



January 14, 2025

Dear Acera Community,

The Acera Board of Directors is excited to announce the unanimous vote to appoint Dr. Heather Pinedo-Burns as the next Head of Acera School. She has a doctorate in education, a strong track record of leadership, and a deep commitment and focus on gifted education. We believe she is the ideal leader for Acera's next chapter and is strongly aligned with our mission and strategic plan. Heather's appointment as Head will commence on July 1, 2025.

The process of finding the next head of school was a thorough and rigorous one that began last December. We are very fortunate that our Board includes two former heads of school with collectively 30+ years of experience who were both able to provide wise counsel throughout the process. Advice and engagement from these and other Board members early on helped us agree on a search process in which we sought an Associate Head of School, with succession planning top of mind. After interviewing several potential search firms, Courtney and the Board selected Educational Directions and recruiter Jay Underwood, himself a former head of a gifted school, to help us conduct our search for an Assistant Head of School, with the hope that we might ultimately be identifying Acera's future Head.

After posting the search nationally, Jay reviewed and interviewed numerous applicants presenting an initial pool to Courtney who further whittled them down. We established a Search Advisory Committee that included representatives from all constituencies including: Acera parents, faculty, administration, alumni, and Board members. After extensive reference checking and initial interviews, the top five candidates came to the Committee for a structured group interview. From there, three finalists emerged all with varied experiences and strong backgrounds. Each finalist then came to Acera for a daylong visit which included in-person interactive workshops with staff and question and answer sessions with parents. The parent sessions were recorded and shared with the entire parent community; all were invited to provide input.

The entire process revealed Heather by a significant margin to be the preferred candidate for our school. Our recruiter shared that he had never seen such unilaterally positive feedback for a school leader candidate. Though perhaps unconventional, it was Courtney and the Board's desire to hire an Associate Head of School who had the full capability of becoming the next head, and to give her time to integrate into the community, learn and experience our mission and values, and allow both parties to assess mutual fit. We are all now delighted to say that the fit is mutual.

Running parallel to the search process, our community has been engaged for over a year in creating our updated strategic plan. Quite fittingly, it is titled '*Building To Last*,' and functioned as a North Star in our search. The strategic planning process included hundreds of voices (parents, faculty, students, and alumni) through 18 different input meetings. Of note, these discussions helped us further align around the centrality of gifted education as the core part of our mission, and to ensure that this mission endures through sustainable leadership and thoughtful succession planning.

As a Board, we have met with Heather both individually and collectively. Also, we have heard resoundingly strong reports on her performance since her first days beginning with last summer's Instructional Leadership Team workshop. Our Board's unanimous vote shows our belief in Heather's intellect, experience, judgement, enthusiasm, and listening leadership style. We are confident she will enable our school to build on its strengths and also elevate Acera as *the* school for gifted students in New England. We whole-heartedly support her as our leader as we seek to achieve the goals set in our Building to Last 2030 Strategic Plan.

As Heather takes on the role of Head of School, Courtney will transition to one with an outward facing focus. She will continue to work on sharing the story of Acera with potential students and families. She will help with fundraising efforts for One Lowell and continue to grow the Acera EI program.

Following this letter, you'll receive a note from Courtney in which she shares more details about the transition and outlines opportunities for you to spend additional time with Heather this winter and spring.

Thank you to Courtney for creating Acera! Thank you to all current and former students, families, faculty, staff and friends for making this such a special place. Please join us in welcoming Heather to her new role.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Holly Whittlemore".

Holly Whittlemore

Chair of the Board of Directors of Acera School

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