



CASE STUDY

Focus and Persistence Change the Course: Turnaround at New Bedford Public Schools (MA)

by Diane Ullman and Sam Ribnick

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Once known as “The City That Lit the World,” New Bedford, Massachusetts, was the epicenter of the U.S. whaling industry in the mid-1800s, providing the whale oil that was the prime energy source for oil lanterns. At that time, New Bedford was one of the wealthiest cities in the world, an era captured by Herman Melville’s famous novel *Moby Dick*, in which Captain Ahab launches his journey from the port of New Bedford.

In recent times, New Bedford has lost much of its former glory. It is now one of the poorest cities in Massachusetts, as many of its industries have declined or moved away. The 2008 recession hit New Bedford particularly hard, and its unemployment rate continues to be twice the statewide average, with nearly one in three residents living in poverty. While New Bedford has long been a welcoming port for immigrants, with nearly half of its residents tracing their origins to Portugal or to Portuguese territories due to a large wave of immigration in the late 1800s, more recent immigration from Puerto Rico and Cape Verde has left New Bedford grappling with challenges many cities face with increasing diversity and a disadvantaged economy.

The city’s challenges are reflected in New Bedford’s public school system. New Bedford Public Schools (NBPS) has been a struggling district for more than a decade, and poverty and shifting demographics have created mounting challenges for the school system. Many of the district’s schools have been ranked in the lowest tiers of the state’s accountability system, and have been through turnaround processes for several years. Despite a massive influx of resources from the state, there had been little progress to show. Waves of leaders, both internal and external, tried to reinvent the school system and failed; four superintendents had come and gone in six years. In May 2011, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), stating that the schools “struggle with student attendance, discipline, graduation, and retention,” made the decision to designate the district as Level 4, “underperforming.” DESE nearly decided to designate one of the elementary schools as Level 5, “chronically underperforming”; had this occurred, the entire district would have been subject to state takeover.



NEW BEDFORD, MASSACHUSETTS FAST FACTS

Incorporated:
1787

Population:
95,078
Down from **121,000**
at peak in **1920**

Median household income:
\$33,098
compared to **\$66,768**
for MA[^]

29.2%
Below
poverty line

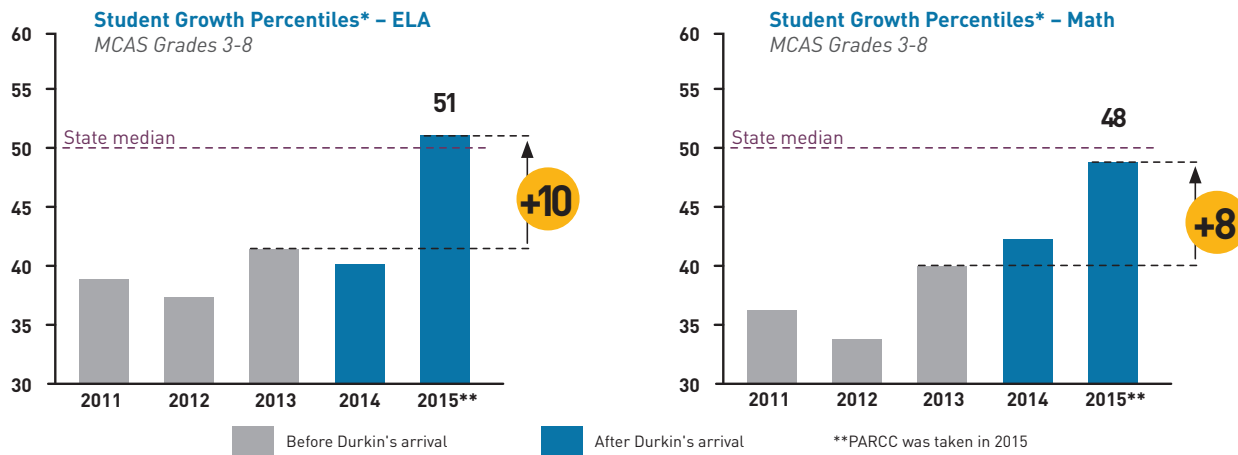
Unemployment rate
10%
compared to
5.6% for MA^{^^}

Key industries:
**Healthcare
Construction
Education
Manufacturing**

[^]As of 2013

^{^^}As of 2014

Exhibit 1 DRAMATIC IMPROVEMENT AT NEW BEDFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS (MA)



*Student Growth Percentile is a percentile ranking of student growth relative to peers starting at the same point. Median for the state is 50.

**Note: The state used statistical methods to calibrate PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) scores to MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) scores, since only half of the state transitioned to PARCC in 2015.

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

It was in this context that Dr. Pia Durkin became the superintendent of NBPS in summer 2013 to lead a turnaround. Over the past two and a half years, much bold work has been done. Clear focus, strong leadership, and a relentless commitment to building team capacity and focusing on high-quality instruction are changing the course. In spring 2015, New Bedford's students demonstrated a dramatic improvement in achievement. Even with the new, more rigorous Common Core-aligned PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) test, student growth scores jumped by 10 points or more in many grades, exceeding the majority of urban districts and reaching the state average for growth (Exhibit 1). Proficiency levels climbed to their highest point in years.

While a great deal of work remains, the dramatic improvement in student results is a tangible sign that this turnaround is different. Teachers, principals, and families are now cautiously optimistic that the New Bedford Public Schools is headed in the right direction. Rather than

taking a "silver bullet" approach, Durkin tackled issues pertaining to people resources, culture, structure, systems, and alignment of the district's efforts. Focus and persistent effort are changing the course for the district, and there is now a renewed sense of hope for the schools of New Bedford.

Challenges on Multiple Fronts

When the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) made the decision in May 2011 to designate New Bedford Public Schools a Level 4 district, the decision reflected student performance and high school graduation rates in the bottom 4% of the state. Fewer than half of the students in the district were scoring proficient on Massachusetts's state test, the MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System). The high school of 2,700 students had a graduation rate of just 53.5%, with an incoming freshman class of 800 students that dwindled to just 500 by the end of 10th grade. Furthermore, the state found that "[graduation] rates are worsening and there is little evidence that the district is addressing them effectively."



**NEW
BEDFORD
PUBLIC
SCHOOLS
FAST FACTS**

12,681 students:

- 0.5% Native American
- 44.8% White
- 11.3% African American
- 0.2% Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander
- 0.9% Asian
- 0.5% Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic
- 36.5% Hispanic

Graduation rate:
60.4%†

Per student spending:
\$12,792††

Schools:
25†††

†Four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate

††2014

†††26 until 2015-16, when two schools were combined

Durkin recalls being asked by multiple people, “Do you really think New Bedford can get better?”

DESE was particularly focused on John A. Parker Elementary, not only because of the school’s low academic results, but also because of the district’s seeming inability to improve the school. DESE nearly decided to designate Parker Elementary School as Level 5.

When Pia Durkin assumed the superintendency of NBPS in summer 2013, she knew the stakes were high. During her first few weeks, Durkin recalls being asked by multiple people, “Do you really think New Bedford can get better?” It was clear to her that staff, parents, and the community were demoralized, and that they were expecting yet another failed turnaround effort.

To Durkin, the need for change was apparent everywhere she looked; she recalls that she “continued to uncover issues and problems that had been in existence for years.” Financial resources were scarce: the district’s budget had been at the minimum spending level allowed by state law year after year, and just before her arrival, a budget deficit of \$3 million was revealed, leading to layoffs and questions about solvency. The state’s report had indicated that “the processes of curriculum development and revision are not being well managed.”

Indeed, Durkin noted, “Central administration had largely disconnected itself from the work in the schools. Principals fended for themselves, operating as separate entities except where personal relationships thrived, allowing for random support largely focused on operational concerns, rather than instructional challenges.” Durkin learned that the reading program had not been updated for 11 years and mathematics textbooks were equally outdated. The district identified only 300 students as English Language Learners (ELL) despite more than 3,000 Hispanic students and a large immigrant population. Staffing issues abounded: the office of personnel was being managed by a head clerk reliant on yellow cards that served as employee records; the business manager had resigned, and two experienced retirees were working in an interim capacity to manage the district’s finances; and a new facilities manager had just been hired into a position that had been left vacant for several years in a district with many buildings over 90 years old. Perhaps most disturbing to Durkin was the realization that despite the poor academic performance, the district’s elementary schools released students early every Friday due to a 1975 agreement with the union to allow teachers to have contractual planning time.

Developing a Comprehensive and Coherent Approach

Durkin immediately began work on creating an Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) in conjunction with the District Management Council (DMC), the plan manager brought in by DESE. A plan manager is provided by DESE to any district named Level 4 on the theory that chronically low-performing districts need an initial boost of external support to effectively plan and execute a turnaround. DMC had in fact worked as plan manager since NBPS was first designated Level 4; while a strong plan had been developed at that time, little follow-through had occurred. Durkin and DMC immediately set about codifying the district’s theory of action and strategy,



Turnaround at New Bedford Public Schools

2011

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

2011

NBPS district designated Level 4

2013 July

Dr. Pia Durkin starts as superintendent

2013 December

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

2014 January

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

shaped by Durkin's intense focus on instruction (Exhibit 2). DMC then helped Durkin translate that strategy into an AIP by delineating the steps for turnaround and establishing clear, ambitious goals for all staff. Though many components of the plan had not changed from the district's previous AIPs, Durkin's theory of action brought the steps into coherence around a singular focus on instruction. One month into her new role as superintendent, Durkin shared the Accelerated Improvement Plan and the theory of action at a convocation event. She introduced an ambitious quantifiable goal for the district: to reduce the number of students not proficient by 40% or more, in every grade at every school. This goal made it clear to all staff that high expectations must apply to every single student, and that expectations for staff would be high as well. This unambiguous, measurable goal represented a major culture shock.

Effective Strategy Requires Effective Leaders

Durkin realized that the implementation of this comprehensive plan would be dependent on the effectiveness of her leadership team in the central office and her leadership in each of the buildings. However, she was not sure her central office had the capability or the willingness to make the tough calls and do the intense work needed for a turnaround. When Durkin brought together the central office leadership team to distribute responsibilities for implementing the AIP, long-tenured district leaders nodded in agreement; yet, Durkin soon saw important initiatives fall behind as district leaders failed to take action. For example, the district's plan specifically called for introducing common formative assessments, but the leader assigned to



The Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 implemented curriculum standards, mandated high school exit exams, and established a state standardized teacher certification exam and process. The legislation also significantly redefined the role of the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), facilitating a move from ensuring local compliance to supporting accountability, equity, and leadership.

In January 2010, the state legislature further expanded the role of DESE with the passage of An Act Relative to the Achievement Gap, which gave the state considerably more power to intervene in low-performing districts and schools. Specifically, this act gave the Commissioner the capacity to conduct reviews and designate schools within a district as "underperforming" (Level 4) and "chronically underperforming" (Level 5). Based on student performance data and improvements in student academic performance over time, up to 4% of the total number of Massachusetts public schools could be designated as Level 4 or 5. Moreover, the act obligated the district superintendents with schools designated as Level 4 or 5 to work with the Commissioner to develop and enact an appropriate turnaround plan for these schools.

The act also defined criteria for designating an entire school district as "chronically underperforming" and made it possible for the state to intervene at a district level. To be designated as Level 5 or "chronically underperforming," a district must be among the state's 20 lowest-performing school districts as determined by MCAS measurements over a four-year period and a district review conducted by the Center for School and District Accountability. If a district is designated Level 5, the Commissioner and the board have the unprecedented authority to appoint either a receiver or a nonprofit organization to take over the responsibilities of the Level 5 district's superintendent and elected school committee.

2014 May

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

2014 June

School committee approves expanded budget with updated reading program

2014 July

Jason DeFalco brought in as chief academic officer

2015 March

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

2015 November

State releases NBPS results on 2015 PARCC showing higher achievement and large Growth Score gains

Durkin introduced an ambitious quantifiable goal for the district: to reduce the number of students not proficient by 40% or more, in every grade at every school.

that initiative continuously prioritized other so-called urgent tasks above the development of the assessments, and so the district was unable to measure student growth for the first quarter of the year. Another central office leader who was trusted with the principal hiring process used it as an opportunity to push forward candidates with personal ties above higher-quality candidates, an affront to Durkin's attempt to redefine how the district selected talent.

By early 2014, Durkin had removed a handful of central office leaders from their positions and had begun to set clear

expectations for the performance of those who remained. She put the two assistant superintendents on notice, helped the curriculum director find a job in another district, and removed the data and assessment manager. As changes in central office leadership were underway, Durkin also turned her attention to school leadership.

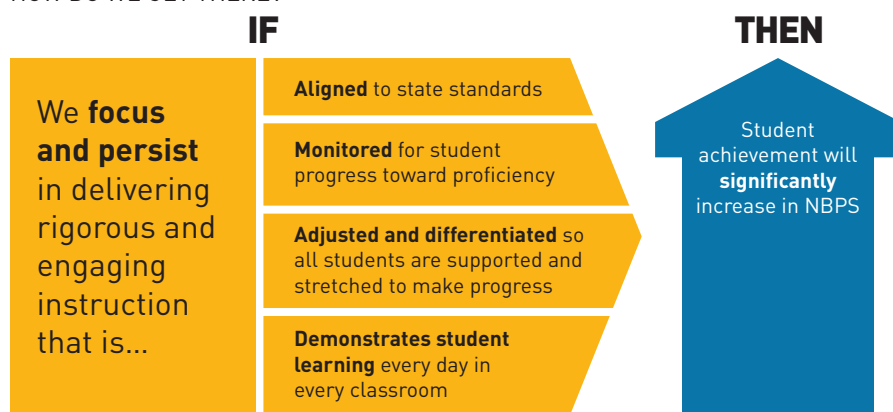
Durkin's approach included a heavy presence in the schools. Being in schools on a daily basis, observing teaching, and discussing teacher and student performance with principals gave her first-hand knowledge of each principal's capabilities. "School leaders were unaware of the serious lack of achievement in their schools," Durkin found on arrival. "Though data was shared, the central administration had limited the accessibility and use of data to the point where individual schools did not know how they fared or how they compared to each other, to the district as a whole, or to the state average. There was a sense that the district administration did not want schools 'to feel bad' by seeing how they compared to each other."

As the 2013-14 school year progressed, it became apparent that the need for capacity building would be far greater than Durkin had realized. She and DMC arrived at a two-pronged approach: (1) to keep the improvement plan on track in the near-term, DMC agreed to provide the needed capacity, taking on tasks and assignments that should be handled by

district staff; (2) simultaneously, DMC would work with the district to build capacity for the long term. Durkin and DMC began conducting a thorough skill and will assessment of all central office leaders and principals in the district. Those who had both skill and will were encouraged to become part of the district's emerging and informal leadership coalition; those who lacked skill but had potential were put on improvement plans; those who lacked both skill and will left the district either as an outcome of the evaluation process or through resignation. By the end of Durkin's first year, nearly half of the 26 schools had leadership changes underway.

Exhibit 2 THEORY OF ACTION: NEW BEDFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

HOW DO WE GET THERE?



Source: New Bedford Public Schools

To meet the leadership need, the district stepped up its efforts to find additional leaders, looking both internally and externally for those who had not only the skill set, but also the appetite for turnaround work. Durkin took heat at times for selecting candidates from outside the district, and was often under political pressure to select an internal candidate, but armed with what she had seen in the schools, she did not waver from selecting the candidates she knew would be the best fit for this challenging work.

Changing the Culture

Years of leadership turnover and chronic underperformance had left NBPS with a deeply ingrained culture that prioritized adult needs over those of students and communities. Durkin realized that deep culture change was going to take more than turning over a few leaders and principals; it would take a systemic review and change of incentives, systems, and structures to change not only observable behavior but also beliefs and mindset. “Leadership capacity had to be assessed at the district level and in the schools, and difficult conversations had to take place,” Durkin said.

To drive culture change, Durkin worked with DMC to introduce tools and systems to focus leaders and teachers on the ambitious goal of reducing the number of students deemed not proficient by 40%. The tools and systems were put in place to provide supports as well as to promote accountability. Data tools were developed to show teachers the depth of student need, to show principals the gaps in instruction, and to show the central office how much more they could be doing to support schools. DMC also helped the district create a “rigor rubric,” an easy-to-use tool that helped schools focus on three crucial elements of rigorous instruction: using content at grade level, student engagement, and teachers promoting persistence. The rigor rubric, together with examples for each content area and grade level, helped raise and align staff expectations for what students should be able to do. For the first time, teachers and principals had common expectations for instruction, which created a foundation for feedback, coaching, and professional development.

To encourage principals to spend their time on instructional responsibilities, DMC helped the district set weekly goals for number of observations, time spent in data meetings, and coaching conversations. DMC created a tool to enable

There was a sense that the district administration did not want schools ‘to feel bad’ by seeing how they compared to each other.

detailed principal monitoring and evaluation processes. Durkin modeled the change, and spent as much time as she could visiting schools and observing instruction, making it to all 26 schools at least once before Thanksgiving, and to some schools many more times than that. For the principals or central office leaders who were slow to make the change and spend more time in classrooms, Durkin presented the data collected through DMC’s monitoring system and explicitly let them know by December that their jobs were at risk if they did not make the shift to focusing on instruction.

Durkin made clear that improving the quality of instruction was the top priority for all staff. For teachers, the district introduced data teams and a process for looking at data on student outcomes and growth. This process was implemented despite initial pushback from central office leaders and principals that it would make staff “feel bad” to compare data across schools and among teachers within a school. Some teachers protested being held accountable for their students’ learning data, implying that it was not fair or right to hold all students to high standards. Durkin held firm on the 40% goal.

Durkin simultaneously deepened her efforts to rebuild the central office with a school-centered approach. When it came time to build the budget, she found a process in shambles; simply submitting a budget on time had been a challenge in years past. Working with the business manager, Durkin and central office leaders created a budget that reflected the district strategy for improvement. Durkin also brought in a new ELL director to build a functional system for identifying and registering ELL students for the first time. The existing

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systems had been so ineffective that only a fraction of ELL students in the district had been properly identified, and many had incorrectly been given an IEP for nonexistent disabilities. After a tremendous effort, the district initiated a thorough screening process, resulting in nearly 2,200 students now identified for ELL services, compared to 300 before.

Armed with a survey of district-wide staff showing that the majority reported poor customer service and support from the central office, Durkin let it be known that district leaders must reinvent themselves. One gesture that sent a particularly strong message was Durkin's overhaul of parking assignments at the central office: she did away with nearly all assigned spots. Durkin also took on the staff's pervasive practice of arriving late and leaving early and eliminated a number of special arrangements that permitted some staff to work a shortened week or alternative daily schedule. The clear message was, "We are here to serve our schools and our families."

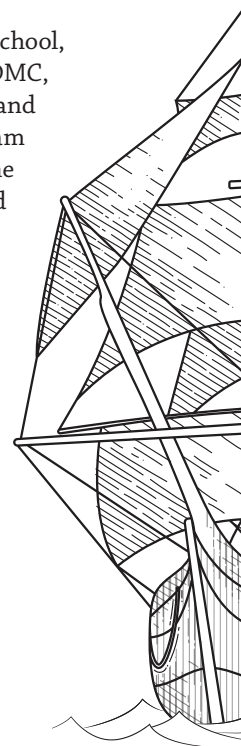
Through the challenging first year, Durkin learned that while district culture needed to change and could change, achieving change would require more than a written plan and symbolic speeches. Developing a comprehensive set of systems that changed the way the district measured performance, keeping the focus on what was important, and reinforcing a culture of shared accountability led to the beginnings of true culture change.

Winning Support from the Community in the Face of "No Confidence"

Durkin had been superintendent for less than six months and was just beginning to put her comprehensive turnaround plan into action when DESE announced the decision to move Parker Elementary from Level 4 status to Level 5 and to move New Bedford High School from Level 3 status to Level 4. Rather than using Level 5 status to take control away from the district, as had been typical with other Level 5 schools, the state commissioner took the unprecedented step of naming Durkin the receiver for Parker Elementary School's Level 5 turnaround. While this was a show of confidence in Durkin's vision and leadership, it also further increased the pressure on Durkin, as well as her visibility. Public scrutiny, already intense for the new superintendent, suddenly skyrocketed. In the case of the high school, the turnaround plan required the district to redesign the school and replace at least 50% of the staff. The impact on the community was felt broadly: parents were concerned about high school graduation; students were unsure about how they would be affected; and staff were worried about losing their jobs, resulting in many growing angry, disengaged, and distracted from teaching.

For both Parker Elementary and the high school, Durkin, with facilitation and support from DMC, convened a local stakeholder group of parents and community members and a School Redesign Team made of teachers and administrators from the schools. While some staff feared the changes and the increased expectations that the turnaround would bring, those on the Redesign Team embraced the chance to reinvent the schools. Durkin used the state-mandated turnaround process as an opportunity to build bridges with the community and win support at a time when fear and uncertainty were running high.

Resistance to the turnaround work surfaced quickly. In January 2014, the New Bedford Educators Association gathered its entire membership for a vote of "no confidence" in Durkin. Though the vote fell short of declaring



no confidence, the teachers were still divided, and the public had taken notice. By May 2014, with Durkin in her position for less than a year, the union successfully passed a no confidence resolution and called for her resignation. Durkin responded by saying that she “absolutely” would not resign, and her resolve was buoyed by the support of key local leaders. The city’s mayor and the Massachusetts commissioner of education both publicly supported her, and she received full support from the school committee. In fact, even a long-standing critic on the school committee spoke up to defend her, and went further by publicly calling out the union president for his role in the district’s struggles.

Though under fire, Durkin was committed to staying in the district and leading the turnaround. Rather than leaving the community and stakeholders divided, Durkin set about winning over and uniting the factions. With budget season upon her, Durkin had little time to pause, and immediately launched a campaign among local leaders and the community to pass an increased budget that would allow for needed improvements: funding for a new reading program, support for the redesign plan at the high school, funding for new ELL teachers, and a redesign of special education. Durkin took the time to hold one-on-one conversations with school committee members and sit-downs with local business CEOs and dozens of community leaders in order to build a coalition of support. When the budget was passed by the school committee but faced opposition from the city council, Durkin spent a marathon session arguing her case in front of the city council. She was grilled with questions about the effectiveness of her proposed plans, but ultimately won the day for the students of New Bedford. As one city council member said, “You’re a tough woman, Dr. Durkin, and I like that. You’re going to get your budget.”

Durkin hired a community relations manager, a young reporter from the local paper to help her further engage the community. Working with the new community relations manager, Durkin established many new communications channels for families to learn about the changes



Superintendent Pia Durkin (center), Massachusetts Commissioner of Education Mitchell Chester, and Principal Lynn Dessert at John Avery Parker School

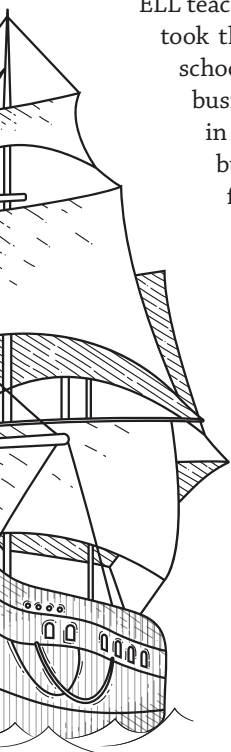
happening at schools. They held “community conversations” at local community institutions, meeting parents where they already were. They began sending regular press releases celebrating achievements and successes, and as a result of all these efforts, the conversations gradually began to change for the better.

Continued outreach and collaboration with the union paid off in Durkin’s second year. Durkin and her team brought the union president to the table for a collaborative bargaining process. She told him that this was a chance for him to take part in leading the change rather than seeing it happen to him. After months of negotiations, in March 2015 the two stood side-by-side and announced breakthrough contract negotiations that introduced many important provisions for the district and its teachers.

After a tough first year in the public eye, her efforts to engage a wide range of stakeholders in the turnaround of the New Bedford Public Schools were recognized when, in the fall of 2014, Durkin was given the highly prized honor by the local newspaper of being named “South Coast Woman of the Year.”

Building and Distributing Leadership Capacity

With the foundation for change established by the end of Durkin’s first year, the most crucial step for Year Two was



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the expansion of the district’s leadership team in order to embed and sustain the positive change for the long-term. This process involved identifying, cultivating, and supporting leaders in the central office as well as in the schools.

In the central office, the district created a position for a Chief Academic Officer (CAO) and hired Jason DeFalco, an experienced Massachusetts urban principal, for the job. Beyond that, new directors of literacy, human capital, special education, and English Language Learners were hired.

The expanded capacity for district leadership was apparent in the annual process for building the new AIP. Whereas the first year’s AIP had been an effort largely between Durkin and the DMC team, the new AIP was written collaboratively by Durkin, the CAO, and a team of academic directors and high-capacity principals, with DMC playing an advisory and facilitative role. After Durkin and DeFalco defined the end-of-year goals, the work was grouped into initiatives, with each initiative assigned a leader and a team. DMC worked intensively with each leader to draft specific plans to achieve the end-of-year goals and to monitor progress throughout the year. These teams met regularly throughout the year to monitor progress and to hold each other accountable; at quarterly meetings, they looked at student data to assess progress and impact.

Other changes and new leadership structures served to further broaden the district’s leadership capacity. Durkin and

DeFalco created a team specifically charged with overseeing and guiding the change efforts and ensuring that changes were reaching the classroom. They also brought together top teachers from all levels to form the Teacher Advisory Group; knowing that teacher leadership was essential to the success of turnaround, Durkin and DeFalco had this group meet regularly during the year to provide feedback on what was working and what was not. Principal meetings, previously used for administrative business, were transformed into collaborative professional learning time, delivered either by the strengthened curriculum team or by principals teaching one another. For the first time, principals were collaborating, openly discussing challenges they faced and strategies that had worked. As capacity was built among teachers and school and district leaders, Durkin was able to move from a purely directive role to a collaborative approach.

As is typical during a turnaround, the district saw substantial turnover among principals. In some cases, Durkin had encouraged the departures, but in other cases, valued principals chose to leave due to burnout or a desire for a less challenging role in another district. While momentum for change had grown, having so many new principals leading schools was a setback and created a sense of uncertainty among teachers. With so many new leaders in place, Durkin knew that her second year would require starting all over again in building the skill and will for turnaround leadership in the new team.

Today, the district has revamped its principal recruiting and hiring to adapt to the lessons learned from seeing principals hired with high hopes, only to depart a year later. Principal candidates now undergo extensive vetting through a three-part process: (1) a rigorous interview with a panel of central office leaders, school faculty, and parents; (2) a performance task, in which candidates are asked to analyze data, create action plans, and provide feedback on a video of teacher instruction; and (3) a final interview with Durkin, the CAO, and the head of human capital to ascertain fit and commitment. Additionally, the district is partnering with nearby Bridgewater State University to offer a sponsored principal license and degree track for selected staff from NBPS, with the hope that those who take part will sign a letter of commitment to work in NBPS after completing the program.

Deepening the Focus on Instruction

As the 2014-15 school year began and Durkin entered her second year, she and her team redoubled their efforts to ensure that there would be an ever-increasing focus on instruction. Whereas the first year had been marked by “triage” to hold the district together while it underwent leadership changes and school turnarounds, the real work of improving the quality of instruction was now starting in earnest.

Elementary teachers faced their biggest change in working practices in years: the district had purchased and adopted a rigorous, Common Core-aligned reading program and expected all K-5 teachers to use it. The new program shook up teachers’ old habits; those who had taught with the old program for years now had to learn a new program, and more importantly, a new way to teach. The district used all mandatory professional development time (pre-service days and two full in-service days) as opportunities to train teachers on the new material. Teachers impressed district leaders by attending additional voluntary training sessions in large numbers.

District academic staff also deepened and extended the rigor rubric, transforming it into a more comprehensive New Bedford Instructional Framework. The framework, which set common expectations for both teachers and principals, consisted of a set of tools, guides, and exemplars covering planning, instruction, data use, and differentiation. Through weekly video updates, DeFalco emphasized and elaborated on “I Do, We Do, You Do” as the core model for instruction in NBPS. Whereas in the past, grievances had been the standard response to any attempt by a principal to talk to teachers about lesson planning, the New Bedford Instructional Framework gave principals and teachers a new way to talk about quality lessons; the submission of lesson plans was no longer a bureaucratic exercise. Teachers heard a uniform message that good instruction means giving students time to practice and struggle. Principals provided model lessons and gave feedback, encouraged teachers to deliver shorter mini-lessons, monitor student practice, and engage students to talk to one another. The practices that are recognized as core to excellent teaching began to take hold in New Bedford classrooms.

Even as district leaders saw progress in the quality of instruction in the fall of 2015, they knew that there were still bottlenecks to improvement: there was limited professional learning time for teachers, and union bumping rules prevented principals from filling positions until the summer. Durkin, DeFalco, and a new director of Human Capital Services began to engage union leadership to find common ground and used a facilitated process called interest-based bargaining. They recognized the importance of making major changes to the teacher contract, given the state’s findings that it “hinders the efforts of principals to improve the quality of teachers’ instruction.” Ultimately, they arrived at a teacher contract that would add 20 hours of professional development time throughout the year that was to be led by principals, other administrators, or talented teachers. On top of that, the union and district agreed to new timelines for announcing vacancies and hiring teachers that put New Bedford on an earlier timeline than surrounding districts, making it easier for principals to hire talented teachers. The district continued its aggressive recruiting strategy and increased the number and quality of events to attract high-quality teachers and leaders to the district; the district even established its own local career fair with a booth for each school staffed by teachers to help recruit. The message this time to the community was not only clear, but also new: quality teaching matters, and the union and the administration were working together to ensure quality teaching in every classroom. Now, teachers and the teachers’ union were ready to support the New Bedford Public Schools’ turnaround.

Signs of Success

During the 2014-15 school year, district leaders, principals, and teachers saw many reasons to be optimistic that their efforts were paying off. The district’s internal assessments looked positive by the end of the school year, but the district had been disappointed in the past when strong internal results had not translated to state test scores. There was reason to be especially wary this year, when students would take the Common Core-aligned PARCC test for the first time. Principals reported that they were seeing more rigorous instruction, but district leaders knew that there were still many classrooms where students were receiving poor instruction. The district had more promising feedback from parents and community members, with 60% agreeing that

For the first time, teachers and principals had common expectations for instruction, which created a foundation for feedback, coaching, and professional development.

NBPS was improving, compared to 30% the previous year; however, without tangible student results in hand, it was hard to know if the progress was real.

Solid confirmation arrived with the 2015 PARCC test results. Delivery of the results had been delayed while the state worked to calibrate the new test with the old, and the results finally arrived in November 2015, nearly six months after students had taken the test. The results were phenomenal (Exhibit 3). In nearly every grade for both reading and math, student achievement levels had trended upward, even with the more rigorous test. More encouraging still, the student growth scores had improved by 5 to 10 points in most grade levels. While the high school results were not as positive, the broad improvements in grades K-8 were a solid sign of success. More good news followed when the district learned that a number of their schools had moved up one level in the Massachusetts school rating system, including two schools that moved from Level 2 to Level 1, the highest level. The results affirmed what many had hoped, but had been afraid to believe: the turnaround effort, with all its bumps and setbacks, was building a better district for students.

Moving Forward

Durkin and others in the district know that the turnaround is far from accomplished, and that many challenges still lie ahead. The district still has early release for elementary students on Fridays, depriving students of equal learning time compared to students in the rest of the state. Many teachers

Exhibit 3 WIDESPREAD GAINS ACROSS GRADE LEVELS AND SUBJECT AREAS

Composite performance index, * gain in SY 2014-15 compared to SY 2013-14

Grade	SY 2014-15 ELA CPI	ELA Improvement	SY 2014-15 Math CPI	Math Improvement
3	78.5	+3.2	78.6	-0.4
4	71.0	+5.9	71.1	+2.6
5	79.2	+3.5	72.0	+1.8
6	79.8	+3.5	73.0	+2.8
7	77.6	+2.3	56.6	+2.2
8	79.9	+1.1	62.9	+7.0
DISTRICT	77.7	+2.6	69.5	+2.3

* Composite Performance Index is a number that can range from 0 to 100 and represents the achievement level of the average student in a district. For example, in 2015, district CPI scores ranged from 60 to 100, with only a handful of districts below 60 CPI and more than half the districts over 90.

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

are struggling to transform their own practice to meet the district's more rigorous expectations, and principals are still learning how to help those teachers effectively. The middle schools and high school still have their share of problems, both with academics and school climate. Principal turnover continues to be a challenge for building momentum, with 12 out of the 25 principals needing to be replaced for the start of the 2015-16 school year.

Nonetheless, there is now optimism about the future. The district has come a long way since Durkin's entry in 2013, when leadership capacity was so dire that the DMC team had to fill the gaps to keep the basic functions of the district running. From top to bottom, the district has successfully



Superintendent Pia Durkin's approach requires spending significant time in schools and classrooms.

reignited a focus on instruction. Conversations about rigorous instruction are now pervasive, with educators gathering to talk about students' progress and to dissect what is working instructionally and what is not. The culture has become less risk-averse, with teachers and principals more willing to try something new in their practice, and more willing to admit when they need to learn something new themselves. The district has taken an innovative approach to meet the needs of the large and newly identified ELL population, creating an ELL Academy to "grow their own" strong teachers.

The district's progress over the past three years is rooted in its human capital. Durkin made it a goal to recruit and develop strong leaders and principals for the district, and the investment of time and resources is paying off. Not only is NBPS seeing real movement in student results, but the early successes and the base of strong leaders is generating positive talk about New Bedford, making it easier to recruit more and better staff at all levels, and further accelerate change. Alongside the improvements to human capital, the district, with the help of DMC, now has the systems needed to support a high-functioning team: a New Bedford Instructional Framework, an aligned assessment system, a collaborative approach to building and leading professional development, a human capital system, and a finance system. These systems ensure that the momentum is sustained and can endure beyond the tenure of any one individual. Durkin, DeFalco, and the many principals, teachers, and staff have taken leadership and ownership for building a better district for NBPS students. They are bringing hope to the community that New Bedford will soon shine brightly again. ♦