

MASC/MASS JOINT CONFERENCE RECAP

WELCOME BACK!

"It was really great to see my constituents and colleagues. It's so good to be back together again," were sentiments repeated many times over the course of last month's MASC/MASS 2021 Joint Conference—an event that had to be postponed in 2020 due to the COVID pandemic and which required some creative planning this year so as to make the program accessible both in person and for members who wanted to participate remotely.

Yes, there were changes. On-site registrations had to be limited to ensure appropriate social distancing and other safety measures. There were fewer sessions offered than in prior years. We could not safely host the popular exhibit hall, vendors' reception or ice cream social out of concern for crowding. Our first large-scale hybrid format event had its share of technology glitches (but our field director technology gurus were able to work around most of these and now know how to avoid them for any future hybrid programming we might present).

But, overall, it was great to be back.

Welcoming attendees at the Wednesday Keynote Dinner, **MASS President Tim Pivovar**, Superintendent



Conference attendees at the opening of the Thursday General Session

Tim Pivovar, Superintendent of Schools, Billerica, summed up in his opening remarks what might well have been the underlying theme of the conference.

"We in this room have a responsibility to model the kind of behavior we want our students to assume. We may disagree on many issues. That's okay. We can disagree without being disagreeable. We know that constructive civil discourse starts with the relationships we build with one another. Events like these allow us to put our ideologies in perspective and recog-



MASS President Tim Pivovar (left) responding to DESE Commissioner Jeffrey Riley (right)

nize that we are all here for the common purpose of serving kids and helping prepare them for a better future than where we are right now. Above all: be kind. And we should not take ourselves too seriously."

"I know people are upset and tired but this is going to end at some point," said **MA Education Commissioner Jeffrey Riley**, the evening's keynote speaker. "We want to be able to look back and say we worked together, collaboratively and courageously, to give our kids the best possible options during this time."

Riley also reviewed the challenges of the past twenty months that school leaders, and his office, have confronted.

"I have great respect for local control, but there have been times in

this pandemic where the Department had to step in. We had to keep kids in a routine. We had to do whatever it took to keep them grounded and help relieve some of the emotional stress. This included establishing contact times for teachers and students. We had to decide when it was safe to bring kids back to schools, a decision made in collaboration with what the medical community told us about safety. And when the Delta variant spiked this summer, we had to reintroduce the mask mandate despite the controversy that decision has provoked.

"We see our role as reinforcing your efforts, through resources, guidance, and support. This includes directing ESSER and SOA funds to help you help your kids through this trauma and implement measures that will support them moving forward. And not just students, but staff as well."

Newly appointed **Deputy Commissioner Regina Robinson** shared her experiences as a former member of the Boston School Committee and as the parent of four Boston Public School students, including one with

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DESE Deputy Commissioner Regina Robinson, formerly a member of the Boston School Committee



Left to right: Superintendent Marice Edouard-Vincent, Superintendent Jason DeFalco, Communications Consultant Christopher Horan

Down's Syndrome. "I know what you are facing, trying to take care of your kids, your adults, yourselves. I know what it's like to be the only one in the room voting a particular way, but I always knew why I was doing it."

Emphasizing the need to acknowledge the disparities in classrooms, she urged making equity "a priority, a process, a plan—without becoming more polarized. In a world filled with bravery deficit, I encourage you to plan, prepare and create change for the year ahead. I have come to understand that courage is one of the most important virtues because without it, no other virtue can be practiced consistently. I call on you to be leaders who exhibit courage, knowing that our students are watching us and our districts are waiting for us to be the change."

The Thursday General Session began with what may become a new tradition for the conference: a welcome from members of the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe that included a riveting—often disturbing—review of the history of American settler-Indigenous peoples relations. The story of that contentious piece of our moral landscape segued into moderator Chris Horan's introduction to the focus of the session "School Districts at the Center of Polarized Community Debates."

"School committees are under siege as never before," he said. How do school leaders navigate these frustrating, devastating times and still serve your communities? How can you diffuse these challenging, often contentious and ugly confrontations, without provoking even more anger? The answer, according to Horan and the five other panelists, may be in



Somerville School Committee member Andre Green

reminding yourselves and your communities that no matter the distraction, the conversation needs to come back to the basics: providing support and instruction in every classroom for every student, every day.

Billerica Superintendent Tim Pivovar expanded on his remarks from the previous evening, advising members to not engage disruptors on their own turf. It's tempting, he admitted, when people derail meetings with vitriolic, out-of-line attacks, to want to retaliate. Don't. Engaging in give and take is not going to end well. "Our messaging needs to be around our core values and guiding principles. Our conversations should clarify the "what" it is we stand for, and the "why."

Andre Green, a member of the Somerville School Committee, reflected on the connection between the Wampanoag story that opened the session and today's polarized climate. "The uncomfortableness and tension around these issues, both those of 200 years ago and those from yesterday, isn't going to go away until we accept it, deal with it and get through it. And the only way to really do that is to solve it."

Jason DeFalco, Superintendent of the Blackstone-Millville Regional School District, acknowledged that the district has had its own share of difficult moments. "We've got to get comfortable with discomfort. It's not going away. We need to be thoughtful, intentional in order to move these issues forward. Yes, they are uncomfortable, but being strategic and being anticipatory is key. It's not just about what is happening in the moment. It's also about what is coming next.

Don't take this work personally, he advised, while noting it can be hard

not to. "You need to see where parents and the community are coming from. Yes, they will make it incredibly personal at times, but seeing the issue from their perspective can help you build bridges."

Medford Superintendent **Marice Edouard-Vincent** recounted the controversy the district struggled with a year ago in the process of renaming the Christopher Columbus Elementary School. "The school was located in a neighborhood that had long been Italian-American and the push to rename the school was perceived as driven by anti-Italian sentiment," she said. An advisory group of 23 people was charged with delivering three names to the School Committee for final consideration, but in the process, public comment periods were long, exhausting and marred by heckling and extreme passion on both sides. The new name (Missituk—the Native American name for the Mystic River that flows through the town), was ultimately selected on a 4-3 vote.

Edouard-Vincent, who was in her first year as Medford superintendent when the proposal to change the school's name was put forward, recalled it as a trial by fire and a learning process. "For me, the key takeaways from the experience were how important it is to know your core values and the "why" for the work. We also realized that no matter the nastiness and negativity, we had to provide an opportunity for everyone to feel seen and heard. They may not have gotten their way in the end, but they felt respected at the end of the process."

MASC President Ellen Holmes, a member of the Ashburnham Westminster Regional School Committee, reported on her shared experiences with other state school board association presidents who are confronting similar stressors around school reopenings, masking, curriculum, and diversity-equity-inclusion efforts. Across the country, she said, school board members are feeling let down by their legislators and governors as they try to put in place measures that will support their school communities safely and equitably. "There is a real breakdown in civil discourse and our students are not only seeing it, but in some cases,

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becoming the target of a lot of pent-up hostility. As adults, we have thicker skins. Going after students and school committee members' families is unconscionable."

Much of this extreme vitriol has been played out, and inflamed by, social media. "A lot of these naysayers are just angry at the universe; the school committee is simply the personification," Andre Green noted. He advised members not to get derailed.



Maurice "Mo" Cunningham

"The anger is positional. It's not about who you are as a person."

"You need to be clear about saying 'no' to those who want to burn down the house," Pivovar concluded. "We have a responsibility to model behavior for our students.

Thursday lunch speaker, **Maurice "Mo" Cunningham**, a professor of political science at UMA-Boston and the author of the recently published *Dark Money and the Politics of School Privatization*, focused his remarks on the continuing attacks on public education and its elected leaders. Much of the anger directed at school committees is being organized and funded, Cunningham reports, by national organizations with ties to the far right and networks of politically conservative, well-heeled oligarchs.

"These groups are highly coordinated, and their MO is to generate



Students shared their frustrations—and their positive takeaways—from the pandemic in the opening video interview on Friday.

chaos so as to disrupt civil discourse and the democratic process through threats and intimidation. Make no mistake that these are the same people who have developed school board starter guides and campaign literature on how to run against incumbent (especially liberal) members."

"Recognize who is attacking you. They want to cower you, bully you. Don't let it happen. Public education is in a fight for its survival because these people would like to destroy it. Don't accept the false accusations. Stand up for your students and your values."

The Friday General Session "Amplifying Student Voices" opened with a riveting video interview conducted in the early fall with a dozen high school students from a mix of communities. In frank, sometimes humorous, occasionally poignant comments, the students shared their perspectives on living and learning through the pandemic and their experiences with re-entry this fall into back-to-school routines.

Students recounted the challenges of juggling zoom time with parents and siblings and mourned the separation from friends and sports and activities that are a key component of the high school experience. Some acknowledged the challenge of "catching up" but most had nothing but praise for teachers who tried to make distance learning work and who managed to integrate national issues into online discussions. "It kind of helped bring the outside world into our sequestered places," one student noted.

School may be back in person, but students acknowledged that many are still grappling with mental health challenges raised and/or exacerbated by the pandemic. Session moderator **Christopher Horan** noted that adults need to recognize the range of issues that students are facing and implement a range of strategies to reach out to those who are struggling.

Dr. Nadja Reilly, who specializes in depression prevention in adolescents, social emotional learning, and community practices for prevention of mental illness as senior director of the Freedman Center at William James College, reported that 1 out of 5 students will struggle with mental health issues that cause measurable disruption in their

THURSDAY NIGHT DINNER



MASC President Ellen Holmes honors Steven Ultrino, MASC's 2021 Legislator of the Year (House), currently serving his 4th term in the legislature and recently appointed Vice Chair of the House Committee on Education. Ultrino, a former member of the Malden School Committee, thanked members for their advocacy on behalf of getting kids equitably back on track and for supporting initiatives to help students over the past 18 months.



Jennifer Hedrington, MA 2021 Teacher of the Year, was a teacher in Malden until a few months ago when she became assistant principal of the Peabody School in Cambridge. Hedrington urged members to "be intentional in your recruitment and retention. Too many students feel like they are invisible—they aren't really 'seen' by their teachers. Representation matters. We have the power to transform the current mess we live in through how we teach our kids. Give your teachers a chance to dismantle the biases and build bridges with students, families and communities."

lives. More troubling is the fact that the trend is increasing and that 50% of lifetime cases surface by age 14.

Reilly anticipates the effects of the pandemic may persist 3-5 years out, with more acute cases emerging that need to be treated. Anxiety, loss of identity, loneliness and displacement issues often fester as they go unaddressed, and there is a marked increase in suicidal ideation in students 11-17, and even appearing in younger students.

"Building strong classroom and

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DELEGATE ASSEMBLY 2021: REPORT ON ACTIONS TAKEN

MASC's 76th annual meeting was held on the last day of the annual conference, Saturday, November 6. A total of 100 delegates representing school districts across the state were registered and participated in the deliberations, both in-person and via zoom conference capability.

The meeting was led by **MASC President Ellen Holmes** (Ashburnham Westminster Reg.). The Association's Financial Report was presented by **Secretary-Treasurer Mildred Lefebvre** (Holyoke). **Immediate Past President Deborah Davis** (Northeast Metro Voc. Tech.) presided over the board elections in her role as Chair of the Nominating Committee. **President-Elect Andrea Wadsworth** (Lee), who chaired the Resolutions Committee, introduced the nine resolutions that were considered and voted on by the delegates.

Following is a summary of actions taken on the resolutions and on the voting of Life Members and the incoming Board of Directors.

Approved for Life Membership were: **Barbara Davis** (Holyoke), **Denise Hurst** (Springfield), and **Patricia Meuse** (Shawsheen Reg. Voc. Tech.).

Elected to the 2022 MASC Board of Directors were: as President-Elect, Stacey Rizzo (Revere); as Vice President, Mildred Lefebvre (Holyoke); as Secretary-Treasurer, Jason Fraser (Silver Lake Reg. and Plympton). Andrea Wadsworth (Lee), who is the 2020 President-Elect, becomes President on January 1, 2022. Current President Ellen Holmes becomes Immediate Past President at the same time.

Following are the actions taken on the nine proposed resolutions:

In the interest of expediting discussion and allowing more time for resolutions of a more controversial nature, a special procedural action was adopted that allowed delegates to vote on resolutions considered non-controversial as a group. Each resolution was presented and delegates identified those resolutions that they wished "held" for further discussion. Those resolutions not held, were voted and approved as a single slate.

The three resolutions that were voted and approved as a group are listed below. The full text of the resolutions is printed in the Delegate Manual and posted on the MASC website.

Resolution 3: Full Funding for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

Resolution 6: Alternatives to MCAS

Resolution 7: School Committees in Receivership

The resolutions listed above were approved by a majority of the delegates (two votes opposing).

Following are the actions taken on the remaining six resolutions that the delegates held for in-depth discussion.



MASC Board of Directors with NSBA Guests

Left to right (standing, back row): Don Erickson, Bay Path Voc. Tech, Division VIII; Viola Garcia, President 2021, NSBA; Andrea Wadsworth, Lee, President-Elect; Beverley Griffin Dunne, Peabody/Essex Tech., Division I; Irene Feliciano Sims, Holyoke, Division IX; Ellen Holmes, Ashburnham Westminster Reg., President; Laura Fallon, Northampton, Division V; Michelle Bodin-Hettinger, Marlboro, Division IV; Mildred Lefebvre, Holyoke, Secretary-Treasurer; Deborah Davis, Northeast Metro Voc. Tech., Immediate Past President; Marc Terry, Ashland, Division II; Devin Sheehan, Holyoke, MASC Past President/NSBA Board of Directors; Chip Slaven, NSBA Interim Executive Director; (kneeling, front row): Rep. Jake Oliveira, Ludlow, MASC Past President; Lydia Tedone, NSBA Board of Directors (CT); Jason Fraser, Silver Lake Reg., Division III; Stacey Rizzo, Revere, Vice President; William Cameron, Pittsfield, Division VI. Not pictured: Nicole Bartlett, Mashpee, Division VII; Virginia Simms George, Assabet Voc., Division X.

Resolution 1: Dedicated Funding for School-Based Clinics and Services

(submitted by the Framingham School Committee)

BE IT RESOLVED that MASC support proposals that would establish dedicated funding for school-based physical health and mental health. clinics and services.

The resolution passed, as presented, on a vote of 94-2.

Resolution 2: Addressing the Homework Gap and Wireless Access

(submitted by the MASC Board of Directors)

BE IT RESOLVED that the Massachusetts Association of School Committees file for and support legislation which seeks to provide free broadband internet to all K-12 students in Massachusetts.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that MASC support Federal initiatives and legislation to improve national high speed broadband internet infrastructure, expansion the FCCs E-rate Program to include homes of K-12 students, or any other steps to expand free access to reliable high speed broadband to the students of our nation.

An amendment was proposed by the delegate from Somerset to revise the language in the final sentence to "preK-12" students.

The resolution passed, as amended on a unanimous vote, with one abstention.

Resolution 4: Mandatory Recess in Public Schools (Submitted by the MASC Board of Directors)

BE IT RESOLVED that the Massachusetts Association of School Committees support legislation (current bills: S.383, H.695) calling for at least 20 minutes of uninterrupted, supervised, safe, and unstructured free-play recess per day which cannot be excluded from structured learning time requirements and may not increase the total number of hours required in the school year for Massachusetts elementary school students.

The resolution was approved on a 96-2 vote.

Resolution 5: Zero-Tolerance Policies (Submitted by the MASC Board of Directors)

BE IT RESOLVED t the Massachusetts Association of School Committees call upon the Legislature to enact or amend legislation (current bills: S.344, H.664) to encourage the use of restorative, therapeutic and educational approaches to incidents whenever possible over the use of "zero-tolerance" policies in order to provide students the best chance to remain in the public school systems of the Commonwealth.

An amendment was proposed by the delegate from Northampton to revise the language so as to read: ". . . whenever possible disavow the the use of "zero-tolerance" policies in order to provide students the best chance to remain in the public school systems of the Commonwealth.

The proposed amendment failed on a vote of 24 (in favor) with 72 (opposed).

The resolution passed as proposed on a vote of 95-5.

Resolution 8: Federal Funding for Electrical Infrastructure and School Buses

(Submitted by the MASC Board of Directors)

BE IT RESOLVED that MASC petition Congress to appropriate \$30 billion dollars for improving the electrical supply infrastructure, and providing electric buses and charging stations.

An amendment was proposed by the delegate from Pittsfield to revise the language so as to add the word "school" between the words "electric" and "buses" in the final sentence.

The amendment was approved on a vote of 82-9.

The resolution was approved, as amended, on a vote of 71-21.

Resolution 9: Prohibit the Use of Native American Mascots

(Submitted by the MASC Board of Directors)

BE IT RESOLVED that the Massachusetts Association of School Committees support legislation calling for regulations prohibiting public schools from using an athletic team name, logo, or mascot which names, refers to, represents, or is associated with Native Americans, including aspects of Native American cultures and specific Native American tribes.

The resolution was approved, as presented, on a vote of 82-9.

Following concluding remarks from President Holmes and incoming President Wadsworth, the assembly adjourned at 10:45am.



Incoming 2022 President Andrea Wadsworth (left) presents the traditional Life Member plaque to 2021 President Ellen Holmes (right) at the Friday night Leadership Banquet.

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Dr. Nadja Lopez-Reilly advises school leaders on how to support student mental health

school culture is essential," she advised. Not just at the beginning of the school year, but reinforced throughout the year. Adults need to understand that kids can't check anxiety at the school door. "Listen to your students. Listen to what they sometimes *aren't* saying. Allow students the space to have safe conversations. And remind your community that the resources invested in social and emotional health are just as important as those spent on academic programs."

Carolyn Casey, executive director of the widely hailed Project 351 service program for 8th grade students in the Commonwealth, suggested engaging students in service and community activities has been a powerful platform for students to express themselves, in an environment where they feel safe, courageous, competent and valued. "It's important for kids to be solution creators and to feel they have a sense of purpose."

The highlight of the session was the message delivered by two students, both alumnae of Project 351, who talked directly, courageously—and eloquently—to the social emotional challenges they, and their peers, have faced.

Skyla Rimler, currently a senior at Mashpee High School, described her experience as a Project 351 ambassador and what she learned about herself in the process of working with others and leading conversations on race, equity and diversity. Diversity is not just about race, she told the audience. Diversity includes everybody because that is what builds community and from there you can get to equity and inclusion.

"Through programs like this you can help students be agents of change and broaden the image of what a leader is. By doing so, you acknowledge and empower those students and provide opportunities to kids who may not otherwise feel invited in."

Isabelle Cole, a graduate of Chelmsford Public Schools and currently a sophomore at Salve Regina College in Newport RI, is the founder of "13 Reasons to Fly" a nonprofit that helps promote mental health awareness and suicide prevention for youth. She stressed the importance of actively promoting mental health supports in schools in order that students can access them before they reach a crisis point. Referencing the focus of the session, she noted that amplifying students voices has to start by listening to them and creating the safe spaces where they feel comfortable communicating their trauma.

"Your job is as a facilitator of these conversations. You have to begin it, listen, step back and support. Connect students to the services and help they need be these in school or outside. And the next step after having these conversations is to continue them."

Friday lunch speaker **Alan Charles**



Left to right: Isabelle Cole, Skyla Rimler, Carolyn Casey



Alan Charles Geller noted the importance of personal and shared responsibility around safety protocols

MISSED A CONFERENCE SESSION? VIEW IT ONLINE.

See page 5 for report on actions taken at the Delegate Assembly. In addition, conference keynote events, general sessions and the more than 40 panel sessions were recorded and have been posted on the Whova app and can be accessed by members who were registered for the conference.

The opening video from the Friday General Session—"Adversity and Opportunities: MA Students' Perspectives on the Pandemic"—is posted on the MASC website homepage:www.masc.org.

Geller, a lecturer at the Harvard School of Public Health who has spent the past year advising districts on safe return-to-school policies, urged members to make connections between schools and local departments of public health. "We need multiple ways to deal with this pandemic. It's not just about masks, or vaccines or social distancing. It's about personal responsibility AND shared responsibility.

"Small differences in vaccination rates can make huge differences in who gets COVID." The drop in infection rates will only happen if more people get vaccinated, he warned, noting the great potential for improvement if schools can become a place where vaccinations are available—for students and their families. If vaccination rates remain low, "we may have to consider vaccination mandates as a last resort. It's like air travel turbulence. When it happens, the "return to your seats and put your seat-belt back on" light goes on. We're not out of the "turbulence" of COVID yet."

MASC Learning Lunch Program to Continue in 2022

MASC was delighted to have connected with so many members during our 2021 Friday Learning Lunch series. Many of you have told us that you appreciated the online professional development opportunity and hoped that it would continue. Yes, Virginia, it will.

MASC will continue to present programs on critical issues the first Friday of each month beginning on Friday, January 7, 2022. Dates and topics are listed below. Register online for these important sessions and connect with your colleagues, MASC professional development staff and other education-issues experts.

First Friday Learning Lunch programs: 2022

January 7

FY2023 Planning, including SOA and ESSER funding implementation

February 4

MIAA Update presented by newly appointed MIAA Executive Director Robert Baldwin

March 4

Superintendent Evaluation

April 1

Advocacy Guidance and MASC Issues for Day on the Hill (April 14)

May 6

ESSER Planning and Guidance

June 3

Goal Setting

Subsequent programs and dates to be announced.

NSBA Welcomes New Executive Director

Effective November 23, Dr. John Heim became the new Executive Director of the National School Boards Association.

For the past 11 years, Heim served as Executive Director of the Kansas Association of School Boards. Over his four-decade career in public education, he has also worked as a teacher, principal and superintendent to improve outcomes and opportunities for Kansas students.

Thank you to Conference Sponsors

MASC and MASS are very grateful for the support and participation of our 2021 Conference Sponsors:

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MASC and MASS send particular thanks to Christopher Horan, Communications Consultant, Horan Communications, who coordinated and moderated the Thursday and Friday General Sessions and Tom Chartrand at Shoreline Media who produced the student interview video that opened the Friday General Session.

Who ARE these masked people?



MASC conference photographer Chris Kisiel, a longtime member of the Woburn School Committee, has posted the conference photos on his Tasher Studio website. To view and/or order copies of the photos, go to www.tasherstudio.com; click on "Your Photos"; select MASC and put in the password: Cape.

The 2021 Conference Planning Committee also reminds Bulletin readers that conference attendees were asked to wear masks at all times in public spaces except during meals. Speakers were permitted to remove masks in order that they could be clearly understood by both in-person and remote attendees, and award presentation photos were also permitted to be mask-free.

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