

## Press Clippings 1/14/2022

### **Wednesday Journal of Oak Park and River Forest D97 schools host forum for pair of superintendent candidates --- 1/13/2022**

By F. Amanda Tugade



Oak Park School District 97 held a two-hour forum last night with superintendent hopefuls, Kim Nalls and Ushma Shah. Over Zoom, Nalls, an assistant superintendent at a south suburban high school, and Shah, a Chicago Public Schools administrator, answered dozens of questions from the community ranging from their approach to retaining staff to mending the achievement gap.

The district's hired search firm, Hazard, Young and Attea (HYA), led the forum Jan. 12, which began with Nalls and Shah introducing themselves and sharing their professional experiences and perspectives on education, leadership and the possibility of becoming the next superintendent. The district's school board plans to announce the new superintendent by the end of the month.

Nalls, who kicked off the event, opened up to viewers about her 28-year career in education. She started as an elementary school teacher and guidance counselor in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and later took on various administrative roles in other Illinois school districts, including her latest post as Rich Township High School District 227's assistant superintendent. Nalls is also a former principal of Thornridge High School in south suburban Dolton and of Proviso Mathematics and Science Academy in nearby Forest Park.

In the Proviso Township high school district, Nalls also served as an assistant superintendent of human resources and technology and assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction.

“As a leader, I don’t lead from an ivory tower or a central office,” Nalls said. “I’m highly visible in schools, supporting my administrators, supporting the amazing teachers, paraprofessionals, the people who are serving our children nutritious meals, the custodians who are making sure that we have state of the art and clean facilities that only contribute to our students’ learning. I believe that schools are the foundation of phenomenal communities.”

Nalls told viewers she would be staff and students’ “biggest cheerleader,” noting her experience would help move District 97 forward.

Like Nalls, Shah also walked viewers through her work in and outside the classroom. Shah, who also began her career as an elementary school and middle school teacher for CPS, has taken on various leadership roles over the course of 30 years. Prior to rejoining CPS as an interim chief portfolio officer last August, Shah spent a decade at Elgin School District U-46 as an assistant superintendent and chief of equity and social justice. Among other things, she also served as a middle school principal of North Cook Young Adult Academy, an alternative public school for sixth- to 12th-graders in suburban Des Plaines.

“I want to know you by name. It’s possible in a place like Oak Park,” Shah told viewers while on screen. “I want to make sure that we create the kind of districts you have said matters to you where you have trust and transparency and where we grow together toward a really big and exciting vision for each of our students.”

## **Tackling District 97’s challenges**

During the hours-long forum, search firm representatives gave room for Nalls and Shah to respond to questions submitted by district families and employees and local residents.

On the topic of helping recruit and retain D97 staff, Nalls outlined a few action steps. She said she would partner with the district’s assistant superintendent of human resources and create a hiring plan. In order to recruit more diverse candidates, Nalls suggested developing stronger relationships with historically Black colleges and universities, as well as other higher-ed institutions in the state of Illinois.

Within the district, Nalls said she would like to launch mentoring programs for faculty and staff and host monthly diversity round tables. The round tables would ultimately serve as a

“check-in to make sure people are OK” and see if people are receiving the support they need and feel included and welcomed.

Echoing some of Nalls’ thoughts, Shah shared with viewers that hiring more diverse employees is less about bumping up numbers and more about cultivating a better work experience.

“It has to be a great place for them to be,” Shah said.

Shah leaned on her previous position as District U-46’s assistant superintendent and told viewers examples of how she and other administrators worked to bring more people of color into their schools. They prioritized professional development and offered pathways for staff of different experiences to connect, she said. Shah said school principals regularly spoke to newly hired staff one-on-one and visited their classrooms weekly as a way to “make sure we were accessible.”

“We’re really developing an ecosystem where we’re using those standards of practice, and we’re coming together and creating a sense of community amongst us,” she said.

The District 97 community also asked Nalls and Shah how they would fix and close its storied opportunity gap.

Nalls said it all starts by looking at the data, including the academic report cards and discipline rates. Both of those information sets, especially the latter, are critical to understanding students, particularly those who are struggling and have fallen behind.

Referring to her former work at the middle school and high school level, Nalls said her districts changed their grading practices and made the decision to apply a new benchmark where, for example, an “F” starts off with a 50[%],” instead of a zero.

“We never want students to experience the power of a zero,” she said, adding students should be provided constant feedback. Nalls sought to impose intervention programs for students, as well as allowing teachers access to training and education opportunities to navigate those programs.

Shah, on the other hand, told viewers that before responding, she would first listen to understand what faculty, staff and families have experienced so far. She wanted to look at the strategies that have already been put in place, and if any of those strategies should be invested in or eliminated.

Shah said she is interested in working closely with faculty, staff and administrators, as this issue is “often about how we organize ourselves around solutions and how we get better over time.”

This, she said, is about constructing a new system and framework to highlight their students’ agency.

Another area of concern for the D97 community is how the new superintendent would handle the impacts of the pandemic on students’ learning.

“No. 1, we need to cater to the hearts of children,” Nalls said, noting she would look to her staff, her teammates, to learn and identify their students’ strengths and struggles and see what kind of resources they already have above anything else.

Nalls said she would also look at the funding that has been allocated to the district during the pandemic and see if they are able to use some of that money to offer school programs over the weekend, boost extracurricular activities or host field trips “to get people to feel good again, as we try to transition back to what we knew as normal.”

Shah also shared Nalls’ sentiments. She told viewers it is crucial to assess what exactly those shortfalls maybe and “making sure we have good data on that.” Shah referenced the Illinois P-20 Council, the state’s education-focused group, that recently released some insight and strategies on how school districts can aid in students’ learning during the pandemic. Those moments for improvement could include re-engagement in the classroom whether in-person or online or mental health awareness, she said.

“We know that the universal goal is to make sure everyone’s ready and everyone’s engaged, but we might need to have targeted strategies and that needs to be a process done in collaboration with the people closest to the students,” Shah said.

