, representing the views of scores of principals, contained two-and-a-half pages of highly critical remarks from the K-8 principal corps.

“There is very little trust between school leaders and the central office,” said one principal quoted in the letter.

“There is a toxic and misguided focus on public relations,” said another.

Cassellius said she welcomed the feedback, but said the high school redesign was a work in progress, so was surprised by the high school leaders complaints.

“I don’t understand why this letter’s coming now,” she said Thursday, adding the principals could have asked for a meeting. “But I’m told that this is not uncommon in Boston. And that’s OK: I’m happy to continue to have the public dialogue.”

The superintendent said she was similarly perplexed by the K-8 leaders' summary letter.

"But I'm glad to have it," she said. "It's good feedback."

School leaders interviewed in recent days said they've long been concerned that Cassellius didn't consult with principals and headmasters on policy and that she freely moved principals from job to job. Their anxiety mounted after June 30, when they say their contracts expired, heightening their professional anxiety.

"Six high school leaders were removed from their positions by the Superintendent during the pandemic shutdown this spring," wrote the high school association in its letter to Cassellius and the school committee. "Changes made under these circumstances are absolutely detrimental to morale, dismissive of the strong work done by those leaders before and during the COVID emergency, and reflect poor practices by the BPS in supporting and evaluating school leaders."

In a statement to the Globe Friday, Boston Teachers Union president Jessica Tang said her organization was troubled by many of the same issues.

"We share many of the concerns that the principal's associations wrote about in their letters, particularly concerning the lack of opportunities to truly inform district decisions with authentic feedback and expertise from educators on the ground," said Tang. "Building trust and partnership as well as changing entrenched district culture can take time, but now more than ever we need it."

School committee chairperson Michael Loconto declined an interview request Friday.

Friday evening, Walsh issued a statement of support for Cassellius.

"Every move Superintendent Cassellius makes is with the best interest of students at the forefront. She has consistently demonstrated her commitment to improving academic outcomes for students, breaking down barriers where they exist, and making our school district stronger and more equitable for students. Of equal importance is that she embraces the hard work we have ahead to achieve excellence across the board for every student in every school, and I am glad to have her leadership to get us to that place," the mayor's statement said.

Cassellius's high school redesign plan would initially target seven of the city's struggling open-enrollment schools, including Brighton, East Boston, English, and Madison Park.

Under her plan, those schools are expected to implement four major new programs, including vocational education tracks, International Baccalaureate, pre-Advanced Placement courses, and dual enrollment with local colleges and universities. At the same time, the schools are expected to expand from grades 9-12 to include grades 7 and 8.

The timeline is equally ambitious: Under the plan, these changes would take effect in the fall of 2021, following a year of what is certain to be epochal disruption by the coronavirus.

Cassellius said she wasn't necessarily committed that timeline.

"My intention was to go through another year of planning," she said. "The pace of the change is still to be determined."

Walsh said he supported the idea behind Cassellius's high school overhaul, explaining that Boston schools vary too widely in structure and requirements. Cassellius, he said, is trying to raise standards for all of them.

"When I took over as mayor, we had 125 schools, 22 different start times, and like 24 different models of schools," Walsh said. "We want to be a predominantly K-6, 7-12 district and not have several different changes for parents having to get their kids into different schools."

Walsh acknowledged that "a lot of people" have raised concerns about educating seventh- and eighth-graders with high school students, including some headmasters. But Walsh pointed out: "It's a system change. The school committee voted on it well over a year ago."

In their letter, the high school leaders stressed that they were deeply committed to improving the system, too, but that Cassellius's method lacked many components, including a "meaningful equity analysis" and would negatively affect alternative education in the city.

"All Heads of School support the strengthening of academics at the high school level," they wrote. However, "[w]e believe that this proposal, if

implemented as currently constructed, would be extremely detrimental to students, families and schools.”

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