

Hubbardston Center principal's status raises questions

Not even two years into serving as principal of Hubbardston Center School, it looks to be an almost certainty that Maureen Donelan will not be its leader when the next school year begins.

That comes a result of a seemingly out-of-the-blue decision made earlier this month by Superintendent Dr. Maureen Marshall to not renew Donelan's contract. What seems particularly unusual about that determination is that for a school of nearly 400 students serving grades K-6, Hubbardston Center had it's best performance on the MCAS in four years based on latest available results.

As a school, it was able to meet adequate yearly progress on both the overall average, or aggregate, and for all student subgroups in the Mathematics portion in 2010, while also meeting it on the aggregate for English Language Arts. If not for missing the mark with a single subgroup — special education students — on the ELA portion, it would have hit in all four areas.

That level of performance, in hitting on three of four adequate yearly progress markers, was the best the school had done since hitting on all four starting with the 2003 test, through 2006.

Beginning in 2007, though, while still under the longtime leadership of Joan Paula, the school first slipped by failing to make AYP in two of the four areas, hitting on the aggregate and for all subgroups on the math portion.

Only to miss the mark in each

of the four areas the next two years.

Donelan then was named principal August 2009, after having served as a teacher in the Narragansett Regional School District, as well as at the Petersham Center School.

EVOLVING EDUCATION



ANDRES
CAAMANO

Under Donelan's stewardship in her first school year of 2009-10, Hubbardston Center made those significant strides on the MCAS. Other noticeable differences, at least from this corner, were in Donelan's openness in dealing with the press. It became immediately clear upon meeting Donelan for the first time, as she allowed me to meet with teachers that February to discuss the year's participation in the annual Newspapers In Education supplement. Having then served as the head of the NIE program for more than five years, I'd been accustomed to a certain limited access to teachers and students at practically any area school. With Hubbardston Center, though, I'd come to expect mostly resistance and little access. With Donelan's guided tour that day through the halls, it felt odd stepping foot in

them for the first time, having been so used to not straying beyond the walls of the school office.

Despite those changes, Dr. Marshall — who made the hiring of Donelan one of her first decisions upon returning to the district under a shared services agreement with North Middlesex that same month — went ahead with this abrupt move, with Donelan apparently given the option of resigning or serving out the remainder of the year. Whether forcing out a principal in the waning weeks of a school year — amounting to only about a meager six weeks at this point — can be sold as either necessary or an effective move is debatable at best.

The way this all came down surprised many parents who have students in the school. About a dozen parents attended the Quabbin Regional School Committee's meeting April 14, aiming to voice their displeasure regarding the move and get some answers.

For starters, they were bothered by the district's lack of communication with parents on the issue, with parent Jerry McKee citing in an e-mail, "My wife and I were told by someone in the community on Tuesday, April 12, that there was a rumor that Principal Donelan had been asked to resign." McKee then contacted the superintendent by e-mail to voice his support for Donelan, only to never get a response.

That lack of communication went beyond the superintendent, though, as the committee

quashed any potential discussion at the meeting. After parent Josephine Amato stood to bring the issue forward, school committee Chairman Edward F. Leonard told the group, "It's not a matter of the school committee ... we're not going to discuss it."

Moments later, Leonard emphatically slammed the gavel to end the meeting. When asked about the issue again after the meeting by the press, the committee remained tight-lipped, citing it as simply a personnel issue, and saying nothing else.

That left the concerned parents to hand out copies of a letter, signed by parents Patricia Gregson and Stephanie Davolos, and addressed to the superintendent, the school committee and the town's selectmen, citing concern over what was an "extreme, unexpected and immediate decision," adding that with how the decision went down, the principal "deserves due process."

How much "due process" Donelan will get is tough to say, even though a meeting between the parents and superintendent is apparently scheduled for Monday. Before Donelan's supporters could think they could dominate the room, though, as written by McKee, "I have also been told that for every statement of support that Principal Donelan receives, there are negative statements as well."

Then again, to expect every teacher, parent and student to be supportive of a principal is an unrealistic bar to try to reach for. Considering the school's recent academic improvements, paired

with the strong support by a core of parents and many students, one would think the value of maintaining stability in its leadership would hold merit.

Aside from parents disappointed about the possibility that Donelan will not be the principal beyond this year, there are some students who feel the same way.

As McKee wrote, "My wife and I informed our children that it is unlikely that Principal Donelan will be at the school next year. Both of my children were dismayed and stated that they really liked Principal Donelan and that 'She's really nice. We like her so much.'"

While one might jump to the initial conclusion that parents shouldn't be allowed to contribute input about whether a principal should be retained or not, when realizing that one of the parents, Ms. Davolos, is herself a head of an area school, as executive director at the North Central Charter Essential School in Fitchburg, that opinion should be seen as holding special weight, in that a head of a school is standing up in support for another.

It takes one to know one, as the saying goes.

While one might see the move as wise if there were major issues with Donelan's work performance, Donelan said, "The superintendent gave me one reason why my contract was not being renewed, and it was not based on job performance," adding the reason given was related to concerns spelled out in a letter by a representative of the

teacher's union.

If anything, this move puts the magnifying glass on the district's two-year sharing experiment with North Middlesex — and how Quabbin, at least from this view, seems to be getting the short end of the stick. When entering into the agreement, the goal seemed to be something close to a 50-50 split, but in the district's looking to hire an assistant superintendent, posted on March 15, to start in July, it's clear that even the district has concluded the balance isn't close to being even.

That opens up a whole different debate regarding the agreement, which was largely sold as a cost-saving measure. By potentially adding a full-time assistant superintendent, though, the district will likely be paying more toward that office's services, compared to if it still only had a full-time superintendent dedicated solely to Quabbin.

This experiment likely had many cities and towns throughout the commonwealth paying close attention to how this agreement would play out. Based on there being few districts lining up to follow suit with similar arrangements, it's clear that following the sudden resignation of then-superintendent Sue M. Gee in May 2009, the district was left with no real ideal or viable options for a smooth transition to the next superintendent.

(Andres Caamano is the Senior News Editor/NIE Director at The Gardner News. He can be reached at acaamano@thegardnernews.com.)