



OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

Sumbul Siddiqui
Mayor (2020-21, 2022-23, 2026-27)

To: Cambridge City Council
From: Sumbul Siddiqui, Mayor
Date: March 5, 2026
Subject: Communicating Information from the School Committee

To the Honorable, the City Council:

I write to provide an updated summary of recent Cambridge School Committee activity.

The Committee received several presentations and documents this week for our March 3, 2026 Regular School Committee meeting.

Appointment of Melissa Bolden as Director of Family & Community Engagement for the Cambridge Public Schools

The Committee received a [memo from the Superintendent](#) announcing the appointment of Melissa Bolden as Director of Family & Community Engagement for the Cambridge Public Schools (CPS).

The hiring process for this position began in October 2025 with the goal of improving CPS family partnership practices. Following a competitive interview process, which included a confidential focus group with caregivers representing schools across the CPS, the district selected Melissa Bolden for the role. Ms. Bolden is well known to the Cambridge community as the Head of the Division of Youth Programs at the Department of Human Service Programs (DHSP), where she has served for 21 years. The district looks forward to continuing to work with her in this new capacity.

Strategic Planning and Equity Work

The Committee received a [presentation](#) outlining the proposed process for developing the district's next strategic plan. This work builds on previous district initiatives focused on equity and system improvement, including *Budgeting for Equity and Student Success in Cambridge Public Schools*, a multi-year report conducted in partnership with THRIVE! and the Cambridge Community Foundation across two phases ([Phase I](#) and [Phase II](#)).

The proposed planning process will include community engagement, analysis of district performance data, and the development of multi-year priorities to guide instructional and organizational improvement. The process is expected to unfold throughout 2026 and will include opportunities for input from



educators, families, students, and community stakeholders before a final plan is adopted.

I believe it is essential that we carefully evaluate our past strategic plan – examining which targets were met, where progress fell short, and why – in order to inform the work ahead.

Comprehensive School Mental Health System

The Committee also received a [presentation](#) on CPS’s efforts to build a Comprehensive School Mental Health System (CSMHS) designed to support students’ social, emotional, and behavioral wellbeing. While these supports are often discussed in terms of student wellbeing, the presentation made clear that mental health supports are closely connected to academic outcomes. Research shows that schools with integrated social-emotional learning and mental health services see improvements in attendance, classroom engagement, school climate, and academic performance.

Student survey data presented to the Committee illustrates the importance of this work. Currently, 67 percent of students in grades 3–5 and 56 percent of students in grades 6–12 report feeling a sense of belonging at school. At the same time, 44 percent of upper school students and 54 percent of high school students report struggling with their mental health at least sometimes in the past month.

These indicators are not only measures of school climate – they are also predictors of academic engagement. Students who do not feel connected or supported are more likely to experience chronic absenteeism, reduced engagement with instruction, and lower academic performance.

To address these challenges, CPS is implementing a tiered system of supports:

- Tier 1: Universal supports that promote positive school climate, social-emotional learning, and prevention for all students
- Tier 2: Targeted counseling and small-group supports for students experiencing emerging challenges
- Tier 3: Intensive, individualized interventions and wraparound services for students with acute needs

The district supports this work through a network of student support professionals – including social workers, school psychologists, counselors, and behavior specialists – as well as partnerships with Cambridge Health Alliance and Cartwheel to expand access to mental health services for students and families.

Motion #26-030: Review of Snow Day Closure Protocols

The Committee adopted [Motion #26-030](#), filed by Chair Weinstein, Vice Chair Dube, and myself, requesting that the administration review the district’s protocols for snow days and delayed starts. Following several weather-related closures this year that extended the school calendar, the motion asks



the administration to examine whether adjustments to current practices could better balance safety considerations with minimizing disruptions to instructional time.

Motion #26-031: Principal Evaluations

The Committee also adopted [Motion #26-031](#) requesting that the Superintendent develop a 360-degree feedback process for school principals that incorporates input from families, staff, and students. The purpose of the proposed process is to strengthen leadership development and support continuous improvement among school leaders, while maintaining the Superintendent's authority and judgment in principal evaluation and support.

Superintendent's Response to Motion #26-032: Third Grade Reading

Finally, the Committee received a [memo from the Superintendent](#) in response to [Motion #26-032](#) which proposed establishing a promotion standard requiring third-grade students to demonstrate grade-level reading proficiency before advancing to fourth grade, beginning in the 2027–2028 school year, with good-cause exemptions and multiple reassessment opportunities.

The Superintendent's memo provides context regarding the district's current literacy work and the data informing this discussion. Cambridge Public Schools is in year two of implementing a science-of-reading aligned curriculum across grades 1–5, a process that typically takes three to five years to fully implement as educators refine instructional practices and intervention systems.

Mid-year data indicates that, of 509 third graders with winter reading scores, 27 general education students and 67 students overall – including students with IEPs – are currently reading below grade-level. Disparities are particularly pronounced among students with high needs, underscoring the importance of strengthening early intervention systems and targeted supports.

The memo further clarifies that CPS promotion decisions are not determined solely by age, but by whether promotion is in the best interests of the student as determined by school leadership in consultation with families. Research has also consistently shown that grade retention alone rarely improves long-term outcomes, reinforcing the need for robust instructional supports and early intervention strategies.

Current district efforts to improve literacy outcomes include the implementation of evidence-based reading instruction, expanded academic interventions, summer learning opportunities, and ongoing progress monitoring systems designed to identify and support struggling readers earlier.

Motion #26-032 did not pass, though the concerns around reading literacy remain important and I share the urgency. Since 2021, the district has made substantial progress in this area, and it is important that we continue building on that momentum by strengthening supports beginning in the earliest grades.



Please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions or requests for additional information.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sumbul Siddiqui".

Sumbul Siddiqui
Mayor of Cambridge (2020-21, 2022-23, 2026-27)