



District
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CASE STUDY

Success on the Horizon: Turnaround at New Bedford Public Schools (MA)

by Sam Ribnick and Diane Ullman

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Success on the Horizon:

Turnaround at New Bedford Public Schools (MA)



A follow-up to the two-part coverage of New Bedford Public Schools in the *District Management Journal*, vol. 19, Spring 2016

- “Focus and Persistence Change the Course: Turnaround at New Bedford Public Schools (MA)” by Diane Ullman and Sam Ribnick
- “Changing the Course: Reflections on the Turnaround at New Bedford Public Schools” by Pia Durkin

Sam Ribnick and Diane Ullman

New Bedford Public Schools, under state watch since 2011, achieved a milestone in July 2017 when Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) announced that the district was being released from monitoring. Back in May 2011, noting that too many of the district’s schools were ranked in the lowest tier of the state’s accountability system and that the schools “struggle[d] with student attendance, discipline, graduation, and retention,” DESE had made the decision to designate the district a Level 4 or “Underperforming” district, triggering state monitoring. At the time, DESE had even considered designating New Bedford Public Schools a Level 5 or “Chronically Underperforming” district, which would have triggered a state takeover. Even under the state’s watch, the district continued to struggle. It was not until 2013, when Dr. Pia Durkin arrived as superintendent, that the real work of turnaround began.

In a letter from DESE dated July 14, 2017, the district received the exciting news that it would be released from monitoring. DESE stated, “The district has made

great strides to address the systemic concerns raised in the 2011 district review. . . . [T]he district has effective processes in place in order to continue to bring about meaningful improvement.” While there is still a long way to go and not all academic indicators are yet trending upward, the sense of progress is real to DESE as well as to all those in the district. As Durkin wrote in her reply to the state, “This validation drives us all to redouble our efforts to continue the momentum.” For the first time in over a decade, there is now a belief that success is on the horizon for the students of New Bedford Public Schools.

In the Spring 2016 *District Management Journal* (vol. 19), the case study “Focus and Persistence Change the Course: Turnaround at New Bedford Public Schools (MA)” by Diane Ullman and Sam Ribnick and “Changing the Course: Reflections on the Turnaround at New Bedford Public Schools” by Pia Durkin tell the story of the district’s turnaround from 2013 through 2016. The following provides an update to the work that has gone on in the district since that time.

FAST FACTS



NEW BEDFORD PUBLIC
SCHOOLS (MA)

25

Schools

919

Teachers

12,640 students:

- **42.6%** White
- **38.9%** Hispanic
- **11.6%** African American
- **5.3%** Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic
- **0.9%** Asian
- **0.5%** Native American
- **0.2%** Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander

The Accelerated Improvement Plan Guides the Way

The Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) that Durkin put in place in New Bedford Public Schools has provided a clear roadmap for the work in the district. Residing somewhere between a district strategic plan and a school improvement plan, the AIP is a state-required tool with a one-year time frame that explains district leaders' goals for the year and sets out an implementation plan.

Before Durkin's arrival in 2013, the prior leadership had struggled to establish a strong AIP. From 2011 to 2013, the district began each school year without a state-approved plan. Even once the plans were approved, they did not serve to drive the work of the district; the plans were only discussed at the quarterly monitoring meetings with the state, during which the district struggled to show evidence of implementation.

Durkin was determined to launch her first school year with an approved AIP in place. Arriving in the summer of 2013, she worked aggressively with District Management Group—the plan manager brought in by DESE—to establish the AIP by September. At the fall convocation event, Durkin introduced an ambitious quantifiable goal for the district: to reduce the number of students not proficient by 40% or more, in every grade and at every school.

For the past four years, the AIP and its accompanying processes have served as the central tool defining and driving the work of the district. Dr. Jason DeFalco, hired by Durkin in July 2014 as chief academic officer, added bi-weekly meetings to the quarterly monitoring meetings as a way to ensure that the district stays focused on the highest-priority tasks. DeFalco explains, "When you're meeting with your accelerated improvement plan team every two weeks, nobody wants to come to that meeting and say, 'Yeah, I didn't do that.' Instead, we get routine updates every two weeks on the progress that has been made. And once a quarter we have what we call quarterly AIP meetings where there is a significant amount of data, both qualitative and

quantitative, to look at student growth and proficiency, but also to look at what we are noticing in classrooms." This approach was a marked difference from when Durkin arrived in 2013 and discovered that the AIP was barely understood, except by two or three senior district administrators. At the time, communication about data was limited. The practice was for the principal of each school to see only his or her school's data because the administration believed it would make schools "feel bad" if comparisons were allowed. Now, the team reflects on and uses data to determine what is working as well as what is not. DeFalco encourages the team to ask: "What are the patterns and trends of instruction, for [student] behaviors? And, more importantly, what are we doing about it? What is that next segment of work going to look like?"

For the first time in over a decade, there is now a belief that success is on the horizon for the students of New Bedford Public Schools.

Durkin and DeFalco have transformed not only the AIP process, but the district culture as well. When the district was first required to create an AIP, it was considered just that: a requirement that did not reflect the "real" work of the district. Now, DeFalco comments, "We created a system for the AIP . . . that really incorporates our stakeholders: teachers, coaches, principals." Embracing the use of data and working collaboratively to achieve the objectives of the AIP represent a remarkable culture change for the district.

School Improvement Plans Carry the Work to the Next Level

To further align the work at all levels, DeFalco also built systems for principals to create School Improvement Plans (SIPs). With the help of the DMGroup team, the district introduced in SY2014-15 a new format for SIPs:

Economically Disadvantaged:

63.5%

English Language Learners:

27.5%

Students with Disabilities:

20.6%

Graduation Rate: (2016 four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate)

70.9%

Per Student Spending: (FY2015; FY2016 not available)

\$12,960

Source: <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/finance.aspx?orgcode=02010000&orgtypecode=5&>

principals followed a similar format to the district AIP to develop their own specific action plan to achieve the overarching goals of the AIP. Principals select a small number of high-priority areas for improvement based on data analysis, set milestones to measure progress throughout the year, and craft detailed action plans for implementation. In SY2015-16, the SIP process added two key components: a year-long targeted professional development plan in support of the school's instructional goals, and a peer-driven review and feedback process for the initial drafts.

This past year and in the upcoming year, based on principal feedback, the district has also replicated the AIP monitoring process at the school level for SIPs. School leadership teams made up of administrators and principals gather every two weeks to keep implementation on track, and then meet quarterly with district leaders for a “data defense” meeting to review data and set direction for the quarter ahead. DeFalco also made sure that the process is differentiated so that lower-performing schools review data every five weeks instead of quarterly. “Our whole focus is on getting results. Kids don't have time for us to tiptoe around the real issues. Principals are okay with that now,” DeFalco said. Durkin comments, “The AIP has become a tool that is ‘alive and active’ in all of our schools. There is an alignment between the AIP and the improvement plans at each of the schools.” This, she believes, was one of the key factors in DESE's decision to release New Bedford from district monitoring.

New Initiatives Make Hard Change Happen

Strengthening Supports for Teachers and Strengthening Supports for Principals

Asked about the most significant new area of focus for this year, DeFalco responds immediately: emotional intelligence. He reflects that for principals to be excellent and effective instructional leaders, they need more than technical expertise on data cycles, lesson design, and re-teach plans; they also need the emotional intelligence to work with teachers in a way that builds the connections and relationships necessary to shift teachers' practice. Durkin comments that the New Bedford principals who are making the greatest gains in achievement are those who have executed all that they have learned about instructional leadership and have adapted what they have learned to suit the conditions of their schools and the people they are charged to lead. She goes on to say, “Just having a technical command of curriculum and evaluation processes is not going to move teachers in their practice. Analyzing the reasons for mediocrity and low performance and adapting your strategy as a leader

will. This takes a real, deep commitment to your own practice as a leader.”

Coaching is one area that has undergone a mid-course correction. “We have found that the [opt-in] coaching model works better at the elementary level, but we have not found it as effective as we need [it to be] at the secondary level,” DeFalco says. This insight led to a structural shift: replacing the opt-in coaching model at the secondary schools with content-area instructional administrators who can evaluate teachers. The hope is that with the authority to evaluate, these department leaders with extensive content-area knowledge will have more impact and effect more pronounced changes in teaching practice, leading to stronger student results. The district was able to repurpose funds and invest a significant amount in professional development to make this new group effective.

What are the patterns and trends of instruction, for [student] behaviors? And, more importantly, what are we doing about it?

—Dr. Jason DeFalco
Deputy Superintendent

The district's teacher hiring practices have also undergone a major shift. Formerly, hiring had been a largely competitive process among schools, but now principals with teacher openings come together to review a group of applicants and observe those candidates delivering model lessons; afterwards, the principals can make strategic decisions about which teacher would be the best fit for the needs and culture at each school. Rather than allowing a good candidate to slip away because he or she doesn't match the needs at one school, the principals may route that individual to another school where the teacher will be a good fit.

Adding Programmatic Supports for Historically Underserved Groups

Recognizing that many groups of students had been historically underserved in New Bedford Public Schools, Durkin made it part of the district's mission to allocate resources during the budget process to address the needs of all students.



• **English Learners**

Durkin hired Sonia Walmsley, a colleague from her former district, to lead the district's department supporting English Learners (EL). Under Walmsley's leadership, the district quickly discovered that thousands of EL students had not been properly identified in past years due to a lack of systems to screen and assess students. In SY2016-17, the district reported 27.5% of all students as EL, up from 11% two years earlier. This rapid increase in the recognition of EL students created an abrupt need for more English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers. Aware of the scarcity of such teachers across the state, Durkin, DeFalco, and Walmsley designed a "grow your own" program in which New Bedford teachers stepped forward to become trained, certified, and coached to teach EL students. Durkin explains, "This was a 'win-win' for the district in which we had our own teachers willing to take the risk to reinvent their skill set and remain committed to New Bedford in a new way." The district's ESL teaching force has now grown from three teachers to 56 teachers.

Based on the new DESE licensure requirements, all teachers in Massachusetts are required to become Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) endorsed. This requirement has led to more collaborative work taking place between general education teachers and the ESL teachers. To ensure that this collaboration would be purposeful and targeted, Walmsley and DeFalco took steps to embed strong instructional practices for EL students in the district's framework for general education instruction. Then principals at each school were charged with ensuring that those instructional practices were indeed taking place in both the ESL and SEI settings and that the teachers were working together. Further, the district is providing targeted SEI training to paraprofessionals who play a role in supporting EL students in their general education classrooms. DeFalco states, "Now, we are pleased to see that our EL kids are carrying the district, with the highest student growth percentile of any subgroup of students." Durkin adds, "This data shows that our EL students bring true assets to the district, and the resources allocated to help them lifts the district's achievement."

• **Special Education**

The rethinking of the paraprofessional role extended to special education as well. An arduous but ultimately successful renegotiation of the paraprofessional contract has resulted in significant changes in both working conditions and expectations for paraprofessionals. There is now more training for classified staff, who are being included in the start-of-year professional development with the teachers with whom they work. Most paraprofessionals are now part of the instructional work that is taking place in classrooms and serve as a key support for student learning. "We are now setting up a fairly extensive content training for paraprofessionals, asking them to be true assistants in instruction," DeFalco says. Durkin adds, "We have absolutely professionalized this role in the district, validating key staff members that were not being used to their fullest capacity to meet the needs of students."

• **Non-academic Wraparound Supports**

Beyond EL and special education, the district has kept a keen focus on strengthening the nonacademic supports for students living in poverty—supports referred to in the district as "wraparound" services.

2011

Parker Elementary and Hayden/McFadden Elementary named Level 4 by DESE

2011

NBPS district designated Level 4

July 2013

Pia Durkin starts as superintendent

December 2013

Parker Elementary named Level 5, New Bedford High School named Level 4

January 2014

New Bedford Educators Association attempts no confidence vote, which does not pass

May 2014

New Bedford Educators Association passes a no confidence resolution and calls for Durkin's resignation. Durkin says she "absolutely" will not resign

June 2014

School committee approves expanded budget with updated reading program

July 2014

Jason DeFalco brought in as chief academic officer

March 2015

Durkin and New Bedford Educators Association president announce breakthrough negotiation to provide additional 20 hours of professional development and earlier hiring timeline

November 2015

State releases NBPS results on 2015 PARCC showing higher achievement and large gains in growth

June 2016

New Bedford High School receives National Academy Foundation accreditation

July 2017

State releases NBPS from monitoring, citing confidence in the district's systems for implementing the Accelerated Improvement Plan

A district wraparound manager was hired to work with middle and elementary school wraparound managers. DeFalco has deliberately included the wraparound manager as a key member of the Office of Instruction, and explains, “We’re firm believers that you can’t teach a child until you can reach the child. . . . We’re really focused on removing those nonacademic barriers that really prevent kids from being successful in academics.” Durkin and DeFalco have also included the district’s many external partners in a more deliberate way to align their work with the key goals of the AIP. Three “Partner Summits” now take place throughout the year, and partners are welcomed and guided in their work in the schools.

Turning Around the High School

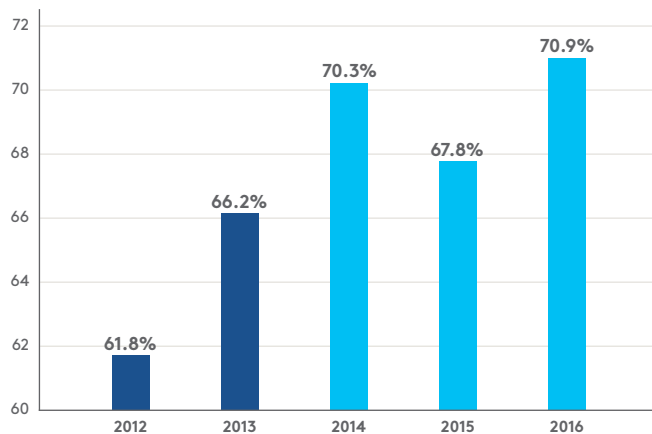
Strengthening the high school has been a very important part of the district’s turnaround effort. The district was designated a Level 4 turnaround district in large part because of the state’s concerns about the high school, long ranked in the bottom 10 statewide. High school turnarounds have proven difficult throughout the country, and New Bedford High School (NBHS), one of the largest high schools in the state, was viewed as especially challenging. After the state designated NBHS as a Level 4 school in 2014, the district submitted a school redesign plan with the help of District Management Group and won \$1.3 million in school improvement grant funds to aid in implementation. The work began with over 50% of staff changing, new school leaders, and a new leadership structure.

Now, three years later, there are some signs of success. The overall graduation rate has risen to a high of 70.9% in 2016, from 61.8% in 2012. Graduation rates of English Language Learners moved from 38% in 2012 to 60% in 2016, and the graduation rate for students with special needs grew from 22% in 2010 to 50% in 2016. The dropout rate has declined from 18.3% in 2012 to 12% in 2016.

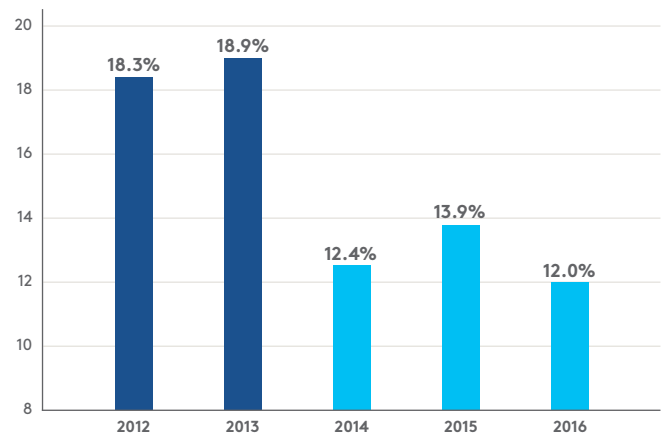
Underlying these improvements are exciting changes to the high school’s structure and offerings for students. A generous donation from alumnus Dr. Irwin Jacobs, former CEO of the Fortune 500 company QUALCOMM, made it possible for every ninth-grader to receive a laptop during SY2016-17, which allowed the school to put in place a technology-enabled math program. Dr. Jacobs, with support from the city of New Bedford, has now increased that donation to include a laptop for every student in grades 9-12, along with extensive professional development offered by the Mobile Technology Learning Center of the University of San Diego. New Bedford High School has also received national accreditation from the National Academy Foundation (NAF) for the designated academy pathways that support students on the way to college and careers in fields including finance, information technology, and the health sciences. To increase opportunities for students to reach top-tier colleges, the high school established an Academy of Honors, geared to supporting students to earn the coveted College-Board Certified Capstone Diploma. Dual-enrollment courses are now available to allow eighth-grade students to take ninth-grade courses as well as to allow high school juniors and seniors to take courses at local colleges. Durkin

Exhibit 1 NEW BEDFORD HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION AND DROPOUT RATES

Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate



Dropout Rate



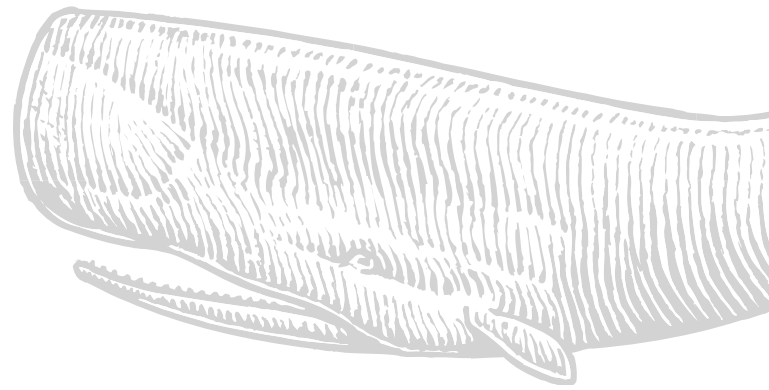
Source: http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/grad/grad_report.asp?orgcode=02010505&orgtypecode=6&fycode=2012

■ Before Durkin's Arrival ■ After Durkin's Arrival

describes all these programs with excitement: “We now have the ability to stretch our students. Our advanced placement courses and dual enrollment programs attract students to NBHS for a world-class education that will help them to get into the college of their choice.”

The Road Ahead

Being removed from state watch is a major milestone in the turnaround process, but Durkin and DeFalco are quick to point out that there is much work ahead. While graduation rates and dropout rates have greatly improved (*Exhibit 1*), there is much work to be done to raise academic achievement results. As seen in Exhibit 2, ELA and math results jumped significantly in 2015, then dropped back down in 2016. Because 2015 and 2016 were the same years that New Bedford Public Schools piloted the new Common Core-aligned PARCC exam in place of Massachusetts’ long-standing MCAS exam, it is difficult to ascertain whether the decrease in 2016 reflects actual changes in student learning or is a side effect of the new assessment. But for Durkin and DeFalco, it is clear that the strong, sustained upswing in scores that the district is seeking has not come yet. They will be diving into classroom- and school-level results to ensure that progress is being documented and used to adjust the district’s strategy. Durkin states with determination, “We are continuing to create and sustain the conditions that will not only make excellence possible for New Bedford Public Schools but will make excellence probable. It is a real privilege to be part of the changes that will make excellence happen for this deserving community.”



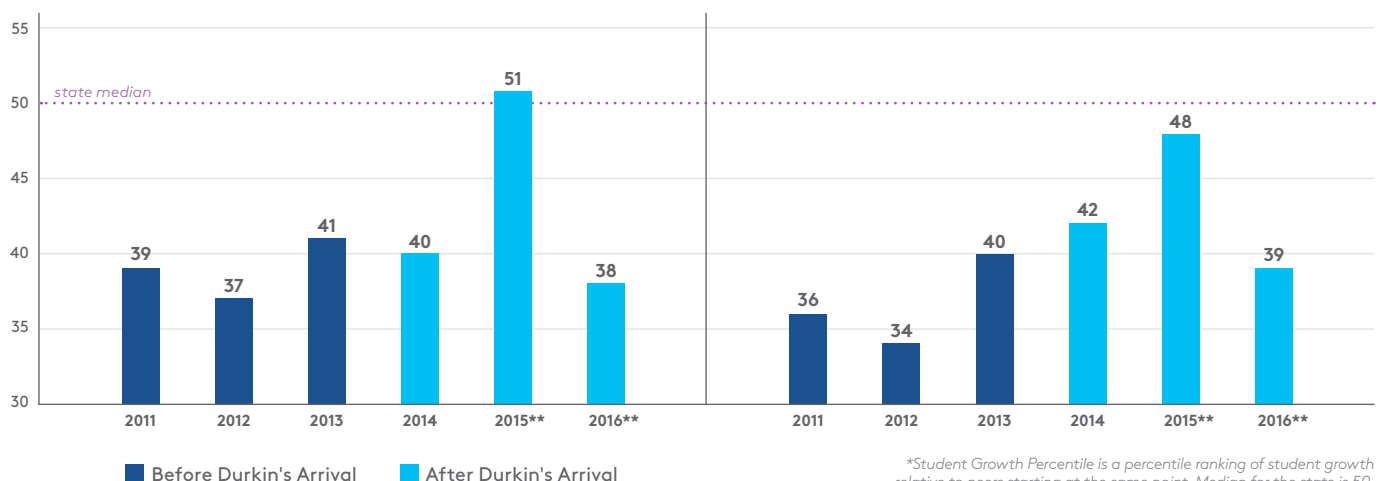
Conclusion

District turnaround is neither fast nor easy. With four years under Durkin’s leadership, New Bedford Public Schools is starting to show signs that the hard work is paying off. With the state’s decision to release the district from monitoring this year, the district’s leadership has received a clear signal that they are on the right path. Durkin also received affirmation from the school committee, who voted to renew her multi-year contract. Thanks to the systems, structures, and the team of educators and administrators that have been put in place and are committed to the district’s reform, the district is now in a much stronger position to continue building toward gains for all students. Durkin and DeFalco are always quick to remind everyone that much work lies ahead as they focus on raising academic achievement, but now there is a sense of momentum; New Bedford Public Schools now has a firm foundation and is on the right course, positioned for continued success. ♦

Exhibit 2 NEW BEDFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS’ ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT RESULTS

Student Growth Percentiles*—ELA
MCAS Grades 3-8

Student Growth Percentiles*—Math
MCAS Grades 3-8



*Student Growth Percentile is a percentile ranking of student growth relative to peers starting at the same point. Median for the state is 50.
**PARCC was taken at NBPS in 2015 and 2016.

Note: The state used statistical methods to calibrate PARCC scores to MCAS scores, since only half of the state transitioned to PARCC in 2015 and 2016.

Source: <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/profiles/general.aspx?topNavId=1&orgcode=02010000&orgtypecode=5&>

Q & A with Superintendent Pia Durkin



Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) recently released New Bedford Public Schools from monitoring of its implementation of the Accelerated Improvement Plan. That ambitious AIP is something you worked very hard to create and that served as your roadmap for the past four years.

When I took the position in July 2013, I made it a mission that we were going to have an AIP plan that was going to be not only completed but approved prior to the opening of school. It was a very ambitious goal. I was told it would never happen, and every superintendent who takes on turnaround knows what a challenge it is to make it happen. Working with DMGroup at the time, we were able to construct a plan and have that approved prior to the opening convocation in September. The plan had very clear goals, but it also included a clear communication plan. I do believe [that] DESE gained confidence as the years went on, seeing that what we wrote in the plan we were doing. And we were open to any monitoring that would take place.

In your AIP, you had an ambitious and very specific goal of reducing the number of students not proficient by 40% in every grade in every school. If you were to do this over again, would you set the same goal and frame the issue the same way?

When you take on a turnaround district, you need to determine what you need to do first. And because the

In taking on a Level 4 district, you realize that you're in the rowboat and you're trying to change the course of the *Queen Mary*. You have to take certain liberties and take some bold measures.

level of expectations was so low in this district, where good people could not believe that we could be a change agent in the lives of our children, it was very important to wrap our heads around a goal that everyone would be involved in.

So the AIP focused on instruction, and we set a goal to reduce by 40% the numbers of students who were in the “Needs Improvement” and “Warning/Failing” categories. That became a district goal, a school-level goal, and a goal within classrooms. And it got to the point where teachers were able to say, “Okay, here are my kids who I want to move this year.” We began to put a face and a name on the children who were not achieving. Teachers started to become believers that the child with that face and that name was going to succeed. It began very slowly. And we had a few champions in every school. Those champions developed a momentum that helped what I call the middle-of-the-roaders in saying “I can do this too.” And though it was really hard to look at resisters—because every school has them, every district has them—we began to focus on those who were moving the change forward.

In looking back, that goal was very ambitious and remains ambitious. I was called a number of things for being too “pie-in-the-sky” and had people saying, “Our kids will never be able to do it, and why are you putting so much stress on the adults?” Well, the stress had been on children for many, many years in not achieving what they should have been achieving.

And to this day, you still have that goal.

We still have that goal. And we're getting closer. There are some schools moving faster, but we absolutely must move the children who are in the lowest categories of achievement to the highest categories. I also will say now, in 2017, we're looking at all children in a much more logical way.

In your turnaround work, you were attacking so many issues at the same time, but if you had to name your top three drivers of success, what would they be?

When you take on a turnaround of a school district, you need to think about setting your priorities. Coming into New Bedford Public Schools, I had to make some decisions as to the things that were going to give us the most leverage and communicate that we were serious about this.

I was called a number of things for being too “pie-in-the-sky” and had people saying, “Our kids will never be able to do it, and why are you putting so much stress on the adults?” Well, the stress had been on children for many, many years in not achieving what they should have been achieving.

This was not the first time that NBPS had embarked upon a turnaround. I had been superintendent for all of a month when I realized that people did not truly believe that they were going to succeed. So I found myself having to really build that positive momentum. I learned very quickly that I have 13,000 students under my charge and I have 26 schools and 1,100 staff members, and I, being one person, could not touch all of them. I realized that the most important lever I had was to get to principals. I could touch 26 principals of 26 schools who were then going to support the teachers in those buildings who were then going to support the children and families. I made a very

key decision that principals were going to be my priority and that I needed to focus on helping them develop the will and the skill to do this very hard work.

The second piece was that I realized very quickly that knowing what to teach was very important for our teachers. There had not been a new reading program in 11 years, and there was no math program in place. It was important to give support for the curriculum to be able to ensure that we were teaching according to the Massachusetts standards.

And the last piece was really focusing on how instruction was being delivered. In that delivery, are children being empowered to be able to take ownership of their learning and be able to make progress? Are teachers able to adjust their instruction to show that our kids in New Bedford could learn as much as any other student in the Commonwealth?

Can you talk about the systems and structures that exist today that you think helped give DESE the confidence to lift state monitoring?

Not only are there clear goals but clear, time-dated progress markers. We don't wait until the end of the school year to see that “Oops, we missed a few benchmarks.” We get routine updates every two weeks on the progress that has been made. And once a quarter we have quarterly AIP meetings where there is a significant amount of data, both qualitative and quantitative, to look at student growth, to look at student proficiency, but also to look at what we are noticing in classrooms to make sure we are doing the right work and to see how to move ahead.

Were there some freedoms that you had as a Level 4 district that allowed you to do things that you might not have done without that designation?

As a superintendent, I was helped a great deal by the achievement gap law of 2010. I did choose the turnaround model in which people had to reapply for their positions. It was a very, very difficult time for NBPS. There were many individuals who had been in positions for a long time. I can't count the times I was told, “But so-and-so is a very nice person and she likes children.” But we weren't getting any results and the expectations were very low. So we had to make some decisions and staff members left, people retired, and people moved on. And we were able to gain staff members who understood the commitment they had to make. So those were very difficult situations in which I had to seek supporters to help me leverage what I needed to make those schools have the conditions to succeed.

But the importance about using any regulation is to balance pressure and support. With too much pressure, people shut down and they're not going to comply with the simplest requests. But too much support allows people to sit back and say we have all the time in the world. That urgency factor was an important one. New Bedford is a district that has been underperforming for many, many years, largely because it focused on the needs of adults rather than the needs of children. That can't be undone in a quick turnaround. In taking on a Level 4 district, you realize that you're in the rowboat and you're trying to change the course of the *Queen Mary*. You have to take certain liberties and take some bold measures.

I made a very key decision that principals were going to be my priority and that I needed to focus on helping them develop the will and the skill to do this very hard work.

You had some strong supporters, but you also had a lot of resistance and weathered a lot of criticism, including a no confidence vote from the union in your first year.

And there were many, many personal attacks. I was new to New Bedford. I lived here, but I was the change agent coming in, causing all this disruption. And you learn as a superintendent you need to find your safe harbor. Though I didn't have an administrative team at the time, I was able to reach out to fellow superintendents, to mentors of mine from previous positions, to colleagues who knew me well from my previous superintendency, as well as to places like DMGroup to help give support when it was most needed.

One of the things you need to learn as a superintendent and you continue to need to practice is that you cannot take things personally. The minute you start taking it personally you lose your focus. Now those words are easy to say, but you need to be able to have a thick skin. But it is very hard and no matter what, you still are a human being. You cannot be the person who is just "Teflon" and pretend it doesn't bother you. So for me, what helped me a great deal was being in the schools. I became obsessed and convinced that every student in every classroom wanted to do better and that these kids deserved better.

You managed to turn things around and garner support and recently had your contract renewed early. What accounted for that?

Somehow, you have to keep communicating what our vision is and what our goals are. It was critical for me to be able to explain clearly what we were doing and why we were doing it. Making sure I communicated often and frequently with the mayor and with the school committee was critical.

Part of the support I did get from the school committee was from letting them know this was going to be hard and that we would probably be hearing some flak [about] this, but let me tell you why I'm doing that. What I learned was that communicating with each of them individually was critically important to building a sense that we were in this together. Not that they couldn't push back, not that they couldn't disagree, but that there was a respectful collaboration of getting this work done.

Any lessons you want to share with other superintendents?

I would say to stay focused on the important things, and to really be able to communicate why these things are important. It's important to find *why* it is important to the person you're trying to connect with—whether it be the mayor, a member of the school committee, the community, a family member, or a parent. We all want what's best for our children, but we have different views of how to get there. And sometimes it's the "getting there" that is really tough, and you need to anticipate what the toughest part is going to be.

The other part is to really stick to your core values. I was about teaching and learning. The only way I was going to change what individuals believed about kids was for them to be successful. So it was about balancing pressure and support. Getting that balance right is always critical for a superintendent when they're managing 26 principals, and for principals when they're managing 60 to 100 or 150 staff members. So those lessons of how you get that balance are really important. And probably one of the most important things is to be prepared as much as you can to anticipate what the difficulties are going to be.

So looking back, is there anything that you would do differently?

In looking back, there are very few things I would probably change.

I would have liked to have gotten my administrative team more quickly in place. It took a long time to get people to

But the bottom line is that kids come first. It's not about an individual, it's not about one superintendent, it's about a community rising up and believing that we can do far better for our kids.



commit to New Bedford—to believe that we could do this work. The district had such a difficult reputation that it was hard to attract people. I was fortunate to be able to hire people from across the state who moved here and said, “I’m in. We can do this.” But again, it comes down to having those communications and having people believe that this is what kids deserve and that we can actually do it.

I was driven to make sure change was going to happen, and it wasn’t happening fast enough. I would probably want to have had a little bit more patience in realizing where people are, just as we do with students.

What’s the next level of work to keep things moving forward?

Now that we’re in year five, the big issue for me and for my team is to ensure that we are building capacity and sustainability. How do we make sure that NBPS stays on track to increase progress and achievement results?

We now have a core group of principals, and we have an aspiring administrative program composed largely of individuals from within the system. In 2013, I don’t think I had one person who came up to me and said, “I want to be an administrator in New Bedford.” This year, we had 40 applicants and we have 14 people in our aspiring administrative program. Building that bench is critical.

The other piece is that we’ve gone beyond the *what* of teaching. We have standards we need to get better at, but now we’re also looking at how students apply those standards. Yes, they’re engaged and they’re excited learning about math, but are they applying it and taking that into real-world math problems? Are they now not just reading but also taking apart an editorial to look at the author’s perspective? Really looking at the quality of the application of the work we’re expecting from our students has to happen. So our protocol now not only includes

what the teachers are doing to get kids to practice those higher-order thinking skills but also what the students are doing. We didn’t really look at student work in our early years. We were mostly focused on what the teacher was delivering and mostly focused on whether the kids were engaged.

It’s so good to hear that so many of the foundational things that you’ve done have taken hold.

We’re very excited that the work has taken on a life of its own. We’re deepening the work such that people are looking at their practice to see how they can adjust to get better and stronger results faster.

But the bottom line is that kids come first. It’s not about an individual, it’s not about one superintendent, it’s about a community rising up and believing that we can do far better for our kids. ♦

**The above is an edited interview with Dr. Pia Durkin, superintendent of New Bedford Public Schools, conducted by Sam Ribnick and Dr. Diane Ullman of District Management Group on August 3, 2017, at NBPS.*



For more insights from Superintendent Pia Durkin and to hear from Deputy Superintendent Jason DeFalco, watch our video interviews on the topics of:

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- Creating strong systems to drive progress
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