

EDUCATION

Des Moines Public Schools changes hiring practice to reconsider people with criminal records



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Job candidates with criminal records are no longer automatically barred from working for the Des Moines Public School District following a change in hiring practices recommended by new Superintendent Ian Roberts.

The shift — which Roberts discussed during a public forum Sunday — affords officials at Iowa's largest and most diverse school district another tool in reaching its longtime goal of diversifying its staff, top administrators say.

"I believe that people are so much better than the worst thing they've ever done," Roberts said at the forum, prompting applause. "I have overturned at least ... five or six decisions around not hiring individuals based on something in their background because they have an opportunity not only for them to be redeemed, but for them to add value to the students that we are serving."

The district has not released details on the incidents that had previously disqualified those candidates from being hired.

Two-thirds of Des Moines Public Schools' roughly 30,000 students are people of color, led by Hispanic and Black students, according to Iowa Department of Education statistics. By comparison, about 19% of the district's 4,887 staff members are people of color.

Roberts said at the forum that the district is aware the mandatory background checks have kept out potential employees over the years.

Several people interviewed by the Des Moines Register stated that decades-old drug convictions were one of the most common reasons someone might be disqualified from

working for the school district.

In Iowa, a Black person is "7.3 times more likely to be arrested than a white person for marijuana possession," according to a 2020 American Civil Liberties Union study.

Given the barriers some people face, Roberts said the school board has given him the "green light to make the right decisions" when it comes to hiring people who may have previously not passed the background check because of past misdemeanor or felony convictions.

New hiring practices have school board's approval

Several board members confirmed to the Register that they support Roberts' hiring changes.

While board Chair Teree Caldwell-Johnson said she could not speak to the specifics of the ongoing changes because staffing is handled by the district's human resources department and the superintendent, she agreed with the intent.

"I would definitely applaud any shifts or changes that are taking place," Caldwell-Johnson said in an interview.

Making changes to hiring practices is within Roberts' purview as the superintendent, she said, but the school board expects practices and policies to be in line with the board's guardrails and state law.

State law requires background checks for employees every five years, said Phil Roeder, Des Moines schools' spokesperson. Background checks for new district employees are done by 3rd Degree Screening, Inc.

Additionally, anyone can apply to work for the district and a criminal offense coming up on a background check does not automatically mean a candidate is ineligible for the position, said Susan Tallman, the district's talent and personnel director.

"We're not going to hire anyone who will put our students or teachers or staff in harm's way," Roberts said on Tuesday.

Advocates say DMPS hiring policy was blocking good candidates

Roberts and Des Moines Public School Board candidates were invited to participate in the A Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy or AMOS forum Sunday afternoon at St. Paul African

Methodist Episcopal Church in Des Moines.

AMOS is comprised of members from local faith congregations, neighborhood groups and nonprofits who focus on finding solutions for community issues.

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Roberts' announcement about the changes to the district's hiring practices came after Charice Williams, the Hiatt Middle School student engagement coordinator, spoke about the importance of having school staff who look like their students and about the barriers to achieving this goal.

Williams told those gathered about a woman, whom she didn't identify, who was previously incarcerated but ultimately earned a master's degree and 30 years later has worked for both the state and county.

Yet because of her criminal record, the woman was not eligible for a stipend position as part of the district's school-based mentor program Sisters 4 Success, Williams said.

"For less than \$2,000 from the district, we missed out on an unlimited resource for our girls," Williams said in an interview.

School staff work hard to support students and give them chances to grow and learn, Williams said. It is frustrating that adults are not always given the same chance to overcome their mistakes "no matter how long ago it was."

DMPS officials look for patterns in hiring

The work to change Des Moines schools' hiring practices goes deeper than Roberts' request for past job candidates to be reconsidered.

The superintendent also requested application data for the last three to five years to better understand which criminal offenses left people ineligible for district employment, and the race and gender of those applicants.

"We're trying to ascertain whether or not there are patterns in the decisions that we've been making," the superintendent said.

The Des Moines School Board's hiring guardrails call for the superintendent to work toward creating a diverse staff "while utilizing hiring practices conducted in accordance with the

District's Affirmative Action Plan and Equal Employment Opportunity/Non-Discrimination Process."

Officials with the Des Moines Education Association — the district's teachers union — have also been working with Roberts and his administration on the changes.

"I believe that our union is supportive of knocking down barriers that keep great people — who have a heart for our students and a heart for helping our young people succeed — from being able to become part of our staff," union President Josh Brown told the Register.

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