

DRAFT Report

Task Force on Student Academic Performance

Hudson City School District

February 22, 2010

Members of Task Force

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Introduction

The Task Force on Student Academic Performance (TFSAP) was created by resolution of the Board of Education of the Hudson City School District on May 12, 2009. Board Member Peter Meyer was named Chairman of the Task Force. ¹

According to the proposal adopted by the Board, the Task Force was charged with “stud[ying] the school District’s student academic performance and recommend[ing] to the Board of Education ways of improving that performance.” This Report summarizes the conclusions of the Task Force and provides recommendations to the Board. Those recommendations are marked with an arrow and numbered consecutively, from 1 to 50, through the document.

What the Task Force Did

Since the initial informational and organizational meetings last July the Task Force has:

- Conducted 16 formal meetings;
- Discussed dozens of education topics and reviewed scores of articles²;
- Interviewed national, state, and local experts³;
- Visited a high-performing school District that is similar in demographic make up to that of Hudson High School⁴;
- Conducted a districtwide survey on communication⁵;
- Met with the District’s Department Heads⁶.

¹ See Board Minutes of May 12, 2009, pages 2978-9. The resolution passed on that date established The Task Force For Student Performance; the name was changed to the Task Force on Student Academic Performance at the BOE’s June 9 meeting. See Board Minutes of June 9, 2009, page 2983.

² See Appendix.

³ The Task Force had as invited guests at its meetings or were interviewed separately, Robert Pondiscio, Director of Communications, the Core Knowledge Foundation, Charlottesville, VA. Dr. Patricia Price, Chair of the Education Department at the College of St. Rose; Erik Sweet and Will Jaacks, Curriculum Associates from the New York State Department of Education; Ralph Bertelle, professor of mathematics, Columbia Greene Community College; Dr. Barbara Peters, Superintendent of Schools, Elmsford Union Free School District, Elmsford, NY. In addition to these state and national experts, the Task Force conducted a survey of parents about District communications and interviewed 16 veteran staff at a Department Heads meeting on January 6, 2010.

⁴ See “Elmsford Report,” Appendix.

⁵ See “Communications Survey,” Appendix.

⁶ See “Department Head Notes,” Appendix.

Public participation in the work of the Task Force was exemplary. Some fifty members of the District community (including staff, parents, and other community members) expressed interest in being on the Task Force or being part of a “Friends” group; the latter group included some thirty people who have been kept regularly informed of the work of the Task Force and who, from time-to-time, offered suggestions or comments about the Task Force’s work. Nearly twenty people attended two initial informational meetings last July (see “TFSAP Survey Results” in Appendix) and fifteen were selected to be on the Task Force.⁷ Several “alternates” as well as members of the School Board were included on the list of “Members” and received regular updates about the work of the Task Force, including meeting agendas and minutes, articles, reports, and press releases, most of which was also made available to the public on the District website at <http://www.hudsoncityschooldistrict.com/boe/TFAPMinutes.php>.

In addition to the meeting minutes, which encompass hundreds of person hours of discussion and debate and form the backbone of this Report, the Task Force sent a team to the Elmsford Union Free School District in Elmsford, NY, discussed academic performance with sixteen veteran teachers at a Department Heads meeting, and conducted a communications survey of parents. Reports from those meetings – and the survey – will also be available as part of this Report (see Appendix). The Task Force convened several meetings to discuss the creation of the Final Report, making an outline for it and offering multiple opportunities for input, discussion, comment, and correction of the work of the group.

Writing the Report

In the end, this Report is the work of a group of people who have strong and informed opinions about the school District; it exemplifies not just the breadth of that opinion, but also the strength of the group’s shared beliefs. There has been open and frank discussion on all subjects contained here throughout many weeks and hours of meetings, with considerable disagreement on some matters but creative and productive discussion on all subjects. And though not everyone shares the same passions for the same subjects and issues, this report represents a consensus of opinion by members of the Task Force, all of whom have contributed to it.⁸

⁷ Because of the challenging time demands of this work not all Task Force members were able to attend all meetings; several people had to step down after one or two meetings. Average meeting attendance over the six months was between eight and ten. Everyone, however, was kept apprised of Task Force work via email and/or telephone.

⁸ This report went through multiple iterations, reflecting the group’s desire to build and achieve consensus. Once the general outline was agreed to and a first draft produced, the group met twice to discuss the draft. Peter Meyer, who prepared the drafts, also fielded comments and suggestions via email and phone. Many changes were made during this process. If a member of the Task Force disagreed on any part of the Report about which there was already consensus, he or she was offered the opportunity to write his or her opinion about that issue in a

Finally, it is important to keep in mind that the Board of Education wanted this Task Force to be the work of District stakeholders, all of whom volunteered their time, not professional researchers. Still, every effort has been made to verify the accuracy of the facts cited here and a great deal of time and effort was spent consulting District documents, education experts, veteran teachers and staff, and the testimony and writings of experts . If facts were for some reason “unknowable” or were “in dispute,” the Task Force attempts to make that known.⁹

How the Report is Organized

This Report is divided into four basic sections: 1) a description of **Where We Are Now**, giving a brief overview of some key District facts and figures; 2) a discussion of five major **Topics** that the Task Force determined had the most impact on student academic performance, including “recommendations” to the Board of Education related to each topic; 3) a brief discussion of the **Future**, with recommendations about continuing the work of the Task Force; and 4) an **Appendix** listing some of the key documents and articles used to inform the Task Force’s work.

Summary of Conclusions and Recommendations

The general conclusion of the Task Force is that there is no magic potion for academic excellence and no single path to student academic improvement. However, the Task Force believes that focus and goal setting, consistency of message, and follow-up on initiatives and goals on the part of District staff are important to academic excellence.

In the last two years the District has made enormous progress on many fronts and has instituted promising new programs, but it can and must do more to sustain its progress with regard to student academics. The Task Force identified five key areas of concern – School Culture, Curriculum, Districtwide Communication, Teachers and Teaching, and Administrative Practices -- as well as calling

“minority report” -- or “opt out” completely and remove his/her name from the roster of members. Comments and suggestions were considered and changes made through the evening of Sunday, February 21, 2010, when the Final Draft was completed. To that time there had been no requests to submit comments for a minority report, but five Task Force members opted out and asked that their names be removed from the Final Report: Jack Howe (Superintendent), Maria Suttmeier (Assistant Superintendent), Mark Brenneman (Principal, Hudson Intermediate School), Wayne Kinney (teacher), and Theresa Moran (teacher).

⁹ It should also be noted that no District funds were expended for the Task Force work except for routine copying and use of the High School Library for meetings. All five guest speakers, as well as Task Force members, volunteered their time and travel expenses. And many thanks to Carole Osterink, a stakeholder and textbook writer/editor, who helped catch many grammatical, spelling, and typographical errors.

attention to a number of other areas that it deemed important if not pressing (see **Future**, page 25). All together, this report makes fifty recommendations to the Board. Among the most important suggestions for academic improvement are these:

- (#1) The District needs to develop and implement a set of consistent and clear statements of high expectations for all members of our school community.
- (#2) The District needs to create a clear and consistent method of student discipline to foster an atmosphere conducive to academic achievement which strives to keep students in school.
- (#3) The District needs a clear, consistent, written, taught and tested K-12 curriculum that is aligned with State standards and also vertically and horizontally aligned (i.e. between grade levels and between classes at each grade level) within the District.
- (#4) The Board of Education and District Administration must work to ensure consistent and complete implementation of all District policies and procedures.

The Task Force recognizes that the District is already at work on many of these fronts and hopes that this report's discussion and recommendations will contribute to the ongoing effort of improving all of our students' academic performance.

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Where We Are Now¹⁰

The Hudson City School District (HCSD) serves some 17,000 residents in the City of Hudson, NY, and the Towns of Claverack, Ghent, Greenport, Livingston, Stockport, and Taghkanic -- all located in historic and scenic Columbia County. The County is on the east bank of the Hudson River, nestled between the Catskill Mountains (in Greene County) to the west and the Berkshire range (in Massachusetts) to the east. Though wonderfully rural in appearance and culture, Hudson, the County Seat, is a thriving arts and antiques center located just two hours north of New York City by Amtrak, three hours west of Boston via Interstate highway, and just thirty miles south of Albany, the State Capital, by train or highway.

A Rich History – An Arts & Antiques Center

Founded as an inland whaling port in the 18th century, Hudson (the first incorporated town in the United States following the ratification of the Constitution in 1791) was both a manufacturing and shipping center until the mid 20th century. With a population of over 15,000 in the 1950s, the town suffered a lengthy economic downturn in the 1960s and 1970s and today has a population of a little more than 7,000. The economic downturn has meant that the per capita income in Hudson (about \$16,000) is far below that of the state average (\$40,000)¹¹.

In the last twenty years, however, Hudson has become a thriving and nationally recognized arts and antiques center, boasting a rich collection of restored historic buildings, regionally acclaimed arts festivals, with rediscovered agricultural and landscape riches that provide District students and staff with a wealth of historic, scientific, environmental, cultural, and recreational opportunities to supplement the school curriculum.¹²

The HCSD Profile

The current school District was formed in 1966 by consolidating the City of Hudson and eleven adjoining school districts into one system; HCSD is now one of six Districts in Columbia County.¹³ Though HCSD currently serves a small city (Hudson) and is called a “city school District,” because of its relatively small

¹⁰ Information in this section comes primarily from school “Report Cards” done by the State Education Department, and from “Looking Forward: Findings and Recommendations for Improved Student Achievement in the Hudson City School District,” by James Baldwin et al, February 2006; and various histories of Hudson, including that of Captain Franklin Ellis and his “History of Columbia County, New York.”

¹¹ Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York_locations_by_per_capita_income Statistics from 2004.

¹² Just six miles south of Hudson, Frederic Church, one of the founding fathers of America’s first native schools of art, the Hudson River School, built his famous mansion, Olana, one of New York’s most visited historic sites.

¹³ The other Districts in Columbia County are Germantown, Chatham, Ichabod Crane, Taconic Hills, and New Lebanon.

enrollment (roughly 2,000 students in four PK—12 school buildings) and its high levels of poverty (based on students who qualify for the federally subsidized Free and Reduced Lunch program) HCSD is classified as a “high needs rural” District by the New York State Education Department (SED). Despite the recent resurgence in the local economy, spurred by the arts, antiques, and second-home renaissance, nearly 60 percent of the HCSD student population is considered poor; over 17 percent are classified as Special Education, which is more than double the state average for a school District.

The District has an operating budget of approximately \$45 million – two thirds of which comes from State sources and one third from local property tax revenues -- and employs approximately 190 instructional staff and 200 support staff¹⁴.

Much Building and Change

In 2009, following a \$36-million renovation and building project, there was significant school restructuring. The Greenport School, which had housed Grades 3 and 4, was closed and its students moved to the Montgomery C. Smith Middle School, which was then renamed the M.C. Smith Intermediate School. The District’s 7th and 8th-grades were moved from the Middle School to the new Junior High, housed on the same campus as the High School and Central Administration Offices.

The Alternative Learning Program (ALP) has been a part of HCSD for most of the last decade. Most recently, ALP has been part of SED’s Magnet School program and housed in trailers at the Greenport campus. With the closing of the Greenport school and the Board’s expressed intention to sell the campus, ALP’s location and status for the future is, as of the writing of this Report, unknown. Current school configuration and enrollment (approximate, as of 2009-10) are:

- John L. Edwards Elementary, PK—2, Enrollment: 475
- Montgomery C. Smith Intermediate, 3—6, Enrollment: 570
- Hudson Junior High, 7—8, Enrollment: 300
- Hudson High, 9—12, Enrollment: 560
- Alternative Learning Program, 8—12, Enrollment: 50

Enrollment Decline and Demographics

There has been a significant demographic change in the District over the past decade. Total student population decreased from 2,681 in 1996-97 to 2,256 in 2003-2004 and is now roughly 2000 —a decrease of over 25 percent in the last 15 years. During this time period the White student population dropped from 73.5 percent to 55 percent; the Black and African American population increased from 19.2 percent to 29 percent; the Hispanic population increased from 5 percent to 9 percent; and the “other” enrollment percentage increased from 2.3 percent to 7 percent.

¹⁴ According to figures kept by the NY SED, in 2006-07 Hudson spent \$10,668 per pupil compared to the state average of \$9,485. It spent \$15,921 per Special Education student, compared to the \$23,898 spent on the average Special Education student.

The percentage of students who qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch (the recognized standard of poverty in public schools) increased from 50 percent in 2005-06 to 53 percent in 2007-08; today the number is 58 percent.

Private School and Home-Schooling

The number of District students who attend private schools or are being home-schooled is a factor in the enrollment decline. It is also a financial issue for the District since State Aid to the District is based on enrollment in District schools (at approximately \$6,000 per student). We are “losing” less aid today than in the past, due largely to the closure of two local private schools, but the number of students choosing to be educated elsewhere still represents some 4 percent of total potential enrollment, a loss to the District of some \$500,000¹⁵:

Students Who Live in the District But Attend Private School or Are Home-schooled

2004-05:	172
2005-06:	173
2006-07:	169
2007-08:	119
2008-09:	111
2009-10:	88

The Task Force recognized that the percentage of Special Ed students in the District – which has ranged from 17 to 25 percent in the last ten years – is a great and ongoing challenge. It is addressed briefly in Section III of the Report.

Academics

Hudson City School District has many excellent programs and counts among its graduates students who have attended many top-ranked regional and national colleges. However, the District has not navigated the new state and national testing mandates, requiring that **all** students be proficient, as well as the Task Force believes the District is capable of doing,

In 2004-2005 Hudson was classified as a District In Need of Improvement under the New York State Education Department’s System of Accountability for Student Success and the federal No Child Left Behind law. It was removed from this classification after the June 2005 Regents examinations at Hudson High School.

The M.C. Smith Middle School was identified as a School In Need of Improvement-Year 2 in 2005-06 and in 2006-07 was placed in Corrective Action, a designation that resulted in significant demands by the

¹⁵ These numbers are from an email from School District Records Officer Dan Barrett to TFSAP chairman Peter Meyer, 2/19/10.

State Education Department to “restructure” the school. Such restructuring created significant burdens on staff and caused confusion on the part of parents and students.

The Corrective Action designation was lifted from the Middle School in 2009 after the school showed improvement in 5th and 6th grades, but because of building reconfiguration – the 3rd and 4th grades from the closed Greenport School were moved to M.C. Smith and the 7th and 8th grades from MC Smith were moved to the new Junior High -- in the 2009-10 school year the newly configured Intermediate School was placed under Corrective Action Year 1 due to poor ELA results among Students with Disabilities in Grades 3 and 4. Additionally, Hudson High School failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in Math due to low participation rates (i.e. 95 percent) in testing.

Positive Trends in Math and ELA

Despite some administrative tumult resulting from these state and federal designations¹⁶ – or perhaps because of them -- overall test score trends in Math and English Language Arts (ELA) have been inching up. In fact, the satisfactory federal AYP report is a measure of that. Though the Task Force was not equipped to do a thorough examination of student academic performance, a review of three years’ worth of test scores in Math and ELA (2006—2009) indicates that the overall trend is promising if not conclusive: students are tending to do better in the lower grades and, if tracked as a cohort, are bringing that improvement with them as they age:

Passing Rates by Grade Level, from ‘06-‘07 through ‘08-‘09

	Math ‘06-‘07	‘07-‘08	‘08-‘09	Grade
	78%	67	77	3
	65	70	76	4
	44	74	68	5
	62	66	71	6
	32	51	68	7
	27	26	53	8
	52	58	69	All grades combined
ELA	46	51	51	3
	62	61	65	4
	54	71	76	5
	57	50	73	6
	37	60	73	7
	42	35	51	8
	50	55	64	All Grades combined

¹⁶ The District has had five Superintendents – Donald Carlisle, James Clarke, Marilyn Barry, Fern Aefsky, and John Howe – in the last ten years. Teacher turnover rates among teachers with less than seven years experience have ranged from 23 to 25 percent in the last several years; turnover rates for all teachers also seem to be on the rise: from 8 percent in 2004-05, to 14 percent in 2005-06 and 12 percent in 2006-07.

Overall, then, our elementary students have shown steady improvement over the last three years in two core subjects. (The State has begun to test students in Science and Social Studies, but the Task Force did not feel it had sufficient data to make any conclusive comment on those scores. Anecdotally, as noted in the Curriculum section, there is concern that some subjects, like Science and Social Studies, are suffering because of the attention given to Math and ELA.)

High School Exams and Graduation Rates

Despite the successes of many Hudson High graduates, the High School appears to have many students who are struggling. Passing rates on High School Regents tests scores have been flat or inconsistent. There have been Regents passing rate improvements of 3 to 12 percent in Math A, U.S. History, and Spanish over the last three years; but decreases in English (-3%), Math B (-4%), Global History (-2%), Living Environment (-2%), Earth Science (-5%), Chemistry (-11%), Physics (-8), and Italian (-5%).

High School Graduates with Regents Diplomas have ranged from 71% in 2005-06 to 81% in 2006-07 to 79% in 07-08; dropout rates, from 5 to 7 percent during these years; four-year graduation rates from 55% to 65%. (There is still some confusion, among staff and the public, about whether “non-completers” and/or students who simply move to another District are counted in our graduation/dropout rates.)

The Importance of Test Scores

While the Task Force believes that there are measures of student success other than test scores and graduation rates, it also believes that these measures are a fact of education life and that the District must take them seriously. Generally, only about 65 percent of our students are scoring at proficient or better on State tests in core subjects such as ELA, Math, and Science and only two-thirds of our students are graduating on time. Other districts with our demographics are doing better academically (see Elmsford Report in the Appendix) and the Task Force believes that our students can and should do better.

####

Topic 1

School Culture

School Culture is a broad topic, encompassing everything from the District's "image" to falling enrollment. But members of the Task Force agreed that school culture has a significant impact on our students' academic performance.

The most pressing concern of the Task Force was the question of expectations. Most notably, with regard to the Task Force mandate, it is the perception of the Task Force that too many students, parents, teachers, and staff believe that just passing is enough.

District expectations for students, staff, and parents, both academic and behavioral, are too low. The result is an "attitude" problem, with too many students not caring about school or their grades. Poor attendance and tardiness seem to be problems, leading to school "disturbance" that detracts from an environment promoting academic achievement. It should be a District priority to motivate students to higher academic achievement.

Some people feel that there is a lack of opportunities for parents to get involved in school activities or events and not enough effort made for an effective "outreach" to invite parents to participate.

School entryways that are poorly marked and lack designated staff to greet visitors often convey an uninviting attitude that may translate into negative impressions about the District. This may also contribute to the dropping enrollment.

School staff does not receive sufficient training in disciplining students, which may contribute to the high number of referrals and suspensions.

There were 4,039 referrals written and 746 suspensions in the high school in 2007-08; in 2008-09, there were 3,279 referrals and 786 suspensions. Though these numbers do not indicate how many students were involved (some students accumulate multiple referrals and suspensions), the continuing public debate about student behavior and the Code of Conduct suggests the need for continued study of the Code and District discipline policies and practices, since student behavior impacts academic performance.

Other specific concerns include:

- Students without involved families often don't have anyone to advocate for them.
- There is some question about how many suspended students receive the state-mandated tutoring while they are not in school.

- In-School-Suspension (ISS) rooms and the practices in them seem ineffective. Students are not doing work in ISS, but are just “biding their time.”
- The “Agenda Books” for the schools send different messages about behavior and expectations.

There are encouraging efforts in many parts of the District: after-school programs, the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program, mentoring programs, the growing Professional Learning Communities initiative, and various Board of Education Committees.

Recommendations for School Culture

The District should:

- (#5) Make high expectations – for academics and behavior – that are clear and consistent, from the beginning of school to the end. Begin in the early grades to designate a class by its graduation year. Accentuate the positive and devote more effort to motivating students to excel. Encourage extra credit exercises and turning off the television at home. Stress that every District program should be as good as it can be and that just “getting by” is not good enough. Convene meetings with staff, parents, and students to discuss expectations.
- (#6) Encourage parents to come to school more often.
- (#7) Look for ways to make schools more welcoming. Make sure that entryways are clearly marked and staff members greeting visitors are friendly and engaging.
- (#8) Develop and implement a Districtwide complaint policy; designate one person to field all complaints.
- (#9) Analyze referral and suspension data, by student and by teacher, to know if specific, targeted actions can be taken to reduce behavior problems. Encourage students and parents/guardians to use advocacy groups like Parents in Partnership or Independent Living Center of the Hudson Valley to “advocate” on their behalf.
- (#10) Provide more staff training about discipline.
- (#11) Improve In-School Suspension oversight so that actual academic work is done in ISS.

- (#12) Find more proactive ways of maintaining discipline and more productive ways of disciplining. Institute a “late-to-class” seminar in which students are offered time-management tips. Look for alternative forms of discipline, like after-school work crews and/or community service. Keep children in school. Institute after-school or Saturday Locker Clean Out days -- not as a punishment but as an opportunity – and have teachers red-flag students whose lockers are out of control and call home. Invite parents to come in and help.
- (#13) Expand the mentoring program in which older students help younger ones. Teachers could be paired with a group of students for conversation/planning about issues that affect their high school lives, not just academic consultation.
- (#14) Study attendance and tardiness rates and what causes the problem. This should include “attendance” by staff as well.
- (#15) Seek ways to increase enrollment. Conduct exit interviews of students/parents and staff who leave the District. Seek out parents of private and home-schooled students and survey them about why they do not send their children to HCSD

####

Topic 2

Districtwide Communication

A common comment at Task Force meetings was the problem of “duplication of effort” and “lack of follow-through,” in many areas of District life: academics, staffing, discipline. (See also Administrative Practices) This could be caused by lack of communication among departments, among schools, between home and school.

The Task Force conducted a Districtwide survey about Communications between parents and the school and will, at a later date analyze the results.

A common complaint is that students and parents don't always know what is required to graduate or go to college – until it's too late.

There is some concern that the public has a “negative” view of the District that is not justified. Does the press report only the negative? Many people believe that it does. We should try to find out why parents remove their students from the school District.

The District website is much improved, but it is still a work in progress. There is a District committee that is working on improving it, and it should continue its work.

It is critical that all staff are aware of information in 504 Plans and IEPs.

Communication seems to be segmented by groups within the school buildings. We don't have ways of communicating about issues involving all members of the school community. Faculty meetings, for instance, are held at a time when aides and assistants can't come.

There seems to be a “defensiveness” on the part of different groups within the District; such defensiveness can be the result of too little communication, but it also can create barriers to communication.

Generally, the response to identified problems and suggestions or complaints seems slow.

We don't have enough events in the school District that would encourage the school community to get together.

Recommendations for Districtwide Communication

The District should:

- (#16) Develop ways to communicate to all parents and students exactly what is needed to graduate and go to college;
- (#17) Designate “Point People” to find and communicate positive happenings in each school building and bring them to the attention of administration for recognition/publication.
- (#18) Look for ways to promote and glorify academic successes.
- (#19) Streamline responsiveness to questions and problems. Consider designating a District “responder” or “answer person” and establishing a system for getting questions answered and problems solved in a timely manner. Consider, for instance, a motto like “If it’s broke on Wednesday, fix it on Thursday.”

####

Topic 3

Curriculum

It is generally agreed that curriculum is a major contributor to successful academic performance. However, it is hard to find agreement on what a curriculum is or whether the District has one.

As a result of several Task Force meetings that featured discussions about curriculum, including two with guest speakers, the Task Force concluded that (a) New York State does not have – or mandate – a curriculum, defined as a specific course of study, organized by grade and by subject; and (b) HCSD does not have an explicit written curriculum for the core subjects – ELA, Math, Social Studies, and Science – that covers grades K–12. The Task Force also recognizes that the subject of curriculum is complex and subject to vigorous debate both within HCSD and in schools throughout the country.

Traditional practice in HCSD, much like other districts, is for teachers and/or groups of teachers to develop their individual or grade-based courses of study.

Currently the District is moving forcefully in the direction of having a comprehensive and complete curriculum that is aligned vertically – from grade to grade – and horizontally – between classes in each grade – for all grades and all core subjects. The entire instructional staff is now in the process of entering its current course content into Rubicon Atlas, a curriculum “mapping” software program. The Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum has also been charged by the BOE with the job of completing K–12 curricula for Math and ELA by the Spring of 2010.

It is agreed that we need a curriculum that that is not only complete – i.e. covering core subjects for all grades – but is also written, taught and tested. It is also agreed that it needs to be of high quality and properly aligned with State Standards.

There is a great deal of evidence that specific “background knowledge” is essential to literacy and comprehension and that curriculum content must build on itself, from grade to grade. This is expressed with the aphorism, “The more you know, the more you can know.”

One challenge for Hudson is a high mobility rate among students (i.e., students moving in and out of the District). These students are always having to “catch up.”

Other instructional and curricular concerns include:

- Some members of the Task Force believe that there is too much “teaching to the test” or time spent preparing for tests. Others believe that in some classrooms not enough attention is paid to testing.

- We may be allowing students too broad a choice in subjects in the upper grades and too much leeway in class discussion and homework in the early grades. We may be giving students too many opportunities to fail.
- Homework is a consistent concern. On the one hand, the District has no consistent policy about homework; on the other, there is concern that giving homework unfairly penalizes students who have poor home lives and/or parents and guardians unable to help them.¹⁷
- Not enough students know about the SAT and ACT tests and how important they are to college entry success.
- There are too many study halls in high school.
- Social Studies, Art, Music, and Foreign Languages seem to be increasingly short-changed as the emphasis on Math and ELA increases.
- A new federal policy requiring English Language Learners (formerly English as Second Language) to take State ELA tests after just a year in the country is a challenge.
- There seems to be a disconnect between in-school grades and scores on standardized tests.

Recommendations for Curriculum

The District should:

- (#20) Tell parents and students exactly what they need to know to pass tests and graduate -- and have that information available in one place. (This should clarify some of the confusion about tests and testing.)
- (#21) Develop a policy to ensure continuous oversight of curriculum quality and its implementation. (This too will help clarify the question of whether some subjects are getting “short-changed.”)
- (#22) Develop standardized student performance benchmarks for each subject and each grade. Analyze those benchmark results and respond to those results with changes in the way the

¹⁷ Many questions about District practices have their answers in the District Policy Manual. Policy #4100, for instance, says that “All students are expected to complete the assigned class work and homework as directed.” See the Appendix for references to three other District Policies that address concerns of the Task Force, but seem to be unknown and unenforced.

curriculum is presented. For instance, teachers can develop a “Dirty Dozen” system in which the twelve most common mistakes on a test are identified with follow up targeted remediation. The results of the benchmarks should also be kept in a student portfolio in the offices of the Central Administration and be available to parents at any time. Those records should be computerized when possible, making sure that confidentiality and security concerns are addressed.

- (#23) Establish a timeline for completing the inventory of current curriculum development (i.e., curriculum mapping) and a date certain (the Task Force recommends a completion date of early 2011) for completing Social Studies and Science curricula.
- (#24) Expand the program in which older students – those with too many study halls, for example – help younger students with school work.
- (#25) Determine how to encourage more curriculum emphasis on Art, Music, and Foreign Languages.
- (#26) Set a Districtwide goal of 80 percent proficiency in ELA, Math, Social Studies, and Science by 2014.
- (#27) Make a concerted effort to have fewer students in the least proficient category¹⁸. Find ways to help struggling students succeed.
- (#28) Make more of an effort to provide access to tutoring and homework help for students who need it. There could be “tutoring labs” in all core subjects, staffed by students who are earning good grades and are working towards either community service hours or resume building. The program should be mentored by teachers. The labs should be accessible at various times of day, not just after school.
- (#29) Consider either mandatory “academic detention” or longer school days for below proficient students.

¹⁸ The State sorts test results into four categories: numbers 1 and 2 are below proficient and numbers 3 and 4 are above proficient. We would hope to make the biggest difference by moving students out of the number 1 category, those scoring the worst.

- (#30) Find out where students actually go after high school (to supplement the “intentions” report currently done) and make an attempt to survey HCSD graduates about how prepared they were for college.
- (#31) Develop a Student Advisory Council (especially for Grades 7 to 12) or encourage the existing Student Council to get engaged in academic and curricular issues.

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Topic 4

Teachers and Teaching

There is no doubt that teachers are the most important part of a school. The Task Force devoted one meeting to listening to – and questioning – Dr. Patricia Price, head of the Department of Education at the College of St. Rose, about schools of education and teacher training. The new Commissioner of Education, David Steiner, has emphasized the need for improved teacher training. (See Appendix.)

According to the latest SED data, the HCSD teaching staff is becoming more professional: in 2007-08 we had no teachers without a valid teaching certificate (compared to 1 percent in 2005-06), and 21 percent with Masters Degrees or better (compared to 18 percent in 2005-06). At the same time, the number of teachers with fewer than three years of experience is increasing: from 4 percent in 2005-06 to 7 percent in 2007-08. Teacher turnover rates among teachers with less than seven years experience have ranged from 23 to 25 percent in the last several years; turnover rates for all teachers also seem to be on the rise: from 8 percent in 2004-05, to 14 percent in 2005-06 and 12 percent in 2006-07.

The major concerns of the Task Force included:

- Are teachers evaluated frequently enough, both before and after tenure, to ensure they continue to deliver quality education?
- Are principals spending enough time in classrooms?
- Is the District doing enough to recruit and retain highly qualified teachers?
- As mentioned earlier, not all teachers are familiar with a disabled student's Individual Education Plan (IEP).
- Do teachers have enough quality time to talk with each other about academics?

The Professional Learning Communities (PLC) program, which sets up opportunities for teachers to discuss individual student academic progress looks very promising. (See Elmsford report.)

Recommendations for Teachers and Teaching

The District should:

- (#32) Implement a teacher mentor program, pairing effective teachers with other teaching staff.
- (#33) Ensure that all teachers understand student IEPs.
- (#34) Institute a program of teacher benchmarks, similar to those for students. Student achievement should be part of those benchmarks. (The Task Force recognizes the fact the this issue, as with others, may be the subject of contractual negotiations.)
- (#35) Encourage teachers to implement reward systems in their classrooms – gold stars, green dots – for students who do the right thing.
- (#36) Continue to pursue the Professional Learning Communities program and make sure to integrate that with existing professional development policies and practices.

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Topic 5

Administrative Practices

The Superintendent and his/her staff, as well as the building administrators and their immediate staff, are responsible for setting the tone for the District as well as ensuring that academic performance standards and goals are set and met.

The District has suffered from high turnover at these leadership levels – five superintendents and multiple high-level administrative positions – in the last twelve years.

In large part due to such turnover there seems to be a lack of focus and consistency in District policy implementation and follow-through. As noted elsewhere in this report, consistency seems a problem in several areas: homework, discipline, and expectations, to name three. Progress is being made, but District Administration needs to provide leadership to ensure that all members of the HSCD community are on the same page. (See Districtwide Communication topic).

There is a fine line between “duplication of effort” and having many people working toward the same goals. It is the administration’s job to open as many doors to the public and school community as possible, but also to channel and focus that input toward well-defined goals.

Too often we seem to hear administrators saying “my hands are tied” when a problem needs solving. It is the responsibility of the administration not just to recruit and hire competent and qualified staff but also to remove staff who are not competent or qualified.

The Comprehensive Education Program being instituted at the Intermediate School (as a result of the school’s Corrective Action status) seems to be promising in that it is articulated and focused.

The Professional Learning Community program is also promising. Elmsford is using it (see Appendix) and it appears to be working. It is not just teachers getting together; it has a specific organization and focus, with stated goals directed toward improving student academic achievement.

There are many Board Policies which are ignored or not implemented. District leadership should ensure that policies are either implemented or removed from the Policy Manual.

Recommendations for Administrative Practices and Policies

The District should:

- (#37) Make clear its expectations for the Superintendent with regard to the academic performance of its students and professional performance of its staff.

- (#38) Develop a five-year academic improvement plan.
- (#39) Establish an external and internal recruitment procedure to identify talent and bring it to the District as well as to find and promote talent from within. See, for instance the Grow Your Own teacher program in Illinois and the Future Teachers of America.
- (#40) Attend career days at outstanding teachers colleges, such as Geneseo, Cornell, Syracuse, Oneonta, and Bard.
- (#41) Encourage administrators to visit classrooms more often.
- (#42) Promote visits to school districts similar to Hudson that are doing better academically.
- (#43) Seek out and implement programs and procedures that are proven to work.
- (#44) Continue to explore the Professional Learning Communities approach to organizing teachers toward individualized academic achievement. This should include giving each teacher a “case load” of “non-service” children (i.e., students not in the teacher’s class) for whom the teacher would check progress, make sure work is done, recommend pro-active programs, and congratulate good work.
- (#45) Identify and prioritize key programs within the District and find ways of providing ongoing evaluation of the programs’ efficacy and progress.

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The Future

By Future we mean subjects of immediate concern that the Task Force did not have time to address, as well as issues that will become more pressing in the future. Those include:

- Online education: The potential is growing rapidly. Lots of courses are offered online; White Boards can be connected to the Internet. It will help with SNOW DAYS as well as providing opportunities for extra examination preparation, extra Advanced Placement courses, and access to remedial education. We need to find out how many of our students have access to computers and the Internet
- Budget cuts: Where? The economic downturn will impact academic programs and we should be ready for calls for countywide education consolidation.
- Need to focus more energy on fundraising and grants. Money is available for charter schools as well as traditional public schools.
- Foreign Languages: Though required by Regents to graduate, the District emphasis on foreign language seems to be flagging.
- Special Education. This is a huge topic. More than 17 percent of our students are classified Special Ed.
- Alternative Learning Program (ALP): Many people agree that it's a good program, giving individual children attention who need it and getting students who don't do well in the regular school environment to a place that is smaller.
- "Houses": Explore the idea of having more schools within schools, *a la* ALP.
- Charter schools: The law allows for "District-sponsored" charters and that should be explored.
- Social Promotion: We need to know more about it.
- Freshmen: Studies suggest that 8th and 9th grade student performance and attendance are key indicators of dropout and graduation.
- Sports, athletics, and physical education programs are essential to academic performance.

Recommendations for the Future

The District should:

- (#46) Convene a public hearing (or hearings) on the work and recommendations of the Task Force.

- (#47) Convene student and staff meetings to discuss the Task Force Report.
- (#48) Continue the work of the Task Force.
- (#49) Prioritize the Task Force's recommendations and determine which ones shall be implemented and when.
- (#50) Provide for a means to review progress on implementation of the Task Force recommendations.

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Conclusion

The Task Force realizes that our school District has much to do to bring all of our students to the level of academic competence that they are capable of, but we are confident that we have the resources to do so. If the Board of Education can fashion a strategy to have all stakeholders work together, we know that the students of the Hudson City School District can be among the most academically proficient in the State of New York.

Key Documents

Appendix

The Task Force created and consulted various documents and reports in its discussions of student academic performance. The following is a list of the “key” documents. (A full list of articles, studies, and reports that were circulated among Task Force members and “friends” will be made available at a later date.)

Documents for and about the Hudson City School District:

--Meeting Minutes. A TFSAP Minutes Log, covering meetings from July 8, 2009, to February 12, 2010.

--“TFSAP Survey Results.”

--School Report Card(s). Records kept by the NY State Education Department.

--District Policy 1900: Parental Involvement

--District Policy 4000: Student Learning Objectives

--District Policy 4200: Curriculum Management

--District Policy 4710: Grading Systems

--Elmsford Report. Notes by the team that visited the Elmsford School District in Westchester County, December 2, 2009.

--“The Baby Step Approach,” by Florence Berth. Memo prepared for the TFSAP, October 14, 2009.

--“Looking Forward: Findings and Recommendations for Improved Student Achievement in the Hudson City School District,” by Questar III Superintendent James Baldwin et al, February 2006;

--Communications Survey conducted by TFSAP;

--Department Heads Meeting notes. From a meeting with TFSAP representatives Bill Ebel and Annabel Lee, January 6, 2010.

Studies and reports about Issues discussed in this Report:

--“Portfolio for District Redesign,” from School Communities that Work, a Project of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. <http://www.schoolcommunities.org/Archive/portfolio/index.html>.

--“High Performance in the High Poverty Schools: 90/90/90 and Beyond,” by Douglas B. Reeves. The Center for Performance Assessment.

--“The Selling of School Reform,” by Dana Goldstein. *The Nation*, June 15, 2009.

<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20090615/goldstein>

--Core Knowledge Foundation: <http://blog.coreknowledge.org/2009/09/28/willingham-%20reading-is-not-a-skill/>

and cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham’s short video on the subject:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RiP-ijdxqEc>.

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