



Shrewsbury Public Schools

Joseph M. Sawyer, Ed.D.
Superintendent

March 14, 2023

To: School Committee
From: Joe Sawyer
Re: Recommendation for Assistant Superintendent for Finance and Operations

I respectfully recommend that you vote to appoint Mr. Christian Girardi as the next Assistant Superintendent for Finance and Operations for the Shrewsbury Public Schools.

I have arrived at this recommendation based upon the information I have gleaned from the search process, and it is my judgment that appointing Mr. Girardi to this important role is in the best interests of the school district.

The search process was coordinated through the New England School Development Council (NESDEC). It was facilitated by NESDEC consultant Dr. Anthony Bent, who has extensive experiences with school district leadership searches and the professional development of assistant superintendents, and who also understands our district as he served for 15 years as superintendent in Shrewsbury (retiring in 2009). Dr. Bent conducted several focus group meetings with key stakeholders in the district and municipal government to develop a profile of the kind of candidate our district was seeking. He then performed application reviews and phone screenings of candidates with this profile in mind, and ultimately six of them were moved forward to the interview stage. A screening committee was formed that included members of the Business Office staff (Kim Fitzpatrick, Budget Analyst, and Susan Rapp, Payroll Specialist), multiple SPS leaders (Barb Malone, Executive Director of Human Resources; Meg Belsito, Assistant Superintendent for Student Services; Todd Bazydlo, SHS Principal; Brian L'Heureux, Director of Information Technology; and myself), and the Town Manager (Kevin Mizikar).

Based on the interviews and consideration of candidates' experience and perceived leadership and interpersonal skills, the screening committee came to strong consensus regarding three candidates to move forward to the finalist stage, including Mr. Girardi. It is unfortunate that a second candidate who was selected as a finalist withdrew from the process when invited (deciding to remain in their current district), while the third candidate who was advanced as a finalist withdrew after having been announced, due to family reasons.

Mr. Girardi participated in the finalist site-visit process by participating in a day-long series of interviews on March 6. He met with the following teams and individuals:

- Executive Director of Human Resources

- Current Assistant Superintendent for Finance and Operations
- Central Office business and operations support staff (two groups)
- Shrewsbury municipal government financial and operations leaders
- SPS operations directors (Assistant Director of Finance & Operations; Director of IT, Director of Extended School Care, Director of Food Services, Director of School Nursing)
- SPS Central Office leaders
- SPS principals
- Shrewsbury Education Association and Shrewsbury Paraprofessional Association leaders
- Superintendent

After meeting with Mr. Girardi, individuals were invited to complete an online feedback form regarding their perceptions of his candidacy for review by Dr. Bent, Ms. Malone, and myself. The feedback from 39 responses regarding Mr. Girardi was extremely strong, with an 85% favorability rating, including 52% as “very favorable” (20 responses) and 33% as “favorable” (13 responses); 10% as “neutral” (4 responses); and 5% as “unfavorable” (2 responses). Written comments regarding Mr. Girardi’s candidacy included the following themes:

Strengths:

- Proven leadership skills, both in leading the Beal community and through the Beal building project, with a stellar reputation
- Strong understanding of district and school operations
- Excellent relationships with School Department and Municipal Department colleagues
- Big picture and systems thinker who is highly organized
- Highly trusted and ethical
- Superb communicator
- Strongly invested in Shrewsbury as a leader and resident/community member
- Very intelligent and quick learner
- Exceptional work ethic
- Calm, measured leadership style with a high capacity for managing demanding, high volume work
- Strong emotional intelligence
- Exemplary representative of the district’s core values

Questions/Concerns:

- Lack of financial training and limited experience with finance (by far the most cited concern)
- Steep learning curve if he moves into this complex role that will require support from SPS team members
- Curiosity if diverse candidates were considered (note: the other finalist who was announced but withdrew is a person of color)
- Lack of other finalists to compare, especially with an internal candidate without experience in the role, which can raise questions of in-group or confirmation bias

- Concern about disrupting the Beal community if he were to be promoted from his principal role there

After carefully considering this feedback, along with that from Mr. Girardi's interview with the School Committee, I have reflected on what path forward is in the best interests of the school district. It is clear to me that in terms of core values, leadership skills, interpersonal skills, operational understanding, work ethic, and commitment, Mr. Girardi is well suited for this district-level leadership role. The key question is whether he will be able to gain the necessary technical skill set regarding financial management quickly enough to ensure that the school district's budget is well-managed and financial forecasts are accurate.

To resolve this question, I believe the following context is important:

- Patrick Collins, the current Assistant Superintendent for Finance and Operations, is willing and available to provide a significant amount of intensive training in the technical aspects of this job over the next five-plus months, and then is willing to continue in a training/coaching role for the entirety of Fiscal Year 2024.
- Mr. Collins has recommended a series of trainings and professional development offerings, provided by outside experts and organizations, that will focus on important elements of financial management that will enable Mr. Girardi to gain key skills. These would begin immediately and continue through the spring, summer, and through next school year.
- There is a high degree of experience among the people with whom Mr. Girardi would work most closely on financial and budget matters, with all having years of experience in their role, and with most having a large amount of that experience within Shrewsbury. This includes business office staff, assistant superintendents, district directors, the Town Manager and other municipal leaders, and myself.

Another question that must be considered when determining whether to advance a single finalist for appointment is whether to extend the search and seek different candidates. To address this, I considered:

- Dr. Bent's perspective regarding the challenging landscape across the state for assistant superintendent/business official hiring.
- There were already several experienced candidates in the pool whose leadership approach or perspectives were not considered by the screening committee to be a match for SPS.
- While there could be a chance to attract additional strong candidates if the search were extended, it is unlikely that re-advertising would be fruitful given the later time frame and likelihood that the current search likely already attracted area candidates who had interest (and this would also very likely mean passing on the potential of the current finalist).

One of my primary responsibilities as superintendent is the financial stewardship and successful operation of the school district, and this is one of the most important elements of your role as a School Committee. As such, I recognize that the selection of the individual who serves as both chief financial and chief operating officer of our school district is extremely important. The district has benefited for many years from the extraordinary expertise and leadership that Mr. Collins has exhibited in this role, and this makes for a very high bar for comparison. In my estimation, Mr. Girardi is a candidate whose leadership characteristics are an excellent match for what stakeholders indicated they seek in this role – and that these characteristics are of a strength that is not commonly found among leaders. Having worked with him over the decade since I appointed him as the principal of Beal, I have come to greatly admire his ability to achieve difficult goals, both as an individual leader and as an excellent team player who brings out the best in his colleagues. Like others, I find his character and trustworthiness to be beyond reproach. I also agree with the sentiments that so many shared in their feedback, which is a clear-eyed recognition that there is a certain skill set that must be learned quickly and that the learning curve will be steep, but that Mr. Girardi's capacity, work ethic, and deep commitment to our school district will enable him to meet this challenge, with the help and support of his skillful colleagues.

There is risk associated with any hiring decision, whether promoting from within or hiring from outside the organization (which has been about a 50/50 ratio for leadership roles since I became superintendent in 2009). I have a high degree of confidence that the risk regarding the time it will take to develop certain technical skills is outweighed by the known strengths that Mr. Girardi will bring to the role, and by the very high potential that he will become an outstanding district financial and operational leader, whose contributions will ultimately benefit our district and our town for many years to come.

For these reasons, I respectfully recommend that you vote to appoint Mr. Christian Girardi as the Assistant Superintendent for Finance and Operations, effective July 1, 2023. Thank you for your consideration.