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CABE in the NEWS



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School officials highest paid city employees in 2019

By Brian Zahn

NEW HAVEN — The highest-paid employee in the city last year was on the payroll for only about 10 months.

Carol Birks, the now-former superintendent of schools, was salaried at \$239,790 in 2019 and collected \$245,189 after having eight months of her contract bought out in October. Birks was the highest-paid public employee last year, according to city records.

Following her is her replacement in the role: interim Superintendent of Schools Iline Tracey, who



Birks

was an assistant superintendent before signing a \$225,000 contract as the interim

schools chief at the time of Birks' departure. She collected \$176,880 in pay from the city in 2019.

In total, the top 10 highest-salaried employees in the city included eight school administrators. The top five all are school employees.

Assistant superintendents Keisha Redd-Hannans and Paul Whyte were salaried for \$168,300 in 2019; the district's research, assessment and analytics supervisor Michele Sherban was salaried for \$162,549; ELL supervisor Pedro Mendia was salaried for \$161,250; and student services director Typhanie Jackson was salaried for \$160,892.

Although he only earned \$21,183 from the city because of a hire date late in the calendar year, the district's CFO Phil Penn had the third-highest salary in the city in 2019 after signing a \$185,000 contract.

The only two non-school city employees to crack the top 10 were Police Chief Otoniel Reyes, the sixth-highest salaried employee at

\$162,000 — \$549 short of Sherban — and Corporation Counsel John Rose, whose salary is \$161,250.

Of the remaining 42 public employees salaried for more than \$150,000 in 2019, only one was not associated with the school district: Fire Chief John Alston, who was salaried for \$158,500. Those employees were a mix of central office supervisors, department directors and building principals.

The Board of Education voted last week to approve a dollar amount for a budget request in Mayor Justin Elicker's budget, board member Darnell Goldson requested that district staff perform a personnel salary study.

"We have heard time and time again that we are top-heavy," Goldson said after the meeting in an email. "I don't believe that is true but I can't refute rumors unless I have facts. Perhaps we will determine we are, not sure."

Goldson's motion calls for the administration to report on the numbers and classification of staff "with a special eye towards administrators and our lowest paid instructional staff, with comparisons to both similar districts as well as high performing districts."

Board of Education President Yesenia Rivera said she is sure the study will demonstrate differences in pay between roles and other districts.

"I believe we have a thoughtful process that considers the scope of the role and the candidate's experience, balanced by both the collective bargaining agreements we have in place and the economic realities in which NHPS operates," she said.

Tracey said hiring and pay in the district are based on several factors.

"The system hired based on job title, credentials, years of service, and whether or not there is a shortage area," she said.

According to the payroll records, assistant teachers or para-professionals earn as low as \$22,313. School guidance counselors earn \$51,503 at minimum, with the closest comparison in pay to other city departments being meter checkers in the city's traffic and parking department.

Rebecca Adams Rieder, senior staff attorney at the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education, said district staffing is more complex than salaries.

"You have to be competitive in the market to attract and retain teachers," she said. "Administrators typically have more education and do different jobs, so they have higher salaries. How many administrators any district is going to have is going to differ, at least to some degree."

Adams Rieder said not all districts have the same needs, and the size of a district can necessitate different operating structures such as the inclusion of a human resources department to do hiring and onboarding for new personnel.

Some districts, she said, might need to invest more money and energy into bilingual education supports than others, which would require a different allocation of resources than a district where English learners are less prevalent.

"Obviously the overarching priority is the same, but each district is going to be looking at different goals and a different vision," she said.

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'You can integrate schools overnight'

Less than a year after Gov. Ned Lamont's modest plan to merge school districts was withdrawn in the face of suburban outrage, suddenly everyone in Connecticut is talking again about a problem that dates back generations.

As it happens, the person most-responsible for bringing to light the issue of modern-day school segregation was in the state last week. Nikole Hannah-Jones, a writer for *The New York Times Magazine* and creator of *The 1619 Project*, has established herself as the most important journalist in America for her work highlighting the dual problems of segregated schools and housing, which persist decades after many Americans decided they'd rather look the other way.

She was at Fairfield University as keynote speaker for the school's annual Martin Luther King Jr. Convocation. "Particularly in the Northeast, so much of segregation is not within school districts but between urban and suburban school districts, and housing plays a huge role in that," she said in an interview.

Potential remedies, though, tend to focus on schools because there's more policy leverage there, Hannah-Jones said. "Most housing is privately owned, but nine out of 10 American children attend public schools, so the government lever on schools is so much bigger than it is on housing," she said.

"You can integrate schools overnight with policy. You can't do that with housing."

Were the governor serious about tackling inequities, this is where he would start.

Credit for keeping the issue of a divided state alive goes in large part to a series in the Connecticut Mirror by reporter Jacqueline Rabe Thomas about how the suburbs effectively wall themselves off from affordable housing, leading to vast disparities between city and town demo-

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graphics and, as a result, school districts. Lamont was pushed last week on a Mirror podcast about what could be done about it.

The governor didn't sound all that committed to his potential solutions, such as linking transit dollars to commitments for affordable housing. Given how he's waffled on nearly every one of his supposed priorities (he's now apparently against a public option for health insurance after supporting a version of it last year, we replaced "Still Revolutionary" with "Scared of Cigna"), no one will be surprised if his ideas die quickly.

But the larger issue isn't going away. Lamont confused people last session when he proposed a school regionalization plan that wouldn't have touched classrooms, and then discussed it as though the real issues were at the classroom level. He was right, but the result was a half-measure vilified for things it didn't do that was ultimately withdrawn.

The governor was then reduced to saying the process of solving the state's longstanding divisions was up to individual communities, which is where it has always stood and why nothing much ever changes.

Many in the state are happy to have moved on. Leaders of a school advocacy group, the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education, in an interview last week on their legislative priorities said they had not supported last year's plan and didn't see it as a priority going forward.

This is just one organization without a lot of power, but the reasoning it offered

is commonly heard, as well as old and tired.

Integrating school districts without touching housing wouldn't really solve the problem, CABA leaders said. Unless we're erasing all municipal lines, any solution will be wanting.

This is true as far as it goes, but it's another way of saying any plan that doesn't fix everything isn't worth doing. It's an excuse to do nothing.

Regardless of what Lamont decides, one constant will be the reaction of the towns. Last year, suburbanites descended on the Capitol in droves to protest regionalizing schools, and the outcry this time has been swift and similar.

"It's like watching a 2-year-old throw a tantrum," state Rep. Gail Lavielle, a Wilton Republican, told the *Wilton Bulletin* in reference to Lamont.

Her defensiveness was telling. "The people in Wilton certainly are not racist," she said. "There's an awful lot being blamed on small towns."

The people of Wilton don't have to be racist to benefit from an inherently racist system, which they unquestionably do. The population of Connecticut is about 10 percent black. The number in Wilton is less than 1 percent. That discrepancy doesn't arrive out of thin air, but comes from decades of government policies that have made Connecticut look the way it does. The question before the state is what, if anything, we're willing to do about it.

Lamont is well aware of the major challenges facing Connecticut that most of his stated initiatives wouldn't do anything to solve. His interest in taking them on remains the state's biggest question going forward.

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CABE shares legislative priorities

By Brian Zahn

NEW HAVEN — With an upcoming short legislative session, the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education is pursuing an abridged policy agenda, its leaders told Hearst Connecticut Media's editorial board Monday.

The nonprofit, membership-based organization that represents boards of education across the state pursues a legislative agenda each year to advocate for public education issues.

Removing the cap on the special education excess cost grant

Patrice McCarthy, deputy director and general counsel for CABE, said one of the organization's goals is to advocate for the state to lift the cap on special education within the Excess Cost Grant. Because the state funds special education through the same revenue source as general education, districts must be reimbursed through the Excess Cost Grant, which is intended for costs that are several times higher than an average per-pupil expenditure.

However, a cap makes it so that districts that take on a higher number of students who require expensive out-of-district placements or services often are shorted for costs.

"Some districts only receiving 73 percent of what they're eligible for under that grant," McCarthy said. "That is a tremendous impact on local budgets."

According to New Haven officials, 22 students in the district this year are receiving special education services in placements outside the district.

McCarthy said she was tentatively on board with a proposal by New Haven parents to advocate for a statewide educational cost study — similar to one in New Jersey that concluded the state was underfunding special education by \$625 million — but student data would need to be protected.

"School boards are in this funny situation with special education; they are in no way decision makers, it's the planning and placement team that makes those decisions. A board's role is to figure out in the budget what they freeze to afford an overexpenditure," she said.

Social-emotional learning

CABE Executive Director Bob Rader said the organization is working with the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence to increase social-emotional learning for students.

"What most of us want is that (social-emotional learning) be throughout school systems, teaching them from an early age empathy and how to work with other kids," he said. "It will give them a lot of the emotional learning and maturity they're going to need in business or whatever they do with their lives."

McCarthy serves on a statewide task force for social-emotional learning. Members of the General Assembly last year passed a bill that aims to improve school climate, although a Hearst Connecticut investigation found much of its language was vague.

"We've got the policy in

place; let's focus on implementation," McCarthy said.

Regionalization

Following a number of unsuccessful school regionalization bills last year which were proposed to cut administrative costs among smaller school districts, CABE leaders said they don't agree with the "forced" consolidation of governance.

"(Gov. Ned Lamont's bill) contained too many sticks; it essentially would've forced districts to regionalize," McCarthy said.

She argued that, if the plan was to save money, there likely wouldn't be much savings as the costs of transportation go up as school buses travel longer distances and wait in traffic longer.

"Local citizens are, for the most part, very committed to their public schools. To force people together just seems like a whole lot of energy, and not necessarily a positive outcome," she said. "I think one of the things we see is we have some regional districts who have existed and the towns' interests diverge. Once you regionalize, it's very hard to divorce. Everyone has to agree."

Although any school regionalization measure likely would desegregate schools in a number of areas in the state, McCarthy said the plans would be inefficient if there weren't a discussion about consolidating entire governance structures between municipalities.

Cultural competency and representation

Rader said CABE remains committed to making boards of education more racially and ethnically reflective of the student bodies they serve, and also increasing cultural competency for boards of education and educators so schools are inclusive of all students.

"We're working on minority teacher recruitment; I'm on the oversight committee for the state department and do a lot of work on implicit bias," he said. "We have found very few — except in cities — African Americans or Latinx. We've been working on encouraging our boards to think about that and to be more sensitive to it. The question of equity and who you have on boards, we hope the next generation understands the importance of boards."

The Partnership for Connecticut

Regarding the Partnership for Connecticut, a five-year private-public partnership that promises \$300 million to support programs and interventions for disengaged and disconnected youth — a third of which is from the state, Rader said CABE will support the experiment if it stays true to its aims.

"If the focus remains on students who are considered underserved and disengaged, we're definitely going to support it," he said.

McCarthy said the \$20 million offered by the state annually is "a drop in the bucket" given the scope of statewide education costs.

Sheila McKay, senior staff associate for government relations at CABE, said the partnership's recently opened request for information should hopefully land some good feedback.

"Ultimately, we're hoping it will help with the achievement gap," she said.

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