

NEWS

Prepping for the job: New Worcester schools boss busily getting ready to move in

**Jeff A. Chamer**

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WORCESTER — While students and staff are ready to walk out the doors into summer vacation, the new boss of Worcester schools is busily getting ready to move in.

The transition to a new superintendent of public schools in Worcester is underway, with Rachel H. Monárrez recently in the city for a week's worth of meetings and house hunting.

Monárrez, who was selected by the School Committee in April to replace outgoing Superintendent Maureen Binienda, met individually with School Committee members and community leaders including Mayor Joseph M. Petty.

She also begins the search for a new home. Monárrez lives in California, having served as the deputy superintendent of the San Bernardino City Unified School District.

"It was a great opportunity just to start immersing myself into the community and hearing from people," Monárrez said of her visit to Worcester. "Hearing what their hopes, dreams and desires are for the city as a whole, the district most specifically and how we can do that together."

Although she is slated to begin July 1, Monárrez will arrive in Worcester July 5.

"I'll probably be in a hotel for a couple of weeks," she said.

Until then, Monárrez is finishing up work in San Bernardino, while also doing prep work for the top job in the Worcester public school district.

"I will be laying out an entry plan on July 1; I'm finishing it up right now," she said. "We'll get it translated and put on the district website."

She said that there will also be an entry video posted that day that will, "give a big picture of what people can expect in terms of my arrival and how I work."

Monárrez's said that her visit was "wonderful" and that when she returned to California, she, "came back with a stack of business cards."

Among those she was able to sit down with for a meeting was School Committee member Tracy O'Connell Novick. She said Monárrez was able to do "some planning for leadership" and lay foundational groundwork for when she returns full-time in July.

"She joined us on our tour of Burncoat, since that's the next building that we'll be doing as part of the Mass School Building Authority project," said O'Connell Novick. "She'll be in all of the buildings over the next number of months."

She said that Monárrez has also been making an effort to keep up with budget deliberations and the decisions made by the Committee thus far.

"I think that I, and the rest of the Committee, are trying to make sure that she has lots of space to be able to make what revisions she might need since that budget is one that she's going to be implementing," she said.

Meeting with Committee members

Monárrez saw the district's new school buses and was also able to meet with Director of Transportation John Hennessy and Chief Financial and Operations Officer Brian Allen, said School Committee member Jermoh Kamara.

The two School Committee members were able to address concerns about student and staff mental health support with Monárrez during their individual meetings, with Kamara also giving particular focus to how physical spaces can impact student mental health.

"Schools have school adjustment counselors, school psychologists and wraparound coordinators. It's not perfect but it's OK," Kamara said. "We need a plan, a clear plan. We then need physical space."

Kamara was also able to discuss Chapter 74 vocational programs in the district.

Although the district has "done a great job with these programs," she said, programs such as the Goddard Scholars Academy, which is only available at Dr. Arthur F. Sullivan Middle School and Doherty South High Community School, are limited in who can participate.

"It's just unfair to tell people who live in the North Quadrant that if you want your child to be in such a program, that they need to drive their child or there'll be transportation," Kamara said. "We need to be really strategic in how we're placing programs and looking at the demographics, looking at data to help us."

Both Kamara and O'Connell Novick praised Monárrez after their meetings, with Kamara saying she was "very receptive" during their discussions and O'Connell Novick saying it was "very energizing."

Meeting with Acting City Manager Batista

The new superintendent was also able to briefly meet with Acting City Manager Eric Batista, who said the two discussed how, "We're both two new to this leadership role and how important it is for her and I to work together and be on the same page.

"She has a different perspective for where she comes from and what she's been able to do," Batista said. "It's just like me in my role right now. My approach can be a little different than Ed Augustus was, so it's a matter of working through those transition periods."

He said that Monárrez has high regard for the city, administration as well as Worcester public schools and its students.

After her many meetings throughout her visit, Monárrez said she was able to get an idea of some areas she would like to tackle as soon as she arrives in Worcester.

"What I believe will really resonate with people is that Worcester public schools will be the model of educational excellence, through a culture of belonging and continuous improvement," Monárrez said.

She said that it was clear during her visit that people want to be involved in what is going on in the schools and that they want to be heard when they express thoughts and opinions.

"That doesn't mean everybody gets everything that they want," Monárrez said. "We come to compromise, but we do that collectively because it is such a diverse community."

Culture for youth to take risks and learn from mistakes

The other aspect she wants to focus on is continuously improving the district and creating a culture where youth will be willing to take risks, make mistakes and learn from their mistakes.

"Adults need to embrace that as well and create that type of culture in the district. We don't have to be perfect and we should not think that we can be," Monárrez said. "We are humans and we make mistakes. What's most important is that we continuously learn from them."

Restorative practices

Monárrez said that one topic that was discussed repeatedly during her meetings that she wants to address upon arrival is implementing restorative practices.

"Restorative practices, to me, is not just how you treat the children. It's how you treat the adults. It's how you treat humans," Monárrez said.

She said when it comes to working with youth who may make, "just not the right decision," it is important to think about the appropriate consequences for them, as well as restoring their relationships so that they are still part of the learning community.

Safety is another aspect of restorative practices, she said, and something that she will focus on immediately in the district, especially after the recent shootings.

Her business office is already working to find a company to come and audit the district to get the current status of its safety practices, protocols, procedures and facilities, she said.

Monárrez said that she also wants to focus on supporting students whose first language is not English and will work with the Office of Multilingual Education to evaluate what is currently being done in the district, what is working and how that can be expanded.

With 28 years of experience, Monárrez is excited about, "bringing in some ideas that I have experienced and I know work, especially around data monitoring," as well as interventions and supports and programs to engage with families.

The thing that Monárrez wanted to emphasize, she said, was community.

"When I say 'community,' I'm talking the people who work in the district, the families whose students attend the district, the people who live in Worcester," Monárrez said. "I'm talking everybody."

She said that although she will be coming to Worcester with her experience from the last 28 years, she will also listen and "value the traditions that are in the community and in the schools."

To make things happen, Monárrez said, she is a "listener" first and then "working with a team" second.

"There are some of them that may need to be changed, but we'll go through that together," she said. "I would only change it if it's in the best interest of children."