

Retiring North High, Burncoat principals reflect on career lessons learned

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WORCESTER - When Worcester principals Mary Scully and Lisa Houlihan took on their new posts five years ago at Burncoat Middle School and North High School respectively, they knew it would be a challenge. They could not have imagined that these last few years before retirement would be one of the most demanding of their careers.

Every story needs a climax - a finale. Where the characters face an epic challenge requiring them to draw on all they have learned.

A global pandemic would certainly fit the bill.

Shared beginnings

Scully and Houlihan have over 60 years of experience between them, much of it at Burncoat Middle School. "It's where we both cut our teeth," said Scully, who is retiring after 33 years at the school. She succeeded her co-worker Houlihan as principal five years ago, when the latter accepted the position at North High.

"I started at Burncoat Middle School and really thought I'd stay there," said Houlihan. When North High was undergoing a change in leadership, then-superintendent Maureen Binienda asked Houlihan if she was interested in the job. "It really never occurred to me," she said. "I guess I was ready for a change because I jumped at the chance, and it's been a fast five and a half years."

Facing the pandemic

In her three decades at Burncoat, Scully believes guiding the school community through the pandemic was her greatest challenge.

“It was a question of trying to meet everyone’s needs,” she said of both teachers and students. The continuity of school programs both remote and in-person, for the latter, while educators needed the support of the administration in adapting to a completely new way of teaching.

“Teachers had to change how they did everything,” said Scully. An important part of her job, she said, was “encouraging people and assuring them they could do it. Luckily, we have an incredible teaching staff, great support staff. It truly takes a village.”

Though the pandemic state of emergency is over, schools must still deal with an aftermath that has never really ended.

“It’s a tricky balance between social and emotional,” said Houlihan, “ensuring that all kids can learn and we continue to move in the right direction.”

“COVID has dictated the direction we’re going in now with the challenges students brought with them and how we will meet those challenges,” said Scully.

Reinventing a school

Having the right direction is a core part of Houlihan’s philosophy. “I believe in working towards a vision instead of just doing a task,” she said.

That vision was creating a school that “helped kids find their own voice and learn how to advocate for themselves,” she said. “It’s important for kids to understand what they need to do and ask for help but not just wait for adults to solve their problems.”

To that end, Houlihan advocated for implementing programs such as internships that ensured students had a variety of opportunities, both

educational and professional, after graduation. The school now has an articulation agreement with Quinsigamond Community College to offer EMT classes for seniors taught by a QCC adjunct professor to prepare for internships.

North High has between 80 and 100 seniors going out on internships the second half of the year in a field of their choice within health science or business industries. Students can also receive professional certifications. "They can leave school and go out and work," she said.

"I make sure that kids are at the heart of every decision made," said Houlihan. She aims to bring students into the decision-making process, further investing them in the school. "The difference between middle and high school is with high school kids you can have a conversation. They want to be heard, and if you understand where they're coming from, problems can be solved."

"What you see is what people put forth, you have no idea what goes on behind their eyes, so it's important to be accepting and welcoming to everybody.

Lisa Houlihan

Middle school matters

"Middle school in and of itself is very impactful," said Scully. "People who teach at middle schools, that's where they want to be." The Worcester school district in particular offers up a specific challenge, with Burncoat Middle School being made up of only seventh and eighth graders.

With such a short two-year program, she said, teachers have very little time to form a relationship with a student. "You got to plant those seeds quickly, it's a tremendously fast process," she said. Scully has had multiple students come back years to say how the direction in middle school guided them on a specific trajectory.

Sitting in her office, "just a couple weeks ago, I heard a voice at the counter," said Scully. "I heard him give his name and I realized, 'I know that voice and I know that name' and met a former student." He was in college now - and remembered her. "Such a rewarding thing to see how these kids grow up."

Scully has had a special interest in advocating for students for whom English is a second language. "Having been an English as a second language teacher has always been at the center of who I am as an educator, building a dual-language program and provide a wide range of opportunities for different types of students that we have here at school."

Scully got her start as an ESL at a time when it was only just beginning as field in education. "The model of ESL has changed tremendously in my time of education," she said. Early on, students of all language proficiencies were placed in a single class, with little to no tailoring to individual needs "Now there is more testing to understand proficiency and a lot more monitoring of students in terms of the progress they're making."

Shared endings

"(Lisa and I) are very different people but with a similar philosophy," said Scully, of putting kids first, and providing equitable access to opportunities. "That's why we work well together."

Though the two of them had worked together for almost 30 years at Burncoat, "we didn't really become close friends until we started working in different buildings," said Scully.

In a common refrain in this series, both of them are looking forward to spending time with their respective grandchildren. Scully said she plans to "put some time into hobbies that have been dormant for a while."

Houlihan predicts she will be bored by next summer and "looking for something to do next." This summer, though, will be anything but boring. "I'm

planning to travel with my husband this summer before he has to go back to work in the fall,” she said. “After that, I’ll be going with a friend.”

“Yes, I am that friend,” Scully confirms when asked. “Small trips at first,” she clarified, “to see how it works.”