

Urban Advocate

POINTS OF PRIDE

Missouri urban school board earns national recognition for gains in math, graduation rates, and college readiness

Michelle Healy

Missouri's Ferguson-Florissant School District is rewriting its urban education story by emphasizing the needs of students and staff to transform educational outcomes.

The transformation is a work in progress, say leaders of the 9,500-student district in suburban St. Louis County, adding that it has firmly taken root and is producing tangible results.

For its achievements, the Ferguson-Florissant School Board was recognized in September with the 2023 Award for Urban School Excellence by NSBA's Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE). The award, which honors distinction in school board governance, academic improvement, educational equity, and community engagement, was presented during the CUBE 2023 Annual Conference in Chicago.

"The Ferguson-Florissant School District has made a transformational change, emerging from one of its darkest days with the killing of Michael Brown nearly 10 years ago," said Verjeana McCotter-Jacobs, NSBA executive director and CEO. "Today, its future—and the future of the students it serves—is extremely bright, evidenced by tremendous gains in math, graduation rates, and college readiness."

For Courtney Graves, a member of the Ferguson-Florissant School Board since 2015 and its current president, the progress underway is propelled by the district's commitment to equity and making an impact holistically. "We focus on figuring out what our stu-

dents need to succeed," says Graves, who also is a CUBE Steering Committee member. "We recognize that there are so many other things going on with a student's family and (in the lives of) our teachers that we have to take a step back sometimes and focus on those things."

That support includes free mental health services and free academic tutoring for every student, access to a medical clinic strictly for district staff and their families, and the inclusion of staff wellness days in the school calendar. These efforts enable the district to improve the classroom and school culture.

Notable academic accomplishments in the Ferguson-Florissant School District, which has an 82% African American student enrollment, include the highest growth in mathematics in the St. Louis region on state assessments; a 93.6% four-year graduation rate, including a 94% four-year graduation rate for Black male students; and 92% of incoming STEAM Academy ninth-graders scoring at proficient or advanced on the eighth-grade state math assessment. In October, the STEAM Academy at McCluer South-Berkeley High School was named one of the best high schools in America by *U.S. News and World Report*.

"We started the [STEAM Academy] just six years ago, so a lot of great work is happening," says Superintendent Joseph Davis. Students are "taking AP courses, IB courses, dual enrollment courses with colleges and community colleges in the area. Those are points of pride."

The district's STEAM Academy Middle School has



SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENT COURTNEY GRAVES AND SUPERINTENDENT JOSEPH DAVIS WITH A STUDENT DURING AN ACADEMIC AWARDS CEREMONY. A FATHER PARTICIPATES IN THE REAL MEN READ PROGRAM.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF FERGUSON-FLORISSANT SCHOOL DISTRICT

been ranked No. 2 in performance out of approximately 450 middle schools in Missouri, Davis adds. He notes that 75% of the students who achieved the 92% proficient and advanced rate on last year's eighth-grade math assessment were Black.

Davis, superintendent since 2015, is quick to balance these bright spots with the reality that the district is not yet where it wants to be academically. "We still have a number of kiddos who struggle," he says, explaining that data analyses indicate that the challenge is rooted at the elementary school level. In response, the district has undertaken an extensive initiative to elevate elementary-level teaching and learning. That includes some 30 elementary teachers from across the district completing a math specialist certification and receiving specialized training. A similar approach is planned around elementary literacy.

With "strong pockets of excellence" visible throughout Ferguson-Florissant schools and demonstrating what is possible, there's reason for community optimism, Davis says. Other points of pride include a nationally recognized early education program; Project Lead The Way certification for science, technology, engineering, and math curriculum earned by all high schools; the award-winning Challenger Learning Center space education facility; and the Red Tail Cadet Program, a flight training program modeled after the legendary Tuskegee Airmen. The cadet program has secured private pilot licenses for students before they've graduated high school.

In January, the district will join the small cohort of school boards seating a student member on its governance board. Following a student election, the student will be a nonvoting board member "but will have a

voice in board meetings," Davis says. This is another example of "the board's commitment to making sure student voice is at the table, and their parents' and our community's voice is at the table as well."

Through town halls, forums, surveys, and focus groups, the board recently engaged students, parents, and other community members in conversations that resulted in a new school uniform policy. Students in kindergarten to fifth grade began wearing uniforms this academic year. All students, K-12, will wear uniforms during the 2024-25 school year.

When it comes to governance, Graves and her board colleagues adhere to the philosophy that they must together own district shortcomings. "I think that's what many boards fail to realize," she says. "It's us. If one child is failing, it's not just the superintendent and what he's doing in his cabinet. It's all of us. We have to hold each other accountable."

Furthering educational equity for all students, especially those most marginalized, is a top priority for the board, which approved an equity resolution in 2018 and followed with an equity audit, equity symposium, marches, and the adoption of anti-racist standards for social justice and anti-racist schools.

From infusing these standards into the district's strategic plan to creating change teams at the building level, ensuring equitable opportunities for all students is positively impacting the trajectory of students' careers and well-being, Graves says.

"Our kids deserve quality daily," adds Davis, "and we're trying to make sure that happens."

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DR. JONATHAN HODGES, RECIPIENT OF THE CUBE 2023 BENJAMIN ELIJAH MAYS LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD, WITH CUBE CHAIR GILL GARRETT, DILIGENT CORPORATION'S DIANE BAKER FREEMAN, AND NSBA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND CEO VERJEANA MCCOTTER-JACOBS.

A Lifesaver and a Guiding Light

Lifetime Achievement Award winner leaves a legacy of advocacy
for children and accountability for adults

As a young physician working in a Paterson, New Jersey, hospital, school board service was nowhere on Dr. Jonathan Hodges' life plan. But it was while treating patients in a hospital emergency room that his plan started to shift, and Hodges' future in public education in his adopted hometown came into view.

In one incident, he recalled pulling the shotgun pellets out of the chest of a 21-year-old and watching him die from the damage to his heart. In another, while already treating two teenagers for gunshot wounds, a third teen entered the emergency room "carrying his intestines."

In talking to other young people he encountered, Hodges noticed that many had dreams of sports stardom but "no focus or educational options that could

lead them someplace else."

Those encounters prompted Hodges "to go see what's going on in the schools," a journey that launched two decades of relentless advocacy for students, staff, and families as a commissioner on the Paterson Public Schools Board of Education.

In September, Hodges, a former school board member, was recognized with the 2023 Benjamin Elijah Mays Lifetime Achievement Award, presented by the NSBA's Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE). The award, which honors a school board member who has demonstrated a long-standing commitment to representing the educational needs of urban schoolchildren, was presented during the annual CUBE Conference in Chicago before an audience of nearly 1,000 urban school board members.

The award pays tribute to the contributions of Benjamin Elijah Mays, the son of parents born into slavery, who became a civil rights activist, education pioneer, mentor to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., president of Morehouse College, and an adviser to three U.S. presidents.

“At CUBE, we pride ourselves in sharing best practices and showcasing excellence in urban districts,” said CUBE Chair Gill Garrett, president of Pontiac School District Board of Education in Michigan. In honoring Dr. Hodges and the Ferguson-Florissant School Board, recipient of the CUBE 2023 Award for Urban School Excellence, “we hope to inspire school boards across the country, but also give them the tools, resources, and network to serve their communities and ensure that their students have access to the best education possible.”

“Dr. Hodges is, quite literally, a lifesaver,” said NSBA Executive Director and CEO Verjeana McCotter-Jacobs. “Not only because of his time as an emergency room doctor, but because of his commitment and passion to ensuring that Paterson’s students have access to the funding, quality teaching, infrastructure, and other resources that each child in America deserves and should have.”

The now-retired physician, who served 21 years on the Paterson Board, provided a wealth of knowledge and a deep understanding of what the district went through and needed, says former board member Dania Martinez. “He was there when local control was taken away, and he’s been here when we obtained local control back. He’s a guiding light. He’s such a strong advocate for education, anything to do with academics. He pushes and pushes and won’t stop until it gets done.”

When Hodges reached out to the principal of East-side High School in the late 1990s and volunteered to lecture before the health professions classes, the school district was already under state control. That status lasted nearly 30 years, until 2021. Invited to become a community member of the school’s management team, Hodges began taking note of academic performance, outdated educational resources, and crumbling school buildings.

“When I watched all the things that were happening with the facilities and the way things were not being taught to students, I decided to run for the board,” he says. First elected in 2002, he knew “we had to go fight. That’s where my voice began to rise.”

Together with others on the board, he exposed mismanagement by state officials, highlighted substan-

dard educational conditions, and uncovered missing funds. Through extended legal battles, aided by the Newark-based Education Law Center, Hodges helped lead the effort to secure a landmark court decision requiring the state to invest more in education and school infrastructure.

Hodges and colleagues also fought against delays in school construction and worked closely with local representatives and parent groups to achieve vital improvements, including the opening of new schools and renovations, Martinez says.

He challenged the board’s advisory classification during the state takeover, constantly pushing for greater autonomy and recognition, she adds.

Since local control was reinstated, the hard work continues to secure the adequate funding needed to develop a curriculum that is challenging, rigorous, and diverse enough for the nearly 30,000-student school district to be competitive with any in the state, Hodges says.

Retired Paterson Superintendent Eileen Shafer has known and worked with Hodges for more than 20 years throughout her various positions with the district. “He’s what a board member should be,” Shafer says. “Somebody questioning what we’re doing, asking why are we doing it? Why are we spending taxpayers’ money to do certain things? Is it working? If it’s not working, let’s get rid of it and get something that will work for the kids.”

His legacy is one of accountability, she says. “There’s no doubt about it.”

Hodges says his own educational experience, growing up mostly in Queens, New York, served as inspiration for the work he did on the school board. “When I was young, my mother used to check the textbooks, the science books particularly, used in my neighborhood versus those used in the rich, majority neighborhoods. It was like Dick and Jane versus Shakespeare,” he recalls.

Refusing to settle for an inferior education for her son, “she pulled me out of the neighborhood school and used false addresses to get me a decent education,” he says. “So, I’m very sensitive to the educational needs of children. I’m very aware and can’t ever forget what my mother did for me. I never would have made it otherwise. Never.”

Michelle Healy (mhealy@nsba.org) is senior editor of American School Board Journal.

Building Strong Foundations

A brighter, more sustainable future for urban schools requires a triad of advocacy, executive leadership, and governance

Gill Garrett



PONTIAC SCHOOL DISTRICT BOARD MEMBERS AND SUPERINTENDENT KELLEY WILLIAMS (FAR RIGHT) CUT THE RIBBON TO THE PONTIAC ALUMNI LEGACY WALK, CREATED THROUGH A COLLABORATION BETWEEN DISTRICT ADMINISTRATION, THE BOARD, AND ALUMNI. PHOTO COURTESY OF PONTIAC SCHOOL DISTRICT.



Gill Garrett

CUBE Steering Committee Chair and the president of Michigan's Pontiac School District Board of Education

Urban districts are the beating hearts of our societies, grappling with diverse challenges ranging from infrastructure development to social equity. To navigate these complexities successfully, a dynamic interplay among advocacy, executive leadership, and governance is essential. Let's explore the significance of this triad in shaping the destiny of urban areas.

ADVOCACY: THE VOICE OF THE COMMUNITY

Advocacy forms the bedrock of a thriving urban district by amplifying the voices of its diverse residents. Local advocacy groups, community organizations, and engaged citizens play a vital role in highlighting the unique needs and aspirations of their communities. Whether advocating for improved public services, sustainable development, or social justice, these voices provide the

grassroots perspective essential for informed decision-making.

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP: CRAFTING VISION AND DIRECTION

Executive leadership and school boards in urban school districts are akin to a compass guiding the way forward. School boards, superintendents, city councils, mayors, city managers, and other community leaders must possess the vision of a sustainable future for our students. They are tasked with steering urban development initiatives and balancing economic growth with social responsibility. Strong leadership fosters collaboration among stakeholders, driving innovation and resilience in the face of evolving challenges.

GOVERNANCE: THE BACKBONE OF EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT

Governance establishes the rules of the game in urban districts. Transparent, accountable, and responsive governance frameworks are indispensable for effective policymaking. Local governments must be equipped to address issues such as infrastructure development, education, health care, and environmental sustainability. A well-structured governance system ensures that decisions are made in the best interest of the entire community, fostering trust and cooperation.

SYNERGY AT WORK

The interaction between advocacy, executive leadership, and governance is the linchpin of urban success. Advocacy informs leadership of the real-time needs of the community, while strong executive leadership ensures these needs are addressed through strategic planning and execution. Governance provides the institutional framework necessary to translate these plans into actionable policies, balancing the interests of diverse parties.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES:

Despite their importance, these elements face challenges such as bureaucratic red tape, political polarization, and resource constraints. However, they also present opportunities for creative solutions and partnerships that can transcend traditional boundaries, fostering a more resilient and responsive urban landscape.

In the tapestry of urban development, the threads of advocacy, executive leadership, and governance are interwoven, forming a resilient and vibrant fabric. As urban districts continue to evolve, recognizing and harnessing the power of this triad becomes imperative for building cities that are not only efficient and sustainable but also inclusive and equitable. Advocacy empowers communities, executive leadership charts the course, and governance ensures the journey is guided by the collective well-being of all. Together, they forge a path toward a brighter, more sustainable urban future.

Gill Garrett (gill.garrett@pontiacschools.org) is the 2023-25 chair of the CUBE Steering Committee and president of Michigan's Pontiac School District Board of Education.



Urban Advocate, the official publication of NSBA's Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE), is published four times a year.
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About CUBE

The Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE) is an integral NSBA program whose mission is to champion educational equity for ALL children, while recognizing that historically underserved, underrepresented, and economically disadvantaged children require the added attention and support of policymakers.