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# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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NY SCHOOLS

## New Haven's School Effort Hits Hurdles

By **SHELLY BANJO**  
September 14, 2011

NEW HAVEN, Conn.—A dozen students in uniforms of white-collared shirts and blue slacks looked up attentively at their sixth-grade teachers at the Brennan Rogers School on the first day of school this year.



New Haven third-grade teacher Tavares Bussey at Brennan-Roger. *JESSE NEIDER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

"We  
will

never make you do something that doesn't guide you to a purpose, we're not here to waste your time," said second-year teacher Kimberlee Henry. Her students nodded. "Everything you will do this year will prepare you for something else, giving you the skills you need to go on to high school, college, and excel at life."

The school's focus wasn't always as sharp. Brennan Rogers, which has about 360 kindergarten through eighth-graders, spent decades failing its students. Parents commonly campaigned for transfers to other schools that weren't plagued with violence and lagging from inattention.

Now, the school serves as the centerpiece of a sweeping reform effort launched three years ago by New Haven Mayor John DeStefano to turn around this inner-city district, where one in four children drops out every year and test scores have languished for decades.

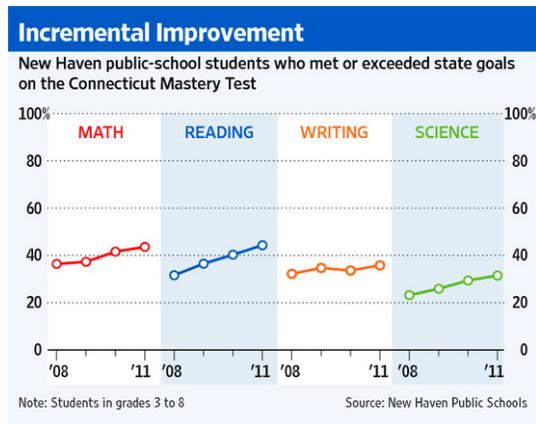
When New Haven reached a deal with its teachers in 2009 that outlined a plan to reform failing schools and evaluate teachers based on student test scores, the approach was hailed from the White House to the American Federation of Teachers as a national model. Yet as the overhaul heads into its third year, New Haven is finding that systemwide reform presents challenges that test even the most lofty rhetoric.

Test scores in the 20,000-student district have increased, but only somewhat, and a large achievement gap persists between the poor and middle-class. Parents are more involved, but student discipline has remained a stubborn problem. Ridding the system of poorly performing teachers and principals can be a slow process.

"It's still too soon to tell," said Garth Harries, who has led New Haven's reform efforts

since Mr. DeStefano hired him from New York City's Department of Education. "We feel good about the progress we've made, but we have a very long way to go."

Part of New Haven's initial success has come from a handful of well-timed factors: a mayor with control over the schools; a cooperative teachers union that agreed to evaluations tied to student test scores; and millions of private dollars from Yale University and other donors.



In 2007, David Cicarella became union president. Mr. Cicarella, who drives a white BMW convertible he bought to celebrate his daughter's college graduation and subsequent acceptance into the Teach for America program, vowed to make districtwide changes and work with the DeStefano administration.

"A new sheriff was in town," he said. "I told union

members, 'If you don't participate in the reform process, I can guarantee you won't like the outcome. But if you do participate, you'll at least get your input in.'"

Until 2009, Mr. DeStefano's attention to schools consisted largely of rebuilding their crumbling buildings. But influenced by a wave of national education rhetoric, he decided to change his tack, using teacher contract talks to force more comprehensive school reform.

During talks with the teachers union, he split up negotiations into two rooms: wages and compensation in one, and school reform in the other.

"I told them if they reach a compromise in the reform room, I'd guarantee they would be happy with the contract terms that come out of the other room," he said.

Mr. DeStefano, who is up for re-election this fall, continues to use school reform as his main political platform. He gave all teachers raises, including as much as 10% for teachers going into schools that are undergoing the most drastic shifts, called "turnaround schools."

As he cut other departments' funding, he kept the Education Department budget stable. "We're now moving from the theoretical to the actual, to see if the design on paper will indeed work in practice," he said in a recent interview.

Education reformers are watching the district's teacher-evaluation system closely.

Last year, 75 of New Haven's 1,846 teachers were deemed in need of improvement by the district, making them eligible to be fired. After they were given training, half improved enough to keep their jobs. At the end of the year, the 34 teachers who didn't improve, including 16 with tenure, retired or resigned.

Still, critics say a number of challenges persist: Poorly performing teachers ousted from the turnaround schools have been able to jump to other jobs in the system while the district tries to prove they're ineffective, in some cases, over two years.

And, said Jeffrey Kerekes, a New Haven psychotherapist and budget watchdog looking to unseat Mr. DeStefano in the mayoral election this fall, "we still have patronage principals who are there for who they know rather than what they know."

Mr. Harries said all principals go through an evaluation process similar to that of teachers and four principals have left the district because of poor performance. He heralded a promise from Yale University that guarantees graduating high-school students admission to public state college and a partnership with the United Way as signs the whole New Haven Community has bought into school reform idea.

At the same time, more than half the district's third- and fourth-graders aren't proficient in reading, with only 44% of New Haven students performing at goal level in math last year. Overall, test scores have inched up only two to four percentage points since 2010.

"The pace of reform isn't nearly adequate, and every day we delay, we're failing our kids," Mr. Kerekes said.

At Brennan Rogers, the number of students performing at goal level in grades three through eight dipped in math to 20% in 2011 from 27% the previous year, while reading scores rose to 27% from 23% in the same period.

"It was frustrating not to see the scores go up after all the effort we put in," said special-education teacher Nicole Mastroianni. "We're just going to have to work even harder this year."

When Brennan Rogers was identified as a turnaround school in 2010, the district required 39 full-time teachers to reapply for their jobs. Only 12 teachers were accepted back. A new principal came in with a background in education reform.

In addition, the school tapped an outside management company called Expeditionary Learning to develop teacher training programs and help implement curriculum and procedural changes. The school lengthened the school day and required teachers to spend every Wednesday afternoon learning how to become better teachers.

Many of the reforms worked: Parents were engaged for the first time in years, filling out parent surveys and attending conference nights. Students didn't leave the school in droves as in years past, and across the school pockets of individual classes and students improved in math and reading. The school was awarded federal funding to become a magnet program focusing on media and communications. Still, some reforms have fallen by the wayside, including a longer school day that the teachers and principal disliked.

Mr. Cicarella, the teachers union president, said districtwide results could take years. "School reform is about fixing the system, and that takes time and patience," he said.

**Write to Shelly Banjo at [shelly.banjo@wsj.com](mailto:shelly.banjo@wsj.com)**

### **Corrections & Amplifications**

The daughter of David Cicarella, the teachers union president in New Haven, was accepted into the Teach for America program. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said she worked for Teach for America.