

A Team Mindset for New Bedford's Schools

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Recently, the NBEDC Regeneration Committee published its take on the city's schools, the fourth in a series of policy statements about how we can encourage dynamic and sustainable economic growth for a thriving New Bedford. Titled *Raising the Bar: Better New Bedford Public Schools Will Lead to a Stronger Economy*, the paper examines ways of furthering the progress and sustaining efforts in the turnaround plan now under way and supported by the School Committee.

While *Raising the Bar* explores links between education and economic success, and considers the challenges of funding public education, it is important to note the critical role played by the School Committee in shepherding the district's continued improvement.

For those following the progress of New Bedford Public Schools (NBPS), the news has been encouraging. Like an enormous ocean liner, this district of 13,000 students and 2,000 employees has begun to make the turn under Pia Durkin's captaincy. It hasn't been easy or painless, but there is real evidence that NBPS is on the right track. Back in 2011, the district faced seemingly insurmountable challenges. But with enormous determination, district-wide school improvement plans were crafted with teacher input and school committee oversight. The results are adding up and the state is taking notice.

In July, the Massachusetts Dept. of Elementary and Secondary Education released the city from state monitoring, noting that it was "not the same school district" it was in 2011. Compared with schools across the commonwealth, NBPS have improved its ranks, moving six schools into the top 50% with the latest MCAS scores.

New Bedford High School has just earned top marks in its reaccreditation by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. The high school offers tailored learning environments within the National Academy Foundation's Career Academy model. Areas of focus include Engineering, Information Technology, Health, and Sciences, all of which are enhanced by Career Technical Education programming. The high school's own Academy of Arts and Humanities is based on the NAF model, and it also inducts qualifying scholars into the NBHS Academy of Honors. Every student in Grades 9-12 now has use of a personal laptop in school and at home for assignments and homework.

The district is doing outreach to families across New Bedford and Acushnet, where students can opt for New Bedford High School's 19 Advanced Placement (AP) courses, conducted by College Board certified instructors. Dual enrollment allows for earned college credit.

All indicators point to a consistently upward student growth trend at the high school.

The improvements are no less impressive at the elementary and middle school levels. After 41 years, half-day Fridays are a thing of the past. A full week of school for all elementary students is the standard, and they receive Art, Music, Technology, and PE throughout the district.

Improving learning quality and increasing the material to be covered requires more time for learning, which is why the district sought and received grants for additional funding to expand the school day at Gomes and Jacobs Schools.

Middle school redesign plans were formulated and negotiated with buy-in from staff. English Learners – nearly 30% of the district’s student population – have seen progress due to increasing staff support, from only 3 ESL teachers in 2014 to 57 today.

Schools can only improve as their staffs improve. Before 2014, tools for teachers in reading, math and science were either outdated or nonexistent. That, too, has changed, along with professional development for teachers and for staff, which has been expanded and planning time built into the school day for teachers to develop their own skills.

Accelerated Learning Pathways (ALPs) are offered at the middle schools as well as a dual enrollment program at New Bedford High School in Grade 8. ALPs is a unique multiyear program of personalized attention focused on a student’s central goal: to obtain a high school diploma as a first step in gaining admission to the most competitive colleges.

New Bedford staff has reinvented their own skill sets by entering the district’s ESL Academy, Aspiring Administrators Program, and applying for Reading Specialist positions. Full-time instructional coaching positions have also been added since 2014 with no major layoffs taking place in the district the past four years.

Financial transparency has also been a guiding principle, with the district providing more detailed reports to inform the decisions of the school committee and the public with a clear picture of how the dollars are invested in the city’s future – its children.

Even more visual transparency is reflected in replacing weathered and opaque windows and doors with insulated and operable units that let the sunshine in at Carney, Hayden-McFadden, Gomes, and Pulaski Schools, with more schools in the pipeline for renovations.

The School Committee can be proud of these accomplishments in the past three years. It has been a collaborative process that requires a team-oriented mindset that places a high value on working together. It has taken enormous effort to get this far and the process is a fragile one. New school committee members may bring new ideas and it is hoped that this same mindset continues. Those willing and eager to build on the progress made should be noted as part of the district’s future – a future that can only look brighter as part of a team that will build on its success.

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