SHU's Dr. Jacqueline Kelleher Appointed to Reconstituted Bridgeport Board of

Jacqueline Kelleher, Sacred Heart University

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Jacqueline Kelleher, Ph.D., assistant professor in Sacred Heart University’s Isabelle Farrington School of Education, hopes to bring her strengths as an educator, parent and city resident to her appointed position as a member of the newly reconstituted Bridgeport Board of Education.

Dr. Kelleher was named to the board in early August by Acting State Commissioner of Education George A. Coleman. In July, the Bridgeport Board of Education requested the state reconstitute it through a resolution, which authorized the commissioner to establish the new board under the provisions of state statute. “Reconstitution of the Bridgeport Board of Education is the responsible and appropriate thing to do to ensure the success of Bridgeport’s students,” Mr. Coleman said in a prepared statement. “This new board is committed to improving the school system and allowing Bridgeport’s students to be competitive among their peers statewide.”

For Dr. Kelleher, the opportunity to serve on the board fulfills a desire she has had to scrutinize inequity in education. “I am honored to take on and accept this task,” she said.

Dr. Kelleher, who began teaching at SHU in January 2010, has a master’s degree in education with an emphasis on special education and a doctorate in educational psychology with a concentration in measurement, evaluation and assessment. She has worked in the public schools and in other universities in the areas related to special education policy, learning strategies, classroom and large scale assessment, measurement, evaluation, instructional design, service learning pedagogy and autism program development. Dr. Kelleher served as a consultant with the state Department of Education, specializing in the areas of autism and general supervision monitoring of 170 local education agencies. She also had stints as director of education with the Beginning with Children Foundation in New York City; executive director of institutional research, assessment and planning at Western Oregon University; and assistant dean of the Neag
School of Education at the University of Connecticut. She has four children, including identical twins with autism. The family often performs as an acoustic band for state functions, including fundraisers, and provides outreach to other families facing similar joys and challenges raising children with disabilities.

Dr. Kelleher’s to-do list for her participation on the Bridgeport board is long, but she points to instituting and advising improved school leadership, strategic planning, accreditation, fundraising and advocacy as among those of primary importance. It’s not just about test scores for her, but rather building a good environment for the education of Bridgeport’s students, and doing so as cost-effectively as possible. “One of my areas of strengths that I am looking forward to is identifying grants and other funding sources that are out there. And aggressively search for federal and state additional dollars.”

Dr. Kelleher said, “Advocacy is a big piece to the puzzle, especially letting policymakers in Hartford (Connecticut General Assembly) know of the significant needs evident in Bridgeport.” She goes on to say, “It’s advocating for the resources and policies necessary to carry out the work that is going to lead to improve outcomes. Improved outcomes will include statewide assessments, but also involve addressing discrepancies, the school climate and communities and the social and emotional preparedness of kids to learn.”

“And there are many things that can be done cost effectively, and I am eager to begin looking in terms of cost-benefit analyses and what’s gone in and what the outcome has been. There are so many things that we can do that are no-cost or low-cost solutions. It’s more about communication than it is about fiscal investment. It’s more about human investment,” she said.

She also sees streamlining the effort so everyone involved is on the same path and with the same vision. The problem-solving has to be strategic, she added, and has to line up with that shared vision.

With her doctorate’s emphasis, she believes teachers and administrators need to educate themselves on how to read data properly in order to provide the best services to their students. “I am data-driven decision-making all the way,” she said, adding that surveys, school climate, assessment and other measurements can help give a better picture on what is being done and not done to serve the constituency. The task is not daunting. “I know how to break it down and look at all the angles and issues and focus in on the real root cause.”

As for the parent involvement piece, Dr. Kelleher has been conducting parent training around the state for five years, particularly related to special education. She helps empower parents “with the language of the law and how to advocate, teaching them how to look for what it is they want and what they envision and what is appropriate for what they want. Parent involvement also improves outcomes.”

When she contemplated the task at hand, she said, “I am not satisfied with that ‘we-can’t-do-this’ mentality. You can absolutely do. You can fix anything. Some of it might be out-of-the-box thinking.”
That belief comes from her personal experience. Since 1992, she has been looking for the right opportunity to work with issues around inequity. She grew up “below the poverty level” in Florida and was enrolled in a school district that almost paralleled Bridgeport’s demographics. Her father was in the Air Force and was transferred to New Hampshire when she was 13. She was a good student, but once she started classes in her new district up north in a relatively affluent area, she discovered that she was “at least two grade levels behind in core academic areas.” Calling her high school years “awful,” she performed poorly in writing, math and science.

“I ended up having a miserable high school experience, really tanking with Cs and Ds, going from As. I became angrier and angrier. It always had bothered me about these two worlds.” In the bottom third of her class, she said she was able to graduate because of her strong reading skills, which she achieved on her own.

Following graduation and working as a waitress, she and her husband were expecting their second child. For years, she was told that she was not college material. But in 1992, she said, “I had two applications in front of me. One was for the University of Southern Maine and the other application was for welfare.” She thought long and hard about her future and that of her family, so at great risk and with some challenges, she was conditionally admitted to USM. “I had one thing going for me and that was motivation. I did not want them to kick me out. But I did not know how to study. So I said, ‘I am going to figure this out.’ Sometimes it would take me six hours a day just to do math.”

To help her, she turned to one of her innate abilities and started “singing her way” through college by using musical mnemonics. She used rhyme and song to learn her lessons. At the end of her freshman year, she had a 3.91 grade point average and was admitted to the university honors program, where she wrote a thesis on mnemonics. “Who would have ever thought considering where I had been?”

She finished her undergraduate degree in three years. “Within those three years of college, I got on fire about education.” She wanted to further her own education and hopefully employ the use of mnemonics in others. She said to herself, “I’ve got to do this for the nation.” But I need a license for my soapbox.”

She knew she wanted to be a professor, and from 2003 to 2010, she did everything she could to learn more so she could speak authentically and realistically about education when she became a university professor. “It had been quite a journey.”

Sacred Heart University, she said, is the right fit. “I came to Sacred Heart because I wanted to be here.” How she got there has its own unique tale. She was attending a conference in Chicago in 2003. Having just completed her doctorate and still struggling financially, she was determined to find an inexpensive lunch during a break in the sessions. She found an out-of-the-way eatery and bumped into a man named Dr. Edward Malin, who also was not going to pay for an exorbitant lunch. Total strangers, they ended up having lunch together and talked about education. “It was an amazing conversation. I said to myself, ‘someday, I am going to work for that man. That is the kind of community where I want to be a professor.’”
Dr. Malin is the director of the Isabelle Farrington College of Education at Sacred Heart University. When a position at SHU opened, she applied. “It was like a coming-home kind of feeling. This is home for me here.”