

COVENTRY

School board approves district staff changes

Washington Oak Elementary will hire full-time assistant principal, CHS to gain two student deans

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COVENTRY — The Coventry School Committee approved a number of personnel changes on Thursday night that will take effect before the start of the new school year, including the hiring of a full-time assistant principal at Washington Oak Elementary School and the reworking of staff at Coventry High School to create two new Dean of Students positions.

Current Washington Oak Principal Christine Mandese presented to the committee this week a proposal for a new assistant principal position she hopes will help her better meet the needs of not only faculty and students

but also parents in the community.

Mandese explained that Washington Oak is one of the largest elementary schools in the state with 585 students and more than 100 faculty and staff members.

"I couldn't find any school of our size without an assistant principal," Mandese said of the research she conducted. "Washington Oak is very large, and when you have a school of this size it's challenging at times. We have to make sure safety is always the number one priority and that teachers have what they need."

She said that as she wraps up her first full year as principal at the school, she can't help but notice her time is being torn between administrative duties and 'instructional leader-

ship.'

"Instructional leadership is my passion," Mandese said. "But at times this year I was torn and more toward the management side."

She noted the school had 324 special education meetings this past year, compared to 122 at Blackrock Elementary. Washington Oak averages about seven office behavior referrals per week and almost 300 per year. The school also has four specialized programs for students with intensive needs.

"I'm an instructional leader at heart, so I work closely with teachers to write student learning objectives and I like to be involved in all of that work with the teachers," Mandese said. "People will tell you I am rarely in my

office because I like to be working close with students and teachers."

The school currently has a part-time assistant principal, Gus Gomes, whom officials said they are happy with, but the addition of a full-time assistant principal would allow Mandese to allocate some responsibilities such as office behavior referrals and teacher evaluations to free up more time for instructional leadership in the school. Mandese said that with a part-time assistant principal there are challenges with communication because the individual is not required to be at the school each week day.

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"Leadership is the second most important factor for students right after teaching, so it is important that there is a strong leadership team at the school," said Mandese. "We want to make every child successful."

Coventry School Committee Chairperson Karen Patenaude said she was "in 100 percent agreement" with the proposal and noted "this is a long time coming."

"There was always a Dean of Students at the old Washington Oak," Patenaude said. "It was a big school then, and we moved to a new building and the principal was always stressed beyond belief. I think if it's something we can afford to do I would support it 100 percent."

Coventry Superintendent Craig Levis said he viewed the change as beneficial for improving the services and supports provided to students, teachers and families.

"Our job is to give kids a fighting chance, to give them the best opportunity to have the rest of their life be more than just existing and being productive," Levis said. "We have phenomenal teachers and nothing is perfect, but our teachers work really hard and giving them the proper support to educate is important. This is something that is truly needed for Washington Oak in terms of continuing to move forward."

To fund the full-time position, Coventry Public Schools Finance Director Sarah Mangiarelli explained they will use savings acquired from the retirement of a behavior specialist in the district. Although the job has not formally been posted online and officially opened, the district is budgeting about \$31,000 for the slot.

"We're picking up another body for \$31,000 and that's pretty good to help move the district forward," Mangiarelli said.

Levis also pointed out that the district managed to come up with an additional \$800,000 needed during budget season due to cuts in state aid and did so "without laying off a single teacher."

"Our greatest asset is our people," said Levis. "We're not coming forward with anything we don't feel has an impact on kids and that we can't sustain."

Levis added that with the full time assistant principals families should notice increased response times when they reach out with concerns.

Committee member Ann Dickson said she appreciated Mandese's "vision for the role of principal" at Washington Oak and noted "that distinguishes between a leader and a manager and I think you understand the difference between the two."

"That is a special school," said Vice Chairperson David Florio. "At one point it had 643 children and there was only one principal and it wasn't enough. I don't want to see another principal leave because of the work. There's so many worthy children and I have no issue approving this because I know it's needed."

The school committee voted unanimously to move forward with the position, including writing a formal job description and advertising.

Coventry High School Principal Michael Hobin also presented to the committee this week a proposal to rework the current administrative structure at the high school. CHS, another large school, currently has three assistant principals, one principal and one

director for the Career and Technical Center.

Hobin started working at CHS in 1993 and explained that the loss of an administrator over the years lowering the team from six to five members has had a significant impact.

He proposed creating two positions for a Dean of Students to replace one assistant principal position which is currently open. Former CHS Assistant Principal Joseph Lucian was recently appointed to the position of Principal at Alan Shawn Feinstein Middle School.

"Part of our struggle is we're always putting students first," Hobin said. "We walk in the building and you never know what's going to happen or what a student needs. So our best intention is to eventually get to the leadership, but if there's a student issue that's always first so the work on the curriculum and professional development gets done later. Every one of our administrators feels that pinch every day."

The high school also lost a grant-funded social worker position that was moved to the middle school.

"So we're down someone who helps kids in crisis," said Hobin. "We have so many kids suffering with any number of needs and we need to make sure we have the staff available at all times for them to work with."

Hobin proposed promoting two teachers to the Dean of Students positions and filling the two teaching positions with new employees. Coventry Assistant Superintendent of Schools Laurie Andries pointed out that the model Hobin proposed is used in most high schools throughout the state.

"Most schools have gone to this model long ago, and in every high school I know of the deans are in the teacher's ranks," said Andries.

Jon Anderson, the school department's legal counsel, said that deans do not have the authority to suspend students.

"The vice principal will have to do the entire investigation and it won't be acceptable for a dean to say 'please sign off on this' and that will not stand up in court," he said.

Member Ann Dickson also pointed out that the positions will be subject to standard teacher hours and as a union contract position there is little room for flexibility.

"I want to make sure if we add people to the staff they are available to work students because that's their primary role," Dickson said, adding that she did not feel she had enough information to make a decision that evening and would abstain from a vote.

"If they want the position they'll do everything in their power and if there is a student situation after 2 p.m. they'll stay," said Patenaude. "I truly believe that."

Patenaude added she is in favor of the proposal.

"I think this makes a lot of sense," she said. "I'm ready and willing to let it happen and see what you come up with. If it doesn't work it's budget neutral so we can always say we gave it a try."

Debra Tyree, Elementary Vice President for the Coventry Teachers' Alliance, asked the committee to remember the deans would be union contract positions and as such would be pseudo-administrative in nature.

"I know you want to get a go-getter but you do need to maintain and respect that there are limitations and parameters," she said.

Three committee members voted in favor of the proposal, Dickson abstained and James Pierson voted against.

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