

Frank T. Simpson-Waverly Elementary School is named after a long-time neighborhood resident and the first employee of Connecticut's first civil rights agency. Located in northeast Hartford, near four colleges and a major urban park, and four miles from downtown Hartford, the Simpson-Waverly area is still recovering from the economic recession of the 1990s. The school's current population of 340 pre-K to 6th grade students is down from 600 K- 8th grade students in the 90s. Ninety-four percent of the schools' students, many of whom live with grandparents, are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

School setting

The state capitol, Hartford is also Connecticut's poorest city, with a median income in 2000 of \$27,100. (As a whole, Connecticut's median family income is the highest in the country; the median family income in Farmington, a suburb of Hartford, was \$85,400 in 2000. This city-suburb disparity is the largest in the country.) Nearly 28% of Hartford's residents live below the poverty level—about half of the city's residents receive some form of entitlement, assistance, or government subsidy. In 2000, its total population was 121,578, of which 38% was African American, 27% white, and the remainder Asian, Native American, or mixed race. The city's birth rate increased 20% over the last decade. One in four infants is born to a teenaged mother.



Despite the realities of serving the poorest and most crime-ridden neighborhoods in the city, Simpson-Waverly has gone from a low-to-moderately-low performing city school to a top performer in the state over the last seven years. More than 60% of its predominantly African American student body stays at Simpson-Waverly each year, a notably low mobility rate for an urban school. The school's philosophy is summed up in a banner that hangs at the school's entrance:

**Listening to the voices of our children:
Looking at the ordinary and seeing the extraordinary.**

1997: the state of Connecticut takes control

In 1996, a state education department assessment conducted by the Northeast Regional Laboratory based at Brown University, found that Hartford Schools were failing their students. Despite efforts to equalize the resources given to all Connecticut cities, Hartford students' achievement scores continued to decline compared with other cities; the city high school, the oldest public high school in the nation, was threatened with the loss of accreditation. At the same time, in the landmark *Sheff v. O'Neill* lawsuit, the state Supreme Court found that the State of Connecticut had not done enough to reduce racial isolation within the capitol city's schools. Ordered to desegregate Hartford schools, the State dissolved the city's school board and appointed a state board to help turn things around in Hartford.



On June 1, 1997, a specially appointed panel took formal control of the Hartford public schools and hired Anthony Amato, Hartford's superintendent of schools from 1999-2002. Aware that many students' families moved frequently, disadvantaging the students as they changed schools and curricula each time, Mr. Amato introduced a literacy program, Success For All (SFA), and standardized academic content across the district with common pacing guides, curriculum materials, and assessments.



Although these events galvanized many educators, Simpson-Waverly had already begun improving: its Overall School Index (a state rank score) jumped from 24% to 46% from 1995 to 1997. Principal James Thompson and his staff had created a new School Improvement Plan that reflected the state and new district standards. Aligning instruction with the new pacing guides and curricula, using state, district, and classroom assessments and student work to monitor student performance, they had also developed a more structured and formal mechanism to address student academic performance. "I realized that it would not be enough to have only myself and the teacher look at the student portfolios to develop instructional strategies.

We really needed a team of people working together and brainstorming together, said Mr. Thompson."

With staff input, Mr. Thompson created the Student Academic Review (StAR) to monitor student achievement, and Simpson-Waverly began its climb to success. In time it became a top performer in statewide assessments, outperforming some of its more affluent, suburban neighbors.

Student Academic Review: everyone is accountable

Once a month, classroom teachers join the StAR team—comprising, at a minimum, the vice principal, internal literacy coach, district math consultant, and the state writing project consultant—to review student portfolios in reading, writing, and mathematics. Under this model, Simpson-Waverly welcomes state and district experts, who take part in StAR brainstorming and targeted professional development for Simpson-Waverly staff, and encourages “in-house” experts to join the StAR team and ultimately model in-class instruction.

The Simpson-Waverly Student Academic Review:

- ▶ Monitors school-wide curriculum implementation
- ▶ Monitors school-wide instruction to ensure the curriculum is aligned with district and state framework
- ▶ Monitors student progress and initiatives
- ▶ Tailors teaching and learning strategies and interventions to individual students
- ▶ Leads to a targeted staff development plan
- ▶ Holds administration, teachers, and students accountable for academic achievement
- ▶ Fosters an atmosphere of collegiality and teamwork and identifies in-house experts



The StAR Team listens as teachers discuss the curriculum and pacing charts.

The StAR model draws on student portfolios to gather a compelling picture of where each student is relative to the curriculum. Teachers also share the portfolios with other educators in order to brainstorm individual solutions to student needs. The portfolios are not teacher evaluations, but demonstrations of monthly student progress. They include a table of contents, weekly tests, district quarterly tests, publishers’ tests, and current samples of student work. In advance of the StAR meeting, each teacher organizes his or her students’ portfolios into three groups: those who meet the standards, those on the “cusp” (who could meet for fall below standards soon), and those who fall below the standards.

During the team meeting, each StAR team member takes 4-5 portfolios, reviews them, notes trends and changes, and then poses questions about specific instructional and intervention strategies or supports that might improve the individual student's learning. The StAR Team listens as teachers discuss the curriculum and pacing charts. The team may ask questions such as "What concepts are difficult for the kids?" They may notice that several students are missing a specific skill such as estimation and suggest ways to introduce it differently. Teachers use this forum to raise concerns about students and the pacing guides with the StAR Team who then can provide support and suggestions. Mr. Thompson explained the power of the StAR as a source of teacher strength, saying, "When making decisions, you should not be in isolation. To know how you are doing, for validation and improvement, you need your peers."

Observers such as the superintendent, principals from other Hartford schools, and principals from other state districts often attend the StAR meetings. Mr. Thompson always asks for visitors' feedback about improving the StAR process and how it might unfold in their schools. Following numerous requests to discuss StAR at numerous district meetings and mentor other principals in establishing StAR in their schools, Mr. Thompson is now working with a district consultant to develop a StAR training manual that will be available electronically and include forms, charts, and activities.

"StAR keeps everyone on track," Mr. Thompson said. "It brings accountability to the classroom level, but there must be follow-up. That is key." As a result, the literacy coach may schedule classroom visits to model a lesson or coach a teacher, the social worker may get referrals and meet with students, the Student Assistance Team may get referrals, Mr. Thompson may arrange for more literacy tutors, or the math and writing consultants may attend grade level meetings to discuss issues or concerns. Essentially every member of the school community is accountable for student learning, from the principal to paraprofessionals.



However, before the staff could begin to push students towards academic excellence, as a community the school developed and supported the School Improvement Plan this included benchmarks for measuring success within the mission statement and the goals and objectives that followed. The Student Academic Review became the mechanism by which the staff assessed their progress towards achieving their goals and charted their next course towards new goals.

When the No Child Left Behind legislation became the new benchmark for measuring progress, the staff had already made important gains, however Adequate Yearly Progress was still a daunting bar to vault. “We were so afraid that we would not make AYP,” recalled the principal, “we made our first goal that 10% of our third graders would be proficient, and then moved the bar higher and higher. As we started to do it, we began to believe in ourselves. Initially we did not hit it in all areas, but we hit it in some.”

Setting the pace

That incremental but steady push for success paid off. Today, students and parents alike know that Simpson-Waverly is about academic success. “We have high expectations for our students,” a teacher said. “We involve them in the review of work, showing them that they can go there and not expecting less.”

A classroom poster sums up the message:

*Good better best
Ms. Register will not let me rest
Until my good is better
And my better is best*

High expectations extend beyond academics to include respect for self and others. Students take pride in their school and graffiti do not deface the school building. Over the last two years, Mr. Thompson said, the school “put in a lot of preventive measures” such as education on health, violence prevention, character development and peer mediation, that enabled the school to look at and address risk factors and social issues students confront. The school created a healthy environment that builds on young people’s assets, explained the school prevention specialist, “The evidence is that students can change behavior to focus on academics. It is not that children cannot learn but that there are some factors that prevent children from learning.”

Running a “tight ship”

Retiring this year, Mr. Thompson has led Simpson-Waverly for 17 years. The current superintendent Robert Henry, said of Thompson: “[He] has clear benchmarks for everyone and he brings accountability in a non-threatening and supportive way.” The district turn-around specialist, present at Simpson-Waverly



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three times a week to assist with curriculum, instruction, and assessment, added, "He is very particular but he is easy to work with and to talk to. His style is involved." Mr. Thompson "meets with each grade level team during their common planning time to review changes in instructional strategies based on test scores," the turn around specialist said, "Nothing really happens without the principal knowing."

A district consultant concurs: "Dr. Thompson runs a tight ship. He is a talent scout. He finds each person's talent and lets them run with it. Although he is highly structured, he lets go of the reins. He empowers staff members to see that they have a role in the direction that they are going. Staff has a clear vision and he helps with resources." A teacher added, "He says, 'these are the scores, this is what is lacking, this is what we are going to do, and this is how we are going to check our progress.'" This level of attention has in turn led to a stable and veteran corps of staff members, the superintendent said.

Steeping students in classical learning

The district supports many additional learning opportunities for targeted children. They include an extended day "Power Hour," Saturday Academies, Summer School, and year-around pre-kindergarten. About a third of all students in grades 3 through 6 participate in the Classical Magnet Program. Based on the Socratic (Paideia) method pioneered by St. John's College in Maryland, this weekly classical program promotes higher order thinking skills.

Once a month, professors from Trinity College conduct college-like seminars, guiding students in analyzing and critiquing literature. In a recent visit, a Trinity professor lectured the students on the difference between perspective and perception, the class discussed a reading, and students wrote about situations where their perspective on a person changed as a result of some perception about him or her. Participants are expected to keep up with their regular classroom work. Teachers are trained in this model and next year, Simpson-Waverly will become a schoolwide Classical Program.



An “unruffleable” staff

Leadership and accountability at Simpson-Waverly include everyone. Teachers mentor other teachers and sit on the School Improvement Team, which meets monthly. This team includes teachers from the lower school (grades K-3), the upper school (grades 4-6) and Special Education, as well as three to four parents, the family resource aide, a paraprofessional, the literacy facilitator, the turn-around specialist, and the principal. The team addresses school progress and provides a common, coordinated and sustained school program.

Staff members at Simpson-Waverly have been looking at information and using data for a long time; their ongoing reflection on student progress shapes the school’s direction. Strategies grow directly out of students’ needs. That the school functions as a coordinated whole is evident in the common instructional practices in use from classroom to classroom. Teachers engage students through both large and small group instruction, cooperative learning, guided inquiry, and discussions. Students learn how to use graphic organizers, to plan a rough draft around a structured “pillar,” and to highlight or underline text as they look for main and supporting ideas.



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They also learn what it means to be a productive member in a cooperative group and engage in good group discussion. In a second grade classroom, students were reading their first expository text, and the teacher prompted them to state what they do to find the main idea. The students replied: “Survey the whole story. Ask questions. Read. Reread and Respond. And Learn,” an approach known by its acronym, SQURRRRL. After reading the text aloud, they discussed it in cooperative groups. The teacher reinforced the cooperation by asking, “What did your team say?” and “Did you contribute? The only way to have a good team is to contribute.”



Mr. Thompson's "inner drive" has resulted in a stable and veteran staff, according to the superintendent. Teachers described the teaching and administrative staff at Simpson-Waverly as dedicated, qualified, and seasoned. One teacher observed, "Nothing ruffles us. We always work around and with it. We rely on resolve." A student said, "I've only been here a couple of months but the teachers are nice. They help me with math when I do not understand." Other student comments include: "Everyone here cares a lot and you get the help you need;" "I like to read and write;" "Teachers take time to explain stuff;" and, "They are teaching important things that we do not know."

Students said they felt they would use what they were learning in school in their future, and that they had a strong sense that their education and future were important.

Students felt that their schooling had a direct effect on their lives. One student said "here you get help with your academics and with your life. I learned that it is important to postpone sex until after my education." A student who plans to be a lawyer praised his training: "During Seminar I learn to talk and question. We have speech contests and I . . . work on my speech." Students appear to feel tremendous gratitude for their school and what it has done for them. The imprint that Simpson-Waverly leaves on these students was summed up beautifully by a student who said, "When I grow up, I want to be a teacher so that the things I learned at this school I could instill in other kids so when they grow up I will have made a difference in their lives".



Mr. Thompson will retire this year but may remain in education in some way. Several teachers observed that the structures and community he has created are self-sustaining. Mr. Thompson agreed, "You are a good administrator if you can make yourself obsolete."

