

NEWS

Retiring WPS Superintendent Maureen Binienda reflects on 46-year career. What's next? A run for office?

**Jeff A. Chamer**

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WORCESTER — On June 30, Superintendent Maureen F. Binienda will retire, and for the first time in 46 years, she will no longer be a Worcester Public Schools employee.

While her retirement plans include expanding her vegetable garden and flower bed, as well as trips with her husband to their Caribbean timeshare in St. Martin, it may be short-lived as her career path could take a change early next year.

“I am considering getting involved in a leadership role in Worcester,” Binienda said. “There's a lot of change in our city right now, so I'm waiting to see what happens with the changes and then, probably next January, I'll make my decision if I'm going to run for office in Worcester.”

In September 2021, the Worcester School Committee voted to not renew Binienda's contract, instead opting to search for a new superintendent.

For the next two-and-a-half months, Binienda will not only begin to wrap up her tenure, but she will also help the new superintendent, who is expected to be announced at the end of this month, transition into the role.

Binienda said that when she filed her retirement paperwork at the end of March, the first day of her 46-year career flashed before her eyes.

“For a second, I wondered, ‘Wow, where's the time gone?’ But I have to say that I have enjoyed every moment,” Binienda said. “I really, truthfully can't go through a week without running into a past parent, a past student, a community member and we stop and share that moment in time.”

Education career an easy choice

A career in education was an easy choice for Binienda, whose family had strong ties to the Worcester Public Schools system.

Her grandfather and aunt worked as teachers in city schools and her mother as a secretary, and she would often find herself in schools with her family at events or holiday parties.

She became particularly interested in a career in special education when she helped teach her younger brother how to read.

“He was in special education classes. Back then, everybody that was special ed went into the same classroom. They called them ungraded,” Binienda said. “He had come home in tears that he couldn't read.”

Binienda, who was only in sixth grade, taught her second grade brother how to read using flash cards, helping him memorize and learn the sight words written on them.

“I couldn't believe that I was able to teach him to read so that always remained with me,” she said. “Maybe I could do this for other kids too.”

She said that experience helped inspire her to pursue special education at Fitchburg State University where she received both her bachelor's and first master's degrees.

Starting as a special education teacher in 1976 at a school that has since been converted into condominiums, Binienda taught elementary special education and had the unique experience of teaching the first special ed class in the non-special ed building.

“They had two buildings — one was for all special ed and the other one was all regular ed — so when I got hired, my job was the only, at that time, special ed class in the regular building,” she said.

After two years, because of financial problems caused by Proposition 2^{1/2}, the buildings consolidated, which led to a reduction in the workforce, she said.

38 years at South High

People with seniority were kept during the workforce reduction because of union rules at the time, which led to Binienda being transferred to South High Community School and her class to another school.

Binienda would spend the next 38 years of her career at South High, where she would work until becoming the superintendent.

“I had a lot of opportunities there. I think all the opportunities I had really helped me with the skills I needed for whatever job I applied for,” she said. “I was a lifeguard. I was part of a summer sports camp that we ran teaching swimming; varsity field hockey coach. I was the basketball cheerleading coach. I was the sophomore class adviser. I was the variety show director.”

Binienda said that all of those opportunities not only provided her with the skills she needed for future jobs but also allowed her to know students beyond their first and last names.

“I made a promise to myself that I'd learn every kid's name and try to learn something special about them,” she said. “So that at graduation when they walked across the stage, I would sit there and think about what I knew about each student.”

School's culture of hope

This was something that, she said, became part of the school culture throughout the district.

“All of our schools have a special culture of the staff really extending themselves to help the students figure out the future or survive day to day,” Binienda said. “There's a good number of students that have a lot of challenges in life and, in many cases, it is the faculty that gives them hope every day.”

She credits the faculty with not only connecting with students to help them overcome academic challenges but also connecting with their families to help assist in getting issues resolved, such as connecting them with an agency about how to pay for an electric bill or getting credit for a bill so they don't have to pay.

To this day, she continues to not only run into former students but will also get phone calls and emails from them asking for advice, thanking her for the work she did as an educator and sometimes simply to say "hello."

From teacher to principal

While Binienda started as a special education teacher in South High, she began to rise through the ranks of the school becoming assistant principal in the 1990s and then principal in 2008.

During that time, Binienda also received her second master's degree at Harvard University in administration, planning and social policy.

“There was a philanthropist in Worcester called Jacob Hiatt and every year, he picked one teacher and one administrator and he paid 80% of your tuition and the district paid 100% of the salary,” Binienda said. “It was a one-year program and in 1991 I was the teacher that was selected.”

During that time she not only worked full time at South High but she was commuting to Cambridge and also raising her 2-year-old daughter.

She said that even while applying for the program becoming superintendent had not crossed her mind.

“I didn't even check off superintendent on the form through DESE (the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education). I just checked off principal and assistant principal,” Binienda said.

It was not until 2006 that she decided to get her superintendent's license.

However, due to changes in teaching licensure, Binienda also had to take the teacher's test to have all of the qualifications for the role.

“I had already done all the work but the difference was I had to take the teachers test because I'd been teaching for so long. I initially, did not have to take the teacher's test and in 1976,” Binienda said. “So I had all the qualifications. I took the teacher's test, passed it and got that license in 2006.”

South honored for community work

Binienda would continue to serve as principal at South High from 2008 until 2016, during which the school would rack up awards for community work.

“There’s got to be over 20 and they’re all from community organizations,” she said. “I had a lot of community partners that I worked with and because of that, the community became aware of the work that we were doing. So I accepted those awards on behalf of everybody that works at that school.”

One of those awards included the Central Massachusetts Housing Alliance Janice Nadeau Award.

"I think about all the skills that we all had to learn in order to go through all the red tape that exists for helping families that are homeless," Binienda said. "I also think about how we didn't give up and we got those kids and their families places to stay."

In July 2016, Binienda was selected as the Worcester public school superintendent.

She is proud of the work she accomplished during her tenure as superintendent, pointing to the early college and innovative pathway programs as particular highlights, stating that each is the best in Massachusetts.

“I have to not take credit for that, but take credit for the people I hired who were really skilled and were able to take on projects and bring them to a really high level,” Binienda said.

Weathering pandemic

She said she was also proud of the system that the district was able to develop during the pandemic.

“Even though we were remote, we met for weeks on end with no days off because we needed to build a whole system that didn't exist. You didn't have a remote system,” Binienda said. “We didn't even have enough Chromebooks, so staff wasn't trained on how to teach remotely, so we had to build a whole remote system.”

She said it was "the strength of my team" that allowed the district to be able to provide students a quality education during the pandemic.

She also credited UMass Medical School, Deb Nazarian, Dr. Michael Hirsh, the Edward M. Kennedy Community Health Center and other community partnerships with helping the district move from a model that was all education to one that was education and medicine working together.

Controversial issues

Binienda’s tenure was also not without controversy, drawing criticism over issues such as school suspensions and sex education curriculum.

“The biggest issue was probably over suspensions, where certain groups of people felt as though we were overly suspending certain groups,” she said. “The sex education curriculum that we ended up with, we hired a consultant and we went through every lesson and took out anything that we felt would be offensive, so I think what we have now shouldn't be offensive to anybody.”

She said that the district also made sure families knew they could opt their students out of the curriculum and that she had never received a complaint from anyone whose child was taught the curriculum.

Another topic that Binienda faced backlash over was her support of school resource officers.

“I'm a big supporter of police in schools. I was there when they were traveling around the buildings and they established wonderful relationships with kids,” Binienda said. “They did not make students fearful. They had established a relationship with the kids.”

When asked if she would decide or handle those topics differently, she said she would not.

“I think you have to stand up for what you believe in, based on your experience and maybe the opinions that you gather from people you trust or people you admire,” Binienda said. “I would not change one decision that we made.”

No regrets over span of career

She said that while she wishes she could have had more time to help the district close the gap that it experienced during COVID-19, she does not have any regrets from her career.

“I'm actually very appreciative of Worcester public schools because how many people get to do this? How many people get to be a student in the Worcester public schools and rise to be a superintendent?” Binienda said.

She said her message to the district would be to "continue to make our students come first and to continue to do whatever is necessary so that all students can be successful."

She is also confident about the future of the district because she has confidence in the staff and principals in the district.

She said that she hopes the next superintendent will listen to the staff and principals and take the time to appreciate them.

"We have very talented staff in the public schools. They're able to deal with students that are in crisis, deal with English language learners, special education students, high achievers, students that have gaps," Binienda said. "I would hope that they would appreciate that and continue to provide the professional development that they need."

She said that she also hopes the next superintendent will take the time to put out good news about the district, sharing news of major accomplishments or achievements.

"I hope that it's not just a stopping place along the way," Binienda said. "That they decided to make Worcester their home and become part of this community."