City Schools Reconfigures Central Office’s Support of Schools; Names Local Principal to Lead Effort

(Baltimore, MD)—The Baltimore City Board of School Commissioners approved the appointment of former Western High School principal Landa McLaurin today to develop and lead Baltimore City Public Schools’ (City Schools) new central office system for supporting schools. McLaurin, a principal coach with New Leaders for New Schools, was CEO Andrés A. Alonso’s top pick for the job following a national search that drew more than 20 candidates from across the country. She was also the top pick among principals on the search panel.

McLaurin’s appointment officially launches City Schools’ School Support Networks, a redeployment of central office staff and resources to better support schools, and a critical step in building the infrastructure to support the transformation of the school system.

In the weeks ahead McLaurin will oversee the hiring of 56 instructional and business leaders to staff 14, four-member networks, each of which will serve approximately 15 schools. Based in the field but with a direct reporting line to City Schools’ chief academic officer at the central office, these networks are designed to: 1) give schools direct and easy access to the central office staff and resources they need to best support students; and 2) channel feedback from principals and schools to create a higher-functioning and more accountable central office.

“This is part of the new way of doing business at City Schools, where we put schools and kids first, and at the center of all that we do,” said Dr. Alonso. “As schools take on more of the work of educating kids, we at the central office are focused on providing guidance and support to them, and to holding them accountable for student achievement. These networks create the structure for doing that. And because it will now be clear to schools who to go to for help, they will be able to let us know how well we are doing at supporting them. Just as schools must be accountable, so must the central office.

“Our schools know best what works for kids, and the networks create one more way for us to tap that expertise to make City Schools a system of great schools,” Dr. Alonso continued. “And Landa, with her experience both as a local principal and a principal coach, is the right person to really develop and lead them.”

The role of the School Support Networks is to work closely with schools to determine what supports they need, and to interface with the central office to make sure they get them. This marks a departure from past practice where principals had to contact multiple departments directly. It also clearly separates the school support and principal accountability functions, which in the past were both the responsibility of the elementary and secondary school executive directors. The networks will be strictly about giving schools the guidance and support they need to be successful, while principal performance and evaluations will remain the purview of the executive directors, who will move to the CEO’s office where school and principal performance will be consolidated.
The School Support Network reorganization accompanies the downsizing of City Schools’ central office, which is being reduced by 179 positions under its FY 2010 operating budget. The network structure represents a more strategic and efficient use of resources.

Each network will have a team leader who reports to Landa McLaurin, the networks’ executive director, who in turn will report to the chief academic officer. And the networks will be evaluated by principals. As executive director, McLaurin will help hire network members in the weeks ahead, and work with the network teams over the summer to develop strategies for fulfilling, and further defining, the central office’s school guidance and support functions.

McLaurin, a graduate of Western with degrees from Towson and Coppin State universities, has worked in City Schools for 37 years, starting as a teacher at Garrison Middle School and ultimately becoming the principal of her alma mater from 1998 to 2006. McLaurin left City Schools in 2006 to become a leadership coach with New Leaders for New Schools, where she helped identify and develop new principals for the school system.

According to City Schools Interim Chief of Staff Tisha Edwards, some 20 candidates from across the country applied for the position and were interviewed by a small panel of City Schools administrative leadership that included two current principals. McLaurin was one of two finalists recommended by the panel to the CEO.

“Landa knows our schools, she knows the challenges that principals have faced,” Edwards said. “And her experience as a principal coach made her a favorite among principals on the selection panel.”

McLaurin begins her new position in a contractual capacity this week, and officially joins the City Schools staff on July 1.

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