

Beverly School District impresses state Board of Education with improvements

By Kelly Kultys, staff writer



Kindergartners from the Beverly City School showcase their accomplishments from the school year Wednesday, June 14, 2017. The administration from the school presented some of those accomplishments to the State Board of Education on Wednesday, Sept. 13.

Dave Hernandez / For the BCT

TRENTON — What a difference a couple of years make.

For five years, the Beverly School District was labeled a "focus school," one that was underperforming on state assessments and that had large achievement gaps among its students.

In June, [the one-school district found out](#) that it had met the requirements to lose that label, and on Wednesday, the school's leaders presented to the New Jersey State Board of Education how they were able to do it.

"We realized that we had to do more to improve our district," said Kerri Lawler, director of curriculum and instruction.

Superintendent Elizabeth Giacobbe said when she took over in an interim capacity in January 2011, the district needed changes right away.

"We were a district in dire straits," Giacobbe said, recalling how there was no curriculum plan in place and the district had issues managing its finances. "We were failing, and therefore we were failing our students."

One of the first steps she took was hiring Lawler to help write curriculum for teachers that would be data-driven based on standardized test results.

They also "departmentalized" the middle school, so students in sixth through eighth grades would change classes during the day instead of sitting in one room, Lawler said. The school also extended the school day, allowing more seat time for students.

Giacobbe said the additional steps to improve the curriculum and instruction were taken after the state announced it would be switching its standardized test to the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, better known as PARCC, for students in third through 11th grades.

55 percent of students were meeting or exceeding expectations in English language arts and 28 percent were in math.

Giacobbe and Lawler said the district was able to improve its PARCC numbers by using new curriculum models in which teachers would ask students more difficult and challenging questions, helping to prepare them for the exams. The data from the PARCC also helped the district see where its strengths and weaknesses were, Lawler said.

The double-digit improvements were one of the reasons state officials invited Beverly to Trenton.

Deputy Commissioner of Education Peter Shulman called Beverly a "lighthouse district" because it could show the way for others.

Kimberley Harrington, the commissioner of education, knew the state board would be impressed by Beverly's turnaround.

"You will be blown away with the results you are seeing from this district," Harrington said.

Giacobbe credited teachers for buying into the district's plan, as well as the Board of Education for supporting changes the staff wanted.

"It's not programs; it's the people in the trenches," she said.

Arcelio Aponte, the state board's president, complimented the district on losing its focus status.

"I just want to congratulate the Beverly City team on the great work you're doing," Aponte said.

However, the administrative team said there was more work ahead, including continuing to improve scores so more students meet the standards, and helping to make the children proud of their school.

"It's not where I want to be," Giacobbe said.

She joked that she wants to see the board again soon, only this time its members would be giving the district the label of "reward school," defined by the state Department of Education as a school that has outstanding student achievement and/or growth over the past three years.

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