

An Interview with Dr. Susan Szachowicz

Principal of Brockton High School

Nancy Kleniewski



How can we improve urban education and reduce the gap in academic success between students attending urban schools and those at suburban schools? Educational analysts and commentators hold many competing positions. One camp says that the problem is a lack of consistently enforced standards for student performance and recommends regular and rigorous standardized tests to identify “failing schools.” A second camp points to the unequal funding and curricular independence for the thousands of school districts in the U.S. and argues for a greater state and federal role in curriculum and financial support for public schools. A third camp identifies bureaucracy as the culprit and advocates for increased innovation such as small schools, pilot schools, school-to-work programs, and charter schools. A fourth camp argues that schools are being scapegoated for fundamental social ills such as poverty, racism, disrupted family life and urban communities, and the real solutions lie not in the schools but in changing the economic structures of the surrounding communities.

For a snapshot of urban education at its best, we need to look no farther than to Bridgewater State College’s largest “feeder” school, Brockton High School. With over 4300 students, Brockton High is the largest high school in New England. With more than a third of its students not speaking English at home, it is one of the most diverse schools in Massachusetts. And with seventy-two per cent of its students qualifying for free or reduced lunch, its students and their families routinely experience severe economic challenges.

Yet against these odds Brockton High School achieves astounding student success. In each year since 2004 it has been selected by the International Center for Leadership in Education as a National Model School. In 2006, it won the National School Change Award. In 2007, it graduated 249 John and Abigail Adams Scholars. And earlier this year, Brockton High received a Bronze Medal from the *U. S. News and World Report* as one of the top schools in the nation that best serve all students. The school’s philosophy is “high standards, no excuses.”

How does a school defy its demographics and mobilize a low-income, highly diverse student body to achieve academic success? This is the question I posed to Brockton High School Principal, Dr. Susan Szachowicz (BSC

’75, ’81G and BSC Trustee) in early February. While I examined the dozens of photos, displays, and tributes in Sue’s office, she told me about her work and her passion for the school she leads. A lifelong citizen of Brockton, Sue graduated from Brockton High, did her student teaching there, and was hired immediately after graduation to teach history and social studies. After serving as department head, house master, and associate principal, she was appointed principal in 2004. Here are excerpts from our conversation.

NK: How is Brockton High different from other large urban institutions? What are its most important challenges?

SS: We are unique because of the focus on academic success and the celebration of academic success. We are the highest-performing urban high school in the state. The challenges we face are the same that any urban school faces. Our students deal with a lot of baggage from outside of school. 38% don’t speak English as their first language, and we have over 30 different languages spoken in the school. But the biggest issue I would have to say is poverty, kids being raised in poverty, across racial and ethnic lines. They are facing educational gaps, missing links all over the place. Many are wards of the state, foster kids, with so much stacked against them. School is a safe haven for many who don’t want to go home. The lure of the streets hurts even those who are smart and articulate. Sometimes I sit in disciplinary hearings and know if they were raised in your house or mine they would be applying to all of the best colleges. We can’t change their circumstances but we can help them face their challenges and succeed.

NK: Brockton High has had a dramatic increase in student performance over the past few years. Can you share with us some of the indicators of that improvement?

SS: On the MCAS, our improvement is occurring at a much steeper rate than across the state of Massachusetts. Our mantra is “Meet or beat the state.” In 1998, our failure rate for sophomores was 75% on the math test and 44% on the English Language Arts test. By last spring, we reduced the failure rates to 19% in math and 9% in English. But it’s not just about passing. We have had a tremendous increase in the number of our students scoring at the Advanced and Proficient level—we want them to be the best they can be. Also,



we offer many Advanced Placement courses, and 75% of our students pass the AP test with a score of 3 or higher (sufficient to earn college credit). This high rate of student success is the basis for the awards we have received.

But the biggest change has been in the culture of the school. When I first started teaching here, the principal told the students, “You have a right to fail.” I was horrified. The students sensed that expectations were extremely low and guess what?—They met them. Now the culture says, “Welcome to Brockton High, you have no right to fail. Our obligation is to help you succeed. And we always celebrate their successes. Now the students know they are heard and respected. There is a new tone, and the kids are very proud of the school.

NK: Who were your collaborators, and how did you introduce the changes needed to make this dramatic improvement?

SS: When I was the history department head, we started looking at time and learning because of the Education Reform Law of 1993. It was like the hammer in education; it forced the changes in education across the state. The law increased funding but also made the schools perform. It made us change how we counted “learning.” Up to then, every minute that the students were in school and breathing, except for lunch, was counted as learning time. The law made us count only structured, meaningful learning experiences, not homeroom, not passing time between classes. We discovered that we were many hours short on learning time. I was on the state time and learning committee so the principal asked me to set up a committee at our school to change the schedule. So who do you get? I tapped my friends in the school to put together our Time and Learning Committee, and we worked out a new schedule for the school. That format was so

successful, we broadened our focus to deal with curriculum, instruction, and assessment in the school. Our committee, now called the Restructuring Committee, represented teachers and administrators, every department in the school, and essentially became the “think tank” for the school.

NK: Change is often painful for the participants. Did you face resistance, and if so, from whom and how did you overcome it?

SS: The Restructuring Committee did have resistance, but we started with data—no one could deny the problem. It was overwhelming. We began a literacy initiative that was school wide. We (the Restructuring Committee) defined literacy at Brockton High by articulating a core set of literacy skills that we felt were applicable in every discipline. We

developed Literacy Charts, which are now posted in every classroom in the school. We also knew that the failure was overwhelming, so we decided to target one thing. We knew that to get people to buy in, they had to see some success. We knew that we had to train everyone well because most teachers were certainly well intentioned but cautious

because they had seen so many things come and go. We persuaded them that every subject area could include writing—even art, music, science. Everybody used their own content and we helped them learn to incorporate open-response writing in their classes using a consistent process so the students were exposed repeatedly throughout the year to this writing process.

Now here is the best part of the whole thing. We trained everybody to teach a writing process, first by training



AN EXCERPT FROM AN E-MAIL FROM SUSAN SZACHOWICZ ABOUT ONE DAY IN THE LIFE OF BROCKTON HIGH

Yesterday I began the day with a disciplinary hearing for a girl gang issue. (Typically the “tough girl” ends up boo-hooing all over the office.)... Then I get on the PA and we have our Poet Laureate of the Week read a poem that was brilliant, powerful, and delivered with such passion that you’d think she was a trained public speaker.... Then I meet with three young ladies who were reporting a sexual harassment issue—with a TEACHER.... I’m walking through the cafeteria at lunch and I get called back to the office to take a call from a student who was here but after some “issues” I allowed him to go to Night School. I get on the phone with him and he just has to tell me that his case finally went to the jury and he beat all of the charges! So now he will be able to finish in June and he is actually smart—he passed the MCAS on the first try. And he just had to be sure that I would be there to present his diploma.... Then I get an e-mail from U.S. News and World Report about the Bronze medal.... And to cap the day off, we had our first Ballroom Dancing session for this year! Forty kids in the gym—all races, all ethnicities, wearing the wave caps, looking the urban image, and they were fox trotting around the gym.

And that was all IN ONE DAY! When I got home last night, I was thinking about what a great ride it is here—the ups and downs are just amazing, and it really made me smile. It also makes me crazy when someone at a conference starts to whine about all the obstacles, and what they CAN’T do... Oh please...

them in interdisciplinary groups, and then in their own subject area. We said, here is the process, then how can we do it in history, in science. So everyone was trained to use the same writing process, same rubric for assessment; the only difference would be in the content. Teachers would use their own content to teach this open response writing. The final piece is the most powerful. I was by then the associate principal, and I gave the department heads a calendar of implementation. Each department was told to assign writing at a different time, so each student would get this writing assignment over and over during the year. Every subject was included, even physics, music, even cooking. In fact, one day I wandered into a consumer science class because I smelled chocolate chip cookies baking and a student whined, “Oh, Dr. Szach, we are in *cooking* class and we have to write.” I said, “Oh, that’s awful. You should write a letter to the principal.” So by the end of the year, every student had gone through the writing process repeatedly. The first year we implemented this, our MCAS failure went from 41 to 23% and the second year it went down to 13% in English Language Arts.

At first the teachers resisted, but we got unbelievable improvement by doing just one thing, and that is what got us the buy-in. Then the math people asked if we could help them. The head of the math department analyzed the math test and saw that a large proportion of the questions contained a graph or chart, so we asked teachers in all of the subjects to use graphs and charts. The process was the same. There were some teachers who didn’t support this literacy initiative, but this was a school wide mandate. Most embraced it because it meant that the students in their classes were reading and writing better. But there were some who felt they were hired to teach a particular subject area, and some

left or retired early. The kids needed the basic skills so it wasn’t an option for us to include them in all classes.

NK: What lessons have you learned about education and school management from this experience?

SS: There are so many lessons learned.



The biggest lesson is that schools are big organizations and what you need is hard work, hard work, hard work. That’s the magic bullet. You have to be relentless. But it is absolutely possible to bring about positive change in the building, and the faculty like it better when things are going well!

Most of what we did was trial and error. You learn by doing—try it and if it doesn’t work you back off. We figured the scores couldn’t go down, so we went ahead. They improved. Then we did it again. We never expected to make such a dramatic improvement. We defied our demographics.

The best day was when the Commissioner’s Office called. I was nervous. The Commissioner, David Driscoll, said, “Szachowicz! I’ve got news for you. Brockton High School is the most improved school in the state and I want to deliver the news at Brockton High. You get all of the kids there.” The Commissioner told the students, “You are a school of champions in your city of champions.” They all cheered. Then I asked him to come to the faculty meeting that afternoon and he enthusiastically told the faculty it was because of the hard work they did. After that the teachers didn’t have to argue any more. Now there is a great feeling in the building.

—Nancy Kleniewski, *Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, has recently been named president of the State University of New York College at Oneonta.*