

How Brockton Public Schools fell from a model school district to a struggling one

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BROCKTON - Brockton Public Schools was known as a district that was successfully addressing the widening gap between students performing well academically and students who were falling behind. By 2014, BPS was seen as a model for closing the student achievement gap.

However, a comprehensive review of the Brockton Public Schools completed by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) in 2020 shows many areas where BPS has drastically declined over the last decade.

DESE's review, which was conducted right before the pandemic in March 2020 and published in October 2020, outlined several issues fueling BPS's decline – including ineffective curriculum and instruction, poor teacher evaluations, very limited support for vulnerable students and unclear financial management. As part of their in-depth review, site visits were conducted from March 2-5, 2020 which included 37 hours of interviews with 170 BPS stakeholders, including School Committee members, district administrators, staff, students and families.

“Since its previous height nearly a decade ago as a recognized leader in closing the achievement gap, Brockton has experienced a continual decline in academic outcomes according to the most recent state data, with 10 of its 21 schools now ranked in the lowest 10 percent of Massachusetts schools,” said the opening line of the 2020 report from DESE.

This school year, district administrators and school committee members continue to grapple with many of the issues highlighted by DESE in its report four years ago.

Against the background of the ongoing budget deficit that will likely bleed into next school year, the school committee voted at its special meeting Tuesday to accept the 2024 Student Opportunity Act proposal, which outlines how BPS plans to address its inconsistent curriculum, as well as the academic and emotional needs of low-performing kids, over the next three years.

But, overall, the 124-page review from DESE provides an image of how Brockton fell from a model school district to a struggling one.

According to the report, “the review team found a district that has not put in place stable educational leadership, systems, and processes. As a result, the district has struggled to allocate limited resources while trying to ensure that fewer leaders and a diminished teaching force provide high-quality learning opportunities for students.”

Budget cuts led to layoffs

According to DESE, Brockton cut over 200 positions in five years – not just teaching positions, but “critical” administrative roles that oversaw curriculum and instruction district-wide.

The report states: “The district eliminated 212 positions from 2014 to 2019 due to budget cuts. These positions included key curricular and instructional leadership roles that were either eliminated entirely or their responsibilities redistributed elsewhere.”

“The district’s decision to reduce leadership, primarily at the secondary level, in order to protect teaching positions has resulted in unstable systems and practices to create and drive improvement initiatives,” it continues.

In the 2017-2018 school year, BPS removed the positions of deputy superintendent of teaching and learning; executive director of elementary schools; executive director of middle schools; middle school curriculum coordinators for English language arts, social studies, math and science; and associate principal of curriculum at BHS.

In addition, the school district laid off 169 teachers and 128 paraprofessionals, according to the DESE report. All positions were cut because of budget reductions.

“Loss of these positions has resulted in larger class sizes, decreased course offerings, increased teacher duties, elimination of technology teachers at the elementary level, reduction of technology teachers at the secondary level, and reduction of support staff,” the report said.

The remaining teachers and district leaders took on “impossible workloads,” the DESE report noted.

“The decision to reduce the leadership force was not informed by district goals or an analysis of data,” the report noted. “It was based on the idea that teachers can be effective without sufficient leadership and ignored the value of having high-level leaders to support and monitor high-quality teaching.”

As a result, the quality of classroom instruction deteriorated, along with student achievement levels. Student enrollment in BPS plummeted from its height of over 17,000 students in 2014, to barely over 16,000 students in 2019. This year, the district’s enrollment sits at 14,954 students.

Is the school board at fault?

Brockton School Committee members and district administrators told DESE they received “significant pushback” from the BPS staff and the Brockton community for laying off classroom teachers. In response, as its budget continued to be slashed, decision makers looked to the district’s central office.

According to DESE’s findings, there was a general lack of “urgency and awareness” within the district of its deteriorating student performance. BPS didn’t implement any of the recommendations from DESE’s previous review of the district that took place in 2013.

“In addition, the school committee does not use disaggregated data on student outcomes to inform its work. As a result, critical decisions at the governance level are often made based on opinion and anecdotal information rather than evidence,” the report from 2020 said.

“While district leaders believe that their decisions have made the best use of limited funds, stakeholders at all system levels describe a system that is not serving students well.”

Looking to the future

During the first half of the 2019-2020 school year, a few months before DESE would conduct its review of Brockton Public Schools, the district went through several structural changes in its executive team.

The City of Brockton elected Mayor Robert Sullivan in November 2019, who would also serve as the new BPS School Committee chair. A month later, BPS also hired a new superintendent of schools.

“In December 2019, the district appointed a new superintendent – a native Brocktonian and career Brockton educator who most recently served as interim superintendent, and before that, as the deputy superintendent,” said the DESE review.

BPS Superintendent Mike Thomas, who is now on administrative leave as of February, served as interim superintendent starting in July 2019 and was named superintendent just before the pandemic switched the district to virtual learning.

According to DESE’s report, Brockton teachers and school board members alike “expressed respect and support for the promise of a newly configured executive team.”

In an October 2020 statement in response to the DESE report, Mayor Sullivan said, “After extensive discussion with Superintendent Thomas and his leadership team, the Brockton School Committee agreed that tapping into DESE’s expertise and knowledge of statewide best practices would aid our goal of improving student outcomes. Although years of chronic underfunding have no doubt greatly and significantly impacted our district’s operations, we cannot lament past losses and must instead move forward with a clear vision and direction for the future of our district.”

Where BPS has landed today

In the years after DESE published its review, the global pandemic rocked schools across the country and Brockton discovered a roughly \$18 million deficit in its Fiscal Year 2023 budget that would extend to this and next school years.

In August 2023, Thomas left the district on medical leave immediately after the announcement of the budget deficit. In February, as his medical leave was reaching its end date, the committee voted to place Thomas on administrative leave while officials investigate the budget mishap.

Since the pandemic, student achievement levels have continued to drop with small signs of recovery in the last year. BPS enrollment continues to dwindle, and the teacher shortage has been exacerbated by more layoffs.

But BPS has a plan to bring back some of its slashed positions using funds it will receive through the Student Opportunity Act, which the school committee reviewed at its meeting Tuesday night.