

**LEADING CHANGE:**

The Transformation of Poughkeepsie High School

By Kim M. Smithgall

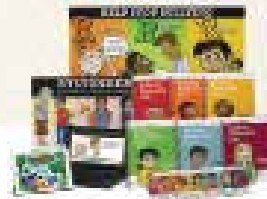
Here's the scene: It's a few days before the start of school. If you're a typical principal, you're likely involved with the flurry of tasks – both expected and unexpected – that need to be accomplished to ensure a smooth opening day for your students and staff. In the midst of all the last-minute activities, the district's new superintendent drops by for a visit, asking if you would consider moving from your position leading the middle school to become the high school principal...that is, principal of a school repeatedly identified as failing by the state and one that had recently experienced a cheating scandal with its Regents exams. Welcome to Phee Simpson's world.

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Poughkeepsie City School District superintendent Nicole Williams and Poughkeepsie high school principal Phee Simpson can chuckle about the scenario now. “At the time, Mrs. Simpson was very happy to be the principal at the middle school and not as excited to take my offer of going to the high school as a principal,” Williams mused. “She made me promise that she could go back to Poughkeepsie Middle School at the end of the year. I said I thought we would be having a very different conversation at the end of the year.”

Williams was right.

The superintendent saw Simpson’s potential to capitalize on leadership skills to make profound, positive changes for students and staff at Poughkeepsie High School.

Simpson delivered...and continues to lead as a relentless visionary.

MEETING THE CHALLENGES HEAD-ON

The positive changes likely seemed a long way off when Simpson – a Poughkeepsie alumna – first assumed the helm at the high school nearly four years ago, though.

“Mrs. Simpson took over a very difficult assignment. The 2012-2013 data showed that the high school was failing for the previous eight years; that’s how it became a receivership school,” Williams explained.

The school – and the district as a whole – was characterized by challenging demographics, including a poverty rate above eighty-six percent and a minority student population nearing ninety percent (the highest ratio in Dutchess County).

Two months after taking a deep breath and starting her new journey, Simpson read an article about a literacy initiative led by Sue Szachowicz at Brockton High School in Massachusetts that helped dramatically improve student performance on all fronts.

“Brockton’s demographics were similar to ours, only Brockton had three times as many students as the almost 1,200 at Poughkeepsie High School,” Simpson recalled. “I was excited about the possibility of using Sue’s work; we knew that Common Core was coming, which would require reading across all content

areas. I felt this was something we could use and something that would be sustainable because we were running out of SIG [School Improvement Grant] money.”

OH PLEASE, NOT ANOTHER INITIATIVE ...

The literacy initiative required teachers in all academic areas to incorporate active reading strategies – even in such classes as math, music, and physical education classes. In Poughkeepsie, the initiative is called Mission Literacy and implementation was non-negotiable, just as it was in Brockton. (Note: see the fall 2016 *Vanguard* article, “From ‘Cesspool’ to Model School: Brockton’s Fight for Student Success,” for details on Szachowicz’s efforts in the Bay State.)

“I’ll be honest: there was push-back,” said Nancy Dingee, a special education and math teacher at Poughkeepsie High School. “This was just another initiative coming down the pike for us to try. As teachers, we were saying, ‘We’ve done this, we’ve tried this already.’”

Simpson was ready for the resistance. “Failing schools are often trying a lot of different things; they’re looking for a panacea to be a quick fix,” she said.

Mission Literacy was not going to be a quick fix; it was going to take a lot of focused effort. “I promised the teachers that I would not add another initiative after this literacy initiative,” Simpson said. “We’re only going to get better around this practice; we were not going to add in something else new. This is *it*.”

Simpson started just as Szachowicz did – using a PowerPoint presentation to highlight student achievement levels. “I showed them who we were and what we needed to achieve because we had set some goals for ourselves as a district. I wanted to be sure that we were going to increase our graduation rates, increase our attendance rates, and decrease our student suspensions,” Simpson said.

She asked English teachers for assistance in showing faculty in other academic areas how to teach active reading strategies to



students. Simpson then partnered with Szachowicz (who had retired from Brockton by that time) and current Brockton educators to refine the initiative and develop an implementation timeline. There were two literacy “rollouts” during Poughkeepsie’s inaugural year, beginning in January.

Dingee described those first few rollouts as “bumpy,” as would be expected with a new instructional approach. However, the new approach was easy to grasp. “Every step was broken down very well in the PowerPoint presentations – what annotating looks like, how to look for context clues. We do that as teachers across the board, so there wasn’t much difficulty for teachers,” Dingee said. “It did take a little time to get buy in from everyone. And for the students to buy-in, we really had to believe in the initiative as teachers.”

That didn’t take long to happen, as there were some impressive results within just six months.

“When we got the Regents scores, I began to win over a majority of the staff. Our English and science Regents scores went up double-digits and math scores went up five percentage points,” Simpson said. “And we had a five percent increase in our graduation rate.”

The transformation had begun... and teachers like Dingee became champions for the cause. She proudly joins Poughkeepsie administrators in presentations locally and nationally to discuss the positive changes that have taken place in the district. “I am one of seven children who graduated from Poughkeepsie City School District. That’s one of the reasons I’m so invested in the district,” Dingee commented.

LITERACY AS A FOUNDATION

The recurring literacy work formed the foundation for Poughkeepsie's success and paved the way for Simpson to introduce and carry out other impactful activities, some of which were directly tied in with Mission Literacy and some that were more broad-based.

As was the case with Brockport High School, every Poughkeepsie classroom and instructional area (even the gymnasium) had to display the Mission Literacy chart, which details the knowledge and skills required of students in the areas of reading, writing, speaking, listening and reasoning. Simpson added a requirement for educators to also display SMART charts and data walls, further reinforcing a focus on shared ideals for educational excellence.

The acronym in SMART charts stands for specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time-bound; it's another strategy Simpson advanced to help engage students and improve the instructional process.

"In Poughkeepsie, teachers have these charts up in the classroom to outline what students are learning for the day," Simpson explained. "So, you would see the learning objective, the overarching question for the academic unit that is being covered, and a breakdown of how the daily lesson will be taught. With this, students know what to expect every period throughout the school day."

Use of the charts has migrated to all of the schools in the district. "Mrs. Simpson was the key factor in spearheading this for the district," Williams said. "We struggled with having high-quality lesson plans, but now we have a tool that's easy to use in every classroom, whether you're a pre-K teacher or a teacher in an advanced placement class."

School leaders also smartened up, so to speak. "We all have thirty-, sixty- and ninety-day SMART goals and we check to make sure we're hitting those goals. And if not, we look at what the impediments were and how we can incorporate the goals into our next sixty-day cycle," Simpson said.

The required data walls are unique to each teacher's needs and

can relate to any type of expectations or other goals to be achieved. "They can be whatever the teacher wants to measure and report — attendance, grades, classroom behavior, etc.," Simpson explained. The commonality comes from the fact that the data walls are, again, displayed in every classroom and are non-negotiable.

INSPECT WHAT YOU EXPECT

Simpson found it helpful also to take Szachowicz's advice on continually monitoring instruction and compliance. "Sue emphasized inspecting what you're expecting," Simpson said.

This took a few different forms in Poughkeepsie. When Mission Literacy was beginning, Simpson asked every teacher to turn in student work for review — work that exemplified high, medium and low literacy achievement levels. "That was something like fifteen pieces of work from each of the ninety teachers in the building," Simpson said. "It was my job to look at it and let the teachers know if they were giving good feedback so the students could then make corrections to their work and improve it."

The inspection activity helped educators grow and improve, while also signaling an even stronger emphasis on instructional leadership (versus operational leadership — i.e., simply putting out fires and maintaining a learning environment).

"All of these activities happened in a progression at Poughkeepsie High School," Simpson said, adding that they built on each other and became the new normal.

With encouragement and support from Williams, Simpson also introduced "Focused Instructional Learning Walks." During these walks — which now occur district-wide — administrators visit and observe a minimum of three classrooms per day and use a detailed rubric (titled "noticings and wonderings") to describe the rigor and relevance of the instruction occurring in the class, whether students were being asked to use literacy strategies and higher-order thinking skills and the level of pupil engagement. The rubrics allow teachers to receive feedback quickly and to

feel supported and empowered by instructional leaders to improve their practice.

A GREAT CULTURE SHIFT

As Poughkeepsie's educators felt more comfortable with Mission Literacy and the ever-expanding focus on cohesive instructional strategies, there were huge shifts in the educational environment.

"There has been a tremendous change in the culture," Dinee commented. "Before, people did their own thing and there was no consistency. Now we're one cohesive group. Mrs. Simpson really stresses that: we're in this together, we're going to accomplish this together so our scores are her scores and vice versa."

Williams concurred, "When we talk about that culture shift, one of the first things we had to do was break down the barriers, the silos, so we would all understand what good instruction looks like," she said. "We now have a high school where classical music is playing as scholars — we call our students 'scholars' — are walking from class to class. That's 1,200 scholars going about their business in a very intentional way. It's amazing the cultural shift that I've seen at the high school and it's spreading across the district."

Students have noticed the shift, as well. In fact, a senior who is the student liaison to Poughkeepsie's board of education made note of this at a recent board meeting. "He said when he was a freshman, the school was more about trying to keep the building under control and trying to get the kids to class and now it's more of college-going culture," Simpson recalled. "I was so happy to hear that children are starting to see Poughkeepsie High School as an institution of learning and that we're trying to prepare them for the 21st century."

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The shift continued as Williams and Simpson collaborated with district and school staff members to raise expectations for students. The efforts were accompanied by several new staff "nonnegotiables" and additional

pupil supports – all of which helped move students from wondering if they had any postsecondary options to pondering which of their postsecondary options to choose.

“We know that we’re at eighty-six percent poverty, but that should not define our trajectory. We’re debunking the myths that children in poverty cannot be successful,” Williams said. “It’s important to expose our young people to college on a regular basis and we have to start with pre-K. So, if you go into any classroom in the district, you’ll see more ‘nonnegotiables.’ You’ll see college pennants showing where the teacher went to college and you’ll see bios of every teacher. It’s a culture of high expectations.”

THE PAST IS HISTORY

Poughkeepsie’s past – when failure was acceptable – is over. Simpson has used her leadership skills to create a school where students are expected to strive for the advanced Regents diploma, which requires passing more courses than what is mandated for earning a regular Regents diploma. The Regents diploma is now considered the “default” diploma.

To help ensure that students find success in this new culture of high expectations, Simpson engaged with staff to create a continuum of schoolwide supports for students. Called “Operation Graduation,” the continuum places pupils in one of three tiers: tier 1 (color-coded green) if they’re doing well and are on target to graduate; tier 2 (color-coded yellow)

if they have enough credits, but need to improve performance on Regents exams and tier 3 (red) if they’re deficient in credits and Regents exams. The intensity of support increases at each level. For example, level 1 students have quarterly monitoring of their grades.

Pupils in tier 2 are part of the school’s adopt-a-scholar program. “Teachers act as mentors to students in the yellow category. They check in regularly with the scholars, advocate for them and help them study for Regents exams,” Simpson explained. These students also take advantage of peer tutoring and Regents review classes.

The individual connections have helped keep Poughkeepsie pupils on track to graduate, along with the more intensive supports at the red level, which include weekly meetings with guidance counselors, credit recovery classes and extra tutoring.

To help students further envision their futures, Poughkeepsie High School has opened its doors to the Dutchess County Regional Chamber of Commerce. The chamber maintains a career action center in the school building. “Chamber staff work directly with our students to help them get internships, do job shadowing, fill out employment applications, write resumes and explore careers,” Simpson said. “They also bring in speakers for career fairs. We have all that happening right in our building.”

TODAY’S SCENARIO

The scenario has certainly changed in Poughkeepsie. The high school is no longer in receivership and student achievement continues to improve. Simpson has set a seventy-five percent graduation rate as the goal for the class of 2017. The district goal is to be in the top ten percent of all districts in the state by the year 2020. With leaders like Simpson – who relentlessly carry out a mission of empowering staff and supporting cohesive, high-quality instruction – there’s no doubt that Poughkeepsie City School District will reach those goals...and then begin setting new ones.

KIM M. SMITHGALL is an award-winning communications specialist and freelance writer, designer, and photographer.

LEADERSHIP RESOURCES

In addition to Sue Szachowicz’s literacy initiative, Poughkeepsie City School District educators have relied on two books by Paul Bambrick-Santoyo to guide continued efforts to transform the district:

- *Leverage Leadership: A Practical Guide to Building Exceptional Schools*
- *Driven by Data: A Practical Guide to Improve Instruction.*

MISSION LITERACY...The Scholars' Perspectives

When Phee Simpson first introduced Mission Literacy at Poughkeepsie High School, the teachers weren’t the only ones who resisted. Students were right there with ‘em.

“Oh, the students hated it at first,” mused Nancy Dingee, a math and special education teacher. “They hated it because it was mandated across the board. They said, ‘This has nothing to do with math; this has nothing to do with physical education.’ But now, it’s routine; it’s a natural progression in the school year. As teachers, we say we’re going to do our literacy initiative and students

respond with, ‘Okay, give us the charts and articles...We’ve got this.’”

Poughkeepsie High School senior Dorothy Belton agreed. “When Mission Literacy was first introduced, it was a long process because teachers had to go into great detail on how to construct a perfect essay,” she said.

Later, Belton came to understand the advantages. “With the literacy rollout, all of the teachers are expecting the same things for essays. Before, you might write a mediocre essay in science and then a brilliant essay in English. The literacy initiative means we know what to expect in every class, whether it’s physics, music, or math.”