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Citing workload, cuts, schools chief seeks help

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NORTHAMPTON - City school administrators are looking to add positions in the central office, where they say half its staff has been cut over the past 10 years.

Among the positions lost are associate superintendent, curriculum coordinator and grant coordinator positions. In an interview Friday, Superintendent Isabelina Rodriguez recalled happier times in the early 2000s, when she served as director of pupil services.

Every week "this table was full," Rodriguez said, pointing to the empty chairs at her conference table. "The superintendent had at least six or seven individuals at the table reflecting on issues."

The cuts have forced administrators to wear many hats, she said. They perform administrative duties such as supervising school building principals as well as clerical duties like delivering School Committee packets and even picking up parents for special needs student contract meetings.

"We don't have the time to sit and think," Rodriguez said. "I do it at 2 in the morning when I'm sitting in front of the computer answering emails. It's going to get to a point where that's going to hit me."

On Thursday, Rodriguez recommended the School Committee approve two new positions - assistant to the superintendent and director of special education - to be filled by early May. Both positions would take on tasks now performed by Rodriguez and Nathan Ziegler, associate director of pupil services.

The School Committee did not vote on the measure Thursday, but intends to revisit it March 11 at 7 p.m. in JFK Middle School.

The assistant to the superintendent position would plan professional development for administrators and teachers; assume accountability for state and federal guidelines; and plan, implement and evaluate instructional programs for students with needs, among other tasks.

The director of special education would be charged with special education services now shared by Ziegler and Futures Education, a consulting firm the district hired at the start of the school year to temporarily fill in for the former director, who resigned in August.

Proposed salary ranges for the assistant to superintendent is \$80,000 to \$85,000 and \$73,036 to \$80,127 for the director of special education. The salaries would come from money allocated in pupil services and early childhood funds and grants.

"I think some money is just money well-spent," School Committee member Lise Glading-DiLorenzo said at the panel's meeting Thursday. "I don't think it's a weakness; I think it's a reality that you can't oversee all of this the way you want to."

Rodriguez also recommended creating and reorganizing positions for next school year, including a part-time English language learners coordinator post handled by a teacher, a supervisor of early childhood and supervisor of special education.

"We've brought ourselves down to such a small group of people and they're so dedicated," Rodriguez said, slamming her fist on the table. "But it's still not enough, unfortunately; it's not fair. We need to be able to find a way to say #this individual's primary responsibility is going to looking at these three items and this."

Special education plan

Rodriguez recommends the additional positions in part to respond to needs highlighted in the state review of special education services. The review states that the district is lacking in policies for special education employees to follow, training for teachers in areas like restraint, therapy services across the district, supervision for aides and administration staff to assist in delivering services and documentation.

Special education parents and members of the Parent Advisory Committee have noted the review was consistent with their personal experiences. Committee members assisted the district in creating its corrective action plan, which has been submitted, but not officially approved, by the state.

"I'm really very proud of the Parent Advisory Group," Rodriguez said. "We are lucky to have such a dedicated team working for the needs of our students."

She noted the review was conducted last spring, when the district faced a \$3 million deficit. The pupil services and special education department was also in a transition at the time.

"Morale was down, we were asking teachers to take a furlough, we were looking at closing a school and cutting services across the board," Rodriguez said. The review "came at a real tough, tough time in our district."

The corrective action plan is to be posted on the school's Web site, www.northampton.k12.ma.us ^[1], once it is official.

"I really encourage people to read the documents," Ziegler said. "It's worth looking at what the district is working on."

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