

NEWS

New Worcester teachers union president vows to hear all views, bolster membership



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WORCESTER — North High School special education teacher Melissa Verdier began laying the groundwork for her campaign to become the new Educational Association of Worcester president three years ago.

Verdier, who is an EAW Board of Directors member and a chair on the union's contract negotiation team, was elected president May 4 over incumbent Roger Nugent.

She hoped that by putting herself “out there for the past few years and just letting people know I do plan on running,” she would be able to gain the support to make a run for the top spot in the largest union in Worcester with about 2,950 unit members.

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“I want to build this union, to show the strength of the largest union in the city,” Verdier said. “That was one thing that I said from the very beginning. There's strength in numbers. We have the numbers. We just need to show them that we are as strong as we can be and that's something I'm striving for.”

Verdier was able to unseat Nugent, who had served two terms as the EAW president because she listened to union members who, she said, often went unheard.

“I really made an effort to get out there and listen to what people wanted and what people did,” she said.

Not original plan to become teacher

Born in Rutland and a graduate of the Wachusett Regional School District, Verdier said she did not immediately plan to become a teacher.

Originally entering college as a math major, she said difficulties with a professor convinced her to change her coursework.

“I felt like I wasn't learning and he really turned me off from math,” Verdier said. “If I didn't understand something, and I asked him to explain it, he'd be like, ‘It's right there on the board. I don't understand why you can't see it.’”

She went on to become an instructional assistant at North High School, where she worked in math classes.

“When I graduated, I wasn't sure if I was ready to take that lead role in a classroom, I still felt a little young,” she said. “I just wanted to get my feet wet.”

Special ed: 'This is the path for me'

She said she went to her father, a former educator and union member, about how she was feeling and he recommended she begin as an instructional assistant.

“So I did that and I became an instructional assistant at North in special education and fell in love with special education and decided, 'This is the path for me,'" Verdier said.

“I was working with kids on how to help them access the curriculum in a more meaningful way,” she said. “Working with students and learning new ways to help them access the curriculum and help them with any kind of accommodations they might need in the classroom or any modifications of materials so that it was at their instructional level ... really brought me back to that love for math.”

Verdier began working as an instructional assistant in 2001 before pursuing her graduate education in special education.

She also served as a long-term substitute teacher before being hired full-time in 2003 at North High, where she has worked for the last 20 years teaching math to special education students.

Not only was Verdier able to lean on her father for advice throughout her career but she was also, she said, able to look back on the “front-row seat” she had with him when he served as the president of the Wachusett Regional Education Association and field rep for the EAW.

“I just found the work really interesting and I'm definitely a proponent for fairness,” she said. “I want to see things equitable and through doing some of the work I've done in the past 12 years of being involved in the union, I noticed that, that isn't the case. We're a very large school system and things aren't always the same across that school system.”

Consistency key

She said that making things more consistent across the board will be one of the key aspects of her tenure.

“There are some aspects of education that should be equitable when you're talking about how somebody's evaluated or when you're talking about how student interactions are handled within the school like that,” Verdier said. “That tends to be different in different places, depending on what level you are ... and which particular school you're in.”

Other areas of focus

In addition to consistency among schools and school levels, Verdier has three other core areas she plans to focus on while president: Increasing transparency, answering people's questions and growing and strengthening through membership.

“I really want to see the transparency there between what's going on in the big picture, like when we're negotiating,” she said. “Six years ago, at this point, we didn't find out until the

MOA (Memorandum of Agreement) was finished that they were proposing a step freeze and I ... probably wouldn't have signed that contract, in my opinion.”

Verdier said she wants EAW members to “know what's going on as it's going on,” so they can do their due diligence and understand how that's going to impact them.

Her second focus, communication, is not only an important aspect of leading the union but something that she believes helped her get elected as president, she said.

“I heard from a lot of people that their questions went unanswered and I don't like that,” Verdier said. “I really feel like we are here for the membership — that's the point of the job — is to work for the members. So if I'm not answering them when they ask me questions then, am I really doing my job?”

Her third focus is to grow and strengthen the union through membership and empowering the members, she said.

“It's also the largest K to 12 local that the MTA has. I don't think, for the size that we are, that we get the respect that we deserve,” she said. “I would like to empower the members themselves to grow and flex their strength so that we can start solving problems at a building level.”

She said that she knows she will not necessarily agree with every member on every issue but that she will do what she needs to do to support them.

“I could completely not agree with somebody's point of view on a specific subject but you're not going to know that as the public because I'm still going to support them because they're a member of the union that I'm the president of,” Verdier said. “I might not agree with you but if your point is valid and what you're looking to do is something that I think is important for that particular viewpoint, whether it be my own or not, I'm still going to work for it.”

Asst. Principal: Verdier a 'doer' and 'no-nonsense person'

Teresa O'Neill, an assistant principal at North High, called Verdier “a doer” and a “no-nonsense person” and said that she was excited for her to be elected president.

“She'll take whatever the situation is on a case-by-case basis for whoever that teacher is that needs the help of the union,” O'Neill said. “She'll do her best to represent them. I don't think it will matter to her at all whether anybody voted for her or not. I don't think she sees things that way.”

She said Verdier is capable of looking at a situation in its entirety and making good decisions or giving good advice because she is level-headed.

“She'll be fair, she'll be honest, she'll represent where she can,” O'Neill said. “I don't think she'll be a person who will let people think something and then not follow through on that. If she says that she's going to do something, she'll do it and she'll follow through.”

Special ed teacher: Faith in Verdier as leader

Lisa Cantwell, a special education teacher at Quinsigamond School who will be retiring after a 35-year career in the district, said that she was shocked that Nugent was not re-elected, but

has faith that Verdier will be able to lead the union.

“I honestly don't really know much about her, but I'm sure she'll be fine. Roger was fine, but maybe it's time for new blood,” Cantwell said. “I did vote for Roger, but it's not like I'm upset that she's going to be the union president at all.”

Cantwell added that as a teacher, Verdier likely understands what union members will expect of a new president and that she will be able to address their needs.

“Being a teacher and part of the union, knowing exactly what teachers are looking for,” Cantwell said. “She's gonna go in with an open mind for the teachers. I think she'll be fine.”

One aspect of Verdier's platform that Cantwell agreed with is more transparency from the union during contract negotiations.

“With the contract going back and forth, back and forth — maybe getting more teacher input during bargaining,” she said.

Cantwell said she hopes that, if the union is able to get involved with school building safety initiatives, Verdier will take some type of action.

“Some of the buildings that have something wrong with them, that are old or falling apart, that may need to be addressed,” she said. “Especially Burncoat High School.”

She said she also hopes that the union is able to show schools the value of their teachers.

“The school I'm at now is great. I love it but in the past, one principal, in particular, would say, ‘Math was supposed to start at 9:02 and you're still doing reading.’” Cantwell said. “We have protocols we have to follow but if you're in the middle of a great lesson, you don't want to just stop because it's a certain time.”

She said that some principals have power over teachers, being able to dictate the teachers' schedules and lesson plans and that she thinks teachers “need to be valued more” for the work that they're doing.

Due to Verdier's popularity, Cantwell said, she thinks people voted for her because they have confidence she will be able to get things done and that makes her have faith in her ability to lead as well.

“She's for the teachers, so I'm not upset,” she said. “I feel bad (for Nugent), but I'm not upset.”

Verdier will take the reins as president beginning July 1, while Saul Ramos will continue as the union's first vice president and Christine Mooshian will serve as the second vice president.

“To the membership, I would like to say thank you for putting your trust in me and know I will always work my hardest and do my best to make sure that my voice is your voice,” Verdier said. “To the body-at-large, I would say keep your eye on the EAW because the strength of the membership is about to grow.”