



Kendra Leigh Miller • Daily Times

**Katherine Duncanson, director of human resources, compliance and school committee attorney for the Coventry School District.**

## Picking up the slack in Coventry

### Administrator up to task taking over departing colleague's dept.

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COVENTRY — She's been the school district's director of compliance and attorney for a year and as of February 24, she'll add director of human resources to her responsibilities.

As the director of compliance and the school district's attorney, Katherine Duncanson will still fulfill the responsibilities of ensuring the district is working in compliance with all district, state and federal education laws as well as being the district's attorney but because Robin Pelletier, the director of administration and finance is leaving her post in two weeks, Duncanson is taking on the human resource component as well.

"I've always been involved in the

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# Coventry admin. picks up the slack

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human resource aspect, but in the past, it's come into play in the event there was an issue," she explained. "Now, I'll be involved from the beginning so the learning curve won't be big."

"Previously, I didn't get involved with an issue unless there's an issue with compliance but there's still pulling interests with day to day such as business operations verses special education, verses fiscal limitations, verses compliance regulations, business regulations and labor requirements," she said. "There's a lot that intersects."

The easiest aspect of her job is working with the school district community.

"I don't think I've ever worked with such an innovative group of people before," she said. "No one accepts that something can't be done, they just look for different ways to do it."

She used the Chromebooks as an example.

"As part of the Rhode Island Department of Education's (RIDE) mandates, every student has to have a Chromebook eventually," Duncanson said. "So, the attitude is, 'let's figure out how to make this happen.'"

Before she became a part of the Coventry School District's administrative team, Duncanson worked for a private law firm in the Providence area where the focus was also on school-related issues.

"I was doing the same work, so when I came to Coventry, it was a natural transition," she said.

There are roughly 700 personnel in the Coventry School district. Duncanson said given that high number, there's always something to do whether it's payroll, dealing with collective bargaining agreements, contract negotiations, filling out required forms for various human resource issues and other circumstances.

"I worked closely with Robin on these issues but now, I'll be involved from the start and I like that because I'll be able to fill in the gaps," she said.

Previously, her assistance with a situation may not have been needed until most of the way through, whether it dealt with a leave of absence for a teacher, an issue with a special education student and their instructional plan or a student needing more time with a teacher.

"I really want to be involved with each step," Duncanson said.

Her passion for being an attorney and being involved with education is a family affair.

Members of her family were educators and she just grew up with a natural love for the law, and as she phrases it, solving problems before they start, not through litigation.

"As I grew as a professional, I liked that I dealt with the same clients and people just about every day or at least one a week, as opposed to other types of lawyers who don't get the opportunity to get close to their clients."

She still reaches out to her former colleagues as they do to her, and she considers her position in the district to be one of true collaboration between herself and everyone in the community.

"My former colleagues and myself, along with my current colleagues, we're all working toward the same goals and doing the same thing; it's a collaborative effort," she said.

The challenges Coventry faces are the same every district faces; complying with RIDE.

"It's not a matter of shifting, it's a matter of adding and we just don't have it in our budget to do it," she said.

Her approach to a job she loves is to prevent issues before they arise if she can, and to be a problem solver.

"I enjoy my work so much and I love being a resource for people," she said. "I think it's about prioritizing and doing whatever we can to create a better school system that's in compliance and serves the community in the best way possible."

"However, I'm very sad we're losing Robin. She is one of the best at what she does and the district is going to lose a great resource in her."