

W07 – Education writing

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One Portsmouth school had 5 principals in 5 years. How the newest hire is helping turn it around.

<https://www.pilotonline.com/news/education/vp-nw-brighton-elementary-accreditation-transformation-20190925-h66mwbue6becfafocta6btanrq-story.html>

For Brighton Elementary, last year was a test of faith.

Could a school, through sheer force of will, turn a daily pledge into a reality?

I am what I say I am.

Could students, who told their new principal they go to the worst school in Portsmouth, be convinced otherwise?

I am not an afterthought.

Could parents, who told teachers the building looked like a jail, see it as a welcoming place?

I am part of the original plan.

Could teachers, who eyed their fifth principal in as many years warily, warm to someone with no elementary experience?

My destiny is success.

Every day last year, students and staff shouted out loud their faith in Brighton, and themselves.

“We’re calling things that are not to make it so,” said Patricia Brown, a sixth-grade science teacher.

“We’re calling it into existence.”

So I must do my best.

The first bus pulled up to Brighton this year as a plane flew in low circles over the building, a trailing banner welcoming students back and announcing the news in all caps.

This year, for the first time since 2013, Brighton will be accredited.

Paul Wilson called it first.

Arriving to lead Brighton eight weeks before the start of the 2018-19 school year, Wilson proclaimed the school would be accredited by the next. A one-year transformation.

Teachers raised their eyebrows. Accreditation is everyone's goal. The principals before Wilson wanted that, too. But this new boss was a biology teacher turned high school assistant principal. What did he know about how little kids learn? How long would he be there, anyway? They assumed Brighton was a stepping stone for the former teacher of the year.

Wilson told them he wasn't trying to go anywhere else. He hung art and family photos in his office. He held one-on-one meetings with every adult in the building and asked for their advice.

"I chose this school," Helen Darden, a fifth-grade special education teacher, recalled him saying. "This is where I want to be."

Wilson felt confident he could handle the school's academic challenges: A little over half of students were reading on grade level on state tests when he arrived, and even fewer were in math. Good teaching is good teaching, he thought, no matter the grade. But he thinks Superintendent Elie Bracy had another reason for putting him at Brighton: his personality.

One teacher described Wilson as "jolly," a fitting description. Wilson is bearded and has a wide smile, the kind that shows every tooth in your mouth. In the videos he posts on Twitter chronicling school life, his laugh can be heard booming in the backgrounds, even though he's off-camera.

"That's what this building needed. They needed the consistency, they needed the academic expertise," Wilson said. "But more than anything, they needed someone who was committed to building the culture of this place, and allowing us to tell our own story."

Wilson paid for the plane out of his own pocket, a surprise reward to tell the school's story to all of Portsmouth.

On the ground that first day back, it was Wilson who commanded attention, not the plane: Students ran from buses and parents' arms up the school steps, wrapping their arms around his legs and giving him high fives.

For almost every student, it was their first time starting a new school year with the same principal.

Portsmouth's Brighton Elementary School expects to receive full accreditation this year, a status it last held in 2013.

The teachers in your child's classroom have the biggest influence on how much they learn. But after that? Their principal matters most.

Principals are the instructional leaders of a school, but they also have a hand in everything else that affects the culture of a school, from the safety of a building to scheduling and hiring. A principal's influence sets the tone, research shows.

A principal can create silos, leaving students, teachers and parents to work in isolation or even against each other. The best ones empower each of those groups and foster collaboration.

In academically struggling schools in challenging environments like Brighton, where 100 percent of students receive free breakfasts and lunches, the research says a good principal can have an even greater effect.

Christil Worsley said she knew during her interview that teaching at Brighton would be different. Wilson hired the second-grade teacher last year. There were no handshakes after — just hugs.

"Normally I have this nervousness in interviews," Worsley said. "They wanted to hear me, and hear what I could bring to this school. I knew that this is where I belonged."

It wasn't that teachers didn't want the school to do better before Wilson got there, sixth-grade social studies teacher Carrie Thigpen said. People were just discouraged.

"We hadn't given up, but we were wondering, what else can we do?" she said.

Darden, the special education teacher, is a veteran educator who's been at Brighton since 2003. She said Wilson put the stakes in focus for teachers.

"We have to do what nobody else wants to do with these kids," she said. "He knew what the challenge was. But who else is going to do it?"

On the first day last year, Wilson rolled out a literal red carpet for students leading to the school's front door.

That was new. Previously, buses dropped students off on the side of the building.

Wilson wanted students to walk in the front. You don't welcome a guest to your home through the side door. You invite them in through the front door, he said.

Many of the changes at Brighton have been seemingly slight ones like that. They hung banners from the hallway ceilings and pasted aspirational words on the stair risers leading up to the second floor. Wilson introduced an affirmation that students recite together at the start of each day.

Other changes go beyond appearances. The school's leadership team used to be made up of just administrators and department heads. Now there are two parents and a student who join faculty meetings to help map out plans for the school.

Suspensions are down 50 percent. Teachers have largely stopped sending students to the principal's office because they know Wilson will just send them back to class most of the time.

That was a real struggle for teachers to adapt to, Darden said. They'd been trained: If a student's acting up, send them home. Now, Darden said she thinks Wilson's approach has forced her to look at how her actions can de-escalate — or escalate — a situation.

Parent support has been key to all the changes, Wilson said. He records a robocall every Sunday with updates. This is where we were last year, he tells them. This is where we are now.

"I just love whenever his voice comes on, he just booms, 'I'm the proud principal of Brighton Elementary,'" said Tiara Cooper, whose son Maxwell is in third grade.

The approach has gotten parents involved at the school who weren't previously, something Wilson tracks and sees as a key indicator of whether he's on the right track. Five parents came to a summer meet-and-greet with Wilson. Eleven came to the first PTA meeting. By the December meeting, though, the auditorium was filled with parents.

Cooper said she'd never participated in a school fundraiser until last year but went out and sold \$200 in popcorn because she believes in what's happening at the school now. Last year was just different, she said, like a breath of fresh air.

This year, Maxwell pouted while she tried to take first-day photos outside the school.

"I was like, what is the matter?" she said. "He said, 'I want to go in, I'm ready to be back.'"

Brighton still has a long way to go.

The school posted some of the largest gains on state tests of any school in Portsmouth last year, but four in 10 students aren't reading at grade level, according to the latest results.

When the school is accredited this year, it will be because of the growth students showed and thanks to a new statewide accreditation system that takes improvements like that into consideration.

But Brighton's moving in the right direction, Wilson said. He didn't have as much teacher turnover this year as last. In the first 10 days of school, enrollment was up by 30 students over last year.

Forty-four students who'd attended Brighton in the past but left have re-enrolled.

"I think the news is getting around that it's a different place," Wilson said. "They're coming back."

He suspects a "full accreditation" banner hanging outside the school will help counter the perception, too.

None of his teachers were surprised when Wilson laid out even bigger goals this year. He wants the school to earn accreditation outright, without the bump that comes from counting growth.

"We have started something but we have not transformed all the way," he said. "Now our goal is to string together some victories."

Private meetings, public squabbles and “making faces”: Norfolk School Board divisions are plain to see

https://www.pilotonline.com/news/education/article_c81c778e-3a13-11e9-9ea3-03049498d89c.html

At the last Norfolk School Board meeting, members sparred repeatedly over nearly six hours.

As the meeting wrapped up, the high school senior who sits on the board turned to the adults. He tried to break the tension.

"We can go on and leave with smiles on our faces," Jaelin Mitchell said cheerfully. "Right? Right?"

Those on the dais returned his plea with nervous laughter.

Since four new board members took office last July, such tension has become more common than not. When a meeting ends without board members rolling their eyes, sighing loudly or talking over one another, staff whisper how "well-behaved" they were.

When they aren't, staff keep their heads down but have privately said similar behavior wouldn't be tolerated from students. They concede it makes for "good TV."

The disagreements are just as often about process as they are policy decisions. On more than one occasion, disputes over board procedures have delayed discussions on weighty matters, such as plans for a proposed career and technical high school and a safety task force formed in the fall but not mentioned since. Matters once routine, like the board's agenda, are picked apart nearly every meeting.

The battle lines emerged day one: A 4-3 split of those allied with Chairwoman Noelle Gabriel and those backing Rodney Jordan, who was ousted as chairman. Those lines also extend to the support that's been expressed for Superintendent Melinda Boone, whose three-year tenure represents the longest anyone's held the top post for the last decade. The board hires and can fire the superintendent, and the Jordan faction has been more supportive of Boone.

Until now, those battle lines have been mostly visible in the split votes on most decisions. On Wednesday, the estrangement will be made more apparent when the minority convenes to air its grievances publicly under a policy that allows any two members to call a meeting. It's unclear whether any of the other four will attend. Late Tuesday, the chairwoman ordered notice of the meeting taken down from the school district website.

Few members would comment on how they think the board has been functioning, but Jordan said he was disappointed in himself and his colleagues.

"We must do better for nearly 30,000 children, and that we includes me," Jordan wrote in an email.

Christine Smith, who is one of the three calling for the special meeting and has called the board's leadership "dictatorial," said Vice Chairman Carlos Clanton had reminded members of their policy that only the chairwoman speaks for the board.

Lauren Campsen reiterated that policy but said she shared her thoughts with Gabriel and hoped it was passed along to a *Virginian-Pilot* reporter.

Gabriel responded with a statement that she said could only be used in its entirety.

Thomas Calhoun, president of the Norfolk Federation of Teachers and a frequent critic, said he feels helpless watching the board. Calhoun said he worries how the infighting will affect the district.

"I've been doing this, going to meetings for over 20 years," he said. "I have never seen a board as rudderless and out of control as this board right here."

Flashpoints

The bickering started even before newly elected members took their oaths of office, with disagreements and objections over the swearing-in ceremony.

Emails show disputes over when and where the ceremony was to take place. Within a few weeks of the May 2018 election, board member-elect Campsen wrote to Jordan expressing disappointment "with this decision to ignore the wishes of the new school board members." In the end, Campsen, Clanton and Adale Martin organized their swearing-in themselves at the city's new downtown courthouse, rejecting the traditional plan for a modest ceremony during a school board meeting.

The mood June 22 was buoyant as families crowded the courtroom. New members spoke of their hopes for progress and the new accountability an elected board — a first for the city — would bring.

Hugging someone after the swearing-in, Campsen was overheard by a reporter saying that "first we're going to get rid of Rodney, and then Melinda."

On Tuesday, Campsen said she has "no memory" of saying that.

"There would be no way I could get rid of Rodney," Campsen said when asked if it reflected her desire. "That doesn't make any sense. He's an elected official."

Two weeks after her comment in the courthouse, Jordan was out as chairman.

In the months since, the board's work has proceeded in fits and starts. Consensus reached one week will fall apart by the next, or even within the span of a few minutes — as it did when the board agreed, after months of back-and-forth, on how to conduct Boone's mid-year evaluation. One moment, it seemed board members would reconvene later to discuss their feedback, in the next Gabriel was calling for a vote to do it then, and in the next there was agreement to wait.

Issues large and small have become flashpoints:

- Gabriel and Clanton held private meetings with the mayor and some city council members during which the superintendent's performance was discussed.
- Gabriel and Campsen, before she took office, took private meetings without the superintendent's knowledge to discuss turning Lindenwood Elementary into a charter school.
- The board decided in closed session to drop a lawsuit against its educational foundation, run for eight years by Clanton, which owed thousands to vendors and scholarship recipients.
- Plans for a career and technical education high school — one of the board's marquee efforts of the past several years — appear to have stalled after Gabriel cancelled a discussion set for October. Staff say they can't seek state approval until they have guidance from the board.
- A December meeting was interrupted after Campsen accused Tanya Bhasin of "making faces" at her while she was talking.
- Campsen, Clanton and Gabriel have attempted to delay or block several key administrative hires recommended by the superintendent, including for the number two academic position.
- The board has failed to make the required public notice of at least four board or committee meetings since October. Gabriel has blamed this on miscommunications and the transition to a new clerk, who started work in January.

The board has directed the city attorney's office to investigate who was behind the rogue use of a Twitter account and pushed off committee appointments in favor of discussing the Twitter account in a closed meeting.

The factions are mostly but not entirely comprised of the old guard and the new. On one side are newcomers Campsen, Clanton and Martin and veteran Gabriel. On the other are veterans Bhasin and Jordan and newcomer Smith.

Jordan acknowledged the board's shortcomings, and Campsen has said previously she wasn't proud of her comments accusing Bhasin of making faces at her. But other members have at times bristled at any criticism. During a discussion of the board's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in January, Martin expressed concern at some speakers who criticize board members during public comment, saying that is "the real threat."

"They just make stuff up, they call us out," Martin said. "It is a threat. They're trying to divide us."

"The beginning of a journey"

Some of the disagreements are mere clashes of strong personalities. During a team-building exercise earlier this year — one of the illegally held meetings — a facilitator led the group in discussing ways to work through disagreements. When Clanton said he would do this by "(getting) them to be willing to understand," the facilitator nudged him.

"I would say work with them to understand," said Samantha Bosserman, the state school board association's director of board development. "Not get them."

But personalities aside, at the core of most of the board's disputes are strongly held beliefs about how the district is doing and in what direction it's headed. Put simply, there are those with confidence in Boone's leadership and those without.

Asked to describe their support of Boone after the meetings with city leaders were revealed last fall, Gabriel said she had "confidence that Dr. Boone is here to lead our division." Clanton said then it was a personnel matter and "I'm here with what we have."

Two-thirds of the schools are accredited, up from when Boone took the job in 2015 and the district was one of three across the state labeled a "challenged school division," but still a major indicator of the academic challenge facing the district.

Campsen and Clanton repeatedly reference the heyday of Norfolk Public Schools, when it was named the country's top urban school district and awarded the Broad Prize in 2005. Campsen says students don't have three, four or five years to wait for improvements to materialize.

When she voted last week to approve the board's accountability plan — an outline of goals and expectations for the next five years that included typos and which the superintendent said she had not been given time to fully vet — Campsen again mentioned the Broad and its legacy.

"That's the goal of this plan, to return Norfolk to the high academic performance that we know we all had. ... The potential is still there," she said.

Clanton said the plan will take the district "back to where they were."

The vote, once again, was 4-3.

Gabriel, in her statement, and in her remarks after the vote said the accountability plan's adoption is the best reflection of the high expectations this board is setting.

She said it's time for the district to move forward.

"My dad would always tell me if you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there. ... This vote is the beginning of a journey," Gabriel said.

To where remains to be seen.

Norfolk teacher accused of abuse faced similar allegations a year ago — and nothing was done

<https://www.pilotonline.com/news/education/vp-bay-view-earlier-allegation-20191125-ksucvprj6va7de3f55vhbbs7ke-story.html>

Jakari Traylor often came home from school last year with scratches and bruises, even bite marks.

The 9-year-old says he told the principal who hurt him. His mom, grandma and a teacher assistant say they did, too.

But Norfolk school officials appear to have done nothing, setting the stage for more children to be hurt.

This school year, another child told her mother the same Bay View Elementary special education teacher had hurt her. That report prompted investigations by Norfolk police, Child Protective Services and the school district and — eventually — the teacher's removal from the classroom.

School officials already acknowledged mishandling the new complaint by leaving the teacher in the classroom for two weeks. Now they say last year's reports by Jakari's family should have triggered her removal months ago — but staff, again, didn't do what they were supposed to do.

Instead, top administrators said they learned of the Traylor family's complaints for the first time last week from The Virginian-Pilot. Acting Superintendent Sharon Byrdsong put the two executive directors who oversee all of the city's elementary schools on administrative leave Friday — one had been admonished earlier for not reporting the second child's allegation to human resources, and the other is the former Bay View principal that Jakari's family said they told last year.

“Let me say, unequivocally, that Norfolk Public Schools will not tolerate the mistreatment or abuse of any child, especially those who are most vulnerable,” Byrdsong said in a statement. “My commitment to the children of this school division is unwavering and I will ensure that protocols for reporting any allegation of mistreatment and abuse of a child are followed to the letter. And if any allegations are found to be true, then appropriate personnel action will be swift.”

Even delayed, Jakari's grandmother said the news of the teacher's removal fills her with relief.

“We weren't crazy last year, and neither was my grandson,” Lorraine Elliott said.

“The system failed us.”

The first time was in October or November of 2018, Jakari's mom, Lorraine Traylor, said. He came home in tears and after she calmed the boy down, he told her what happened:

“(The teacher) hit me,” she recalled him saying.

That's what her son, and other students, called the 18-year veteran teacher who was placed on leave in mid-October. The Pilot isn't naming the teacher because she hasn't been charged with a crime. She declined to comment on the initial allegations when reached early last week, and did not respond to a message left Friday about the additional allegations.

Jakari would come home from school with fingernail imprints in his arm, Traylor said. Once, he came home with a busted lip, and told his mom that the teacher used his hand to hit his mouth. Another time,

he came home with a bite mark on his back. He'd tell his mom and grandma that his teacher did it. Other times, he'd say the teacher threw away his lunch or snacks because "I was bad."

"She would choke me and she would grab my neck," Jakari said last week, sitting with his mother and grandmother during an interview at their home. "(She) would hold me down and she would slap me with my own hand. (The teacher) need to go."

After the bite mark, Elliott said she confronted the teacher, who denied hurting the boy.

"She said, 'I wouldn't do nothing like that to him,'" Elliott recalled the teacher saying.

Elliott and Traylor also complained to the principal at the time, Valerie Walton. Traylor said Walton expressed disbelief at Jakari's allegations.

"She said, 'I don't believe she would do anything like this,'" Traylor recalled Walton saying.

Traylor said she lost track of how many times she complained to Walton — six or seven times at least. Meanwhile, Jakari was coming home from school many days in tears and was acting up in class worse than ever before, running from the class and the school and prompting repeated calls to mom and grandma.

He catches the bus at his grandma's house, and every morning was a struggle, Elliott said.

"It was H-E-L-L," she said. "He did not want to go at all."

This year he was assigned to a new classroom with a new teacher. Traylor said the difference between this year and last year is like night and day. Jakari said he loves his new teacher, who texts his mom regularly to tell her when he's had a good day.

Tammie Sykes started working at Bay View last October as a special education teacher assistant.

The work was hard: Most of the children needed one-on-one support throughout the day, she said, but each class had two or three assistants and two or three times as many children. Students would get frustrated and act out when they didn't understand instructions. Many of them were non-verbal. They would piggy-back off one another, she said, one child's misbehavior setting off others'.

It was a job that required extreme patience, she said.

She was assigned to another classroom, not Jakari's, and had limited interactions with his teacher. But the other teacher assistants would talk, she said, and one told Sykes she was upset at the way she saw Jakari's teacher treating students. The assistant told Sykes she was afraid she'd be fired if she reported what was happening. So Sykes said she would tell the principal, instead.

When Sykes told Walton, she said Walton threatened her job and told her, "You talk too much."

“She said, ‘Sometimes you have to learn to keep your mouth closed because your job is on the line,’” Sykes recalled. Sykes said she backtracked. “I said, ‘You are so right. You’re right.’”

Then, in February, a teacher assistant in Jakari’s classroom was out so Sykes was asked to fill in. She and the teacher were the only adults in the classroom, she said.

Jakari came into the room, late that day for school. The teacher told him to sit down, but he said he didn’t want to. Then they started arguing, Sykes said, with the teacher insisting he sit down.

The teacher pushed Jakari down into his seat and was trying to push the desk up to him so forcefully the desk flipped over, Sykes said. The teacher righted it and pushed his head down against the desk, she said. Then, Jakari tried to run out of the classroom. Sykes said the teacher slammed the door, then elbowed Jakari in the neck. At this point, he was backed into a corner. The boy bit his teacher.

“When he bit her, she turned him around and she bit him back,” Sykes said. “She bit him on the back.”

Jakari told his teacher he was going to tell people what she did, Sykes said.

“She said ‘Ain’t nobody going to believe a dummy like you,’” Sykes recalled. “Who gonna believe you if you’re a retard?”

Sykes went to Walton again, this time to share what she had witnessed. Walton, Sykes said, told her “You must not want your job.” Sykes said she didn’t know what else to do so she “left it alone” after that.

“I didn’t know who else to go to,” she said. “If an administrator says that to me, who else knows and is covering it up?”

Traylor saw the injuries her son was coming home with but said she hadn’t heard what Sykes observed before a Pilot reporter told her.

“No, no, no, no,” she said.

None of what Jakari, his family or Sykes said appears to have reached upper administrators until now.

A spokeswoman for the district, Barbara Hunter, said the Traylor family’s allegations have triggered a new investigation. They have no record of any earlier investigation into what Jakari said.

“NPS protocol on allegations of child abuse or mistreatment requires immediate notification of Child Protective Services and the NPS Departments of Human Resources and Student Support Services,” Hunter wrote in a statement. “This protocol was not followed.”

Traylor and Sykes said they haven’t heard from the district since the Pilot shared their names.

Walton, now an executive director overseeing half of the city's elementary schools, is on administrative leave now. So is Dennis Fifer, the elementary executive director who oversees Bay View's principal this year. Neither could be reached for comment. The classroom's three teacher assistants also are on administrative leave, Hunter said.

What triggered an investigation into the teacher this year was a little girl who told her mom that the teacher had twisted her arm and squeezed her hand so hard it hurt. The mom, who spoke on condition of anonymity because her daughter is still a Norfolk student and she fears retaliation, said she found bruises on her daughter one night while washing her in the bath.

The mom talked to the principal and another teacher at the school, who reported the allegation to Child Protective Services in early October. A few days later, more allegations were reported to CPS. More than two weeks after the mom's initial complaint, the teacher was removed from the classroom. Almost two weeks after that, CPS contacted parents of the other children in the classroom to tell them.

Several of those parents, who also spoke to The Pilot on condition of anonymity because they feared retaliation, said CPS staff told them the teacher was observed dragging children by their arms across the floor, bending their fingers backward and twisting their arms behind their backs.

When his mom read a Bay View special education teacher was removed from the classroom pending allegations of child abuse, Traylor said she knew exactly who it was even though she hadn't been named.

"Maybe if they had believed someone, his story could have saved the next child," she said.