

Hope High: From warning status to full accreditation

01:00 AM EDT on Friday, April 27, 2007

By Linda Borg

Journal Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE — When principal Arthur Petrosinelli welcomed the faculty at Hope High School nearly two years ago, after restructuring, he told them that gaining full accreditation from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges would be the ultimate symbol of success.

This week, the once-troubled high school received the brass ring.

“I almost cried,” said Mary Markey, a science teacher in Hope’s Leadership Academy. “That we accomplished in two years what people never thought could be accomplished was a dream come true.”

Shortly after getting the news on Wednesday, Peter McWalters, state commissioner of elementary and secondary education, turned up at Hope and addressed the staff.

“Those of you who stand here day after day, still learning, still risking and depending on each other — you are not alone,” he said. “You’ve stayed on task. You’ve stayed together. You’ve focused on the kids, and on learning, and I will be there for you. Please trust that some of us know how hard this is and what you need.”

Yesterday morning, Frances Gallo, the former deputy superintendent of Providence schools who was recently hired to head the Central Falls School Department, called to congratulate Hope’s three principals. “I haven’t cried so much in a long time. I still have goose bumps.”

The New England Association of Schools and Colleges placed Hope High School on warning status in 2003, detailing 108 problems that required correction. At the time, a visiting team from the association noted huge gaps between Hope’s stated mission — to turn out students who are independent, life-long learners — and the reality of the classroom.

The association also found fault with both the quality of instruction and the resources available to the school. Teachers operated in a vacuum, and, as a result, “student learning lacked consistency and depth,” the 2003 report said.

The warning label means that a school has significant issues but they can be resolved, according to Janet Allison, deputy director of the association’s Commission on Public Secondary Schools. It is one step above probation.

The NEASC, a private organization with a voluntary membership, is committed to fostering high-quality public and private schools. Unlike the requirement of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, with its relentless focus on test scores, the association examines broader indicators of effective teaching and learning.

Besides Hope, Classical High School is the only Providence high school to have full NEASC accreditation. Several high schools, including Central, which lost its accreditation in 2001, have re-applied to the NEASC. Those applications will be reviewed during the June and September association meetings.

In its April 23 letter, the association commended Hope for “changing the learning environment and the culture of the school,” embedding the school’s mission and expectations into the daily life of the school and increasing the level of academic challenge for all students.

“The report they submitted to us was extraordinary,” said Allison, who has been working with Hope for years. “This is a school where education is going on. Kids are engaged in their learning. Instructional practices have changed. The teachers are committed to these kids.”

She said that the three principals — Petrosinelli, Wayne Montague and Scott Sutherland — together with the faculty and staff, have “worked incredibly hard to turn the school around, to change the climate and culture.”

Sutherland compared writing the NEASC report to a relay race, in which a small group of teachers completed one part, then handed it off to a fresh team. The high school actually had to file two reports to the association: one last August and another in March.

When the principals arrived at Hope, “We had all these boats sailing in different directions,” Sutherland said. “We were exploring uncharted territory.” Now, he said, the ships are moving in the right direction.

Hope’s principals and staff took on a half-dozen big reforms at once. In the wake of McWalters’ intervention at Hope in the face of persistent poor performance and a high dropout rate, a new leadership team took over the 1,200-student high school in the summer of 2005 and divided the building into three learning communities. For the first time, the principals had the authority to hire their own staff, and when the school opened that fall nearly half of the teachers were new.

In an attempt to make the building feel less impersonal, Hope created advisories, in which a small groups of students is assigned to one teacher, who helps them prepare for graduation. The school also became one of the first in the state to implement individual learning plans that spell out each student’s academic, career and personal goals. Most importantly, the school created a community where there once was none.

The principals also credited Nicholas Donohue, the state-appointed special master, and Steve Smith, president of the Providence Teachers' Union, for their willingness to meet the principals half way.

Yesterday, Mayor David N. Cicilline said he was delighted to hear Hope's good news:

"I know how hard the principals and faculty have worked," he said. "There is no reason why we can't do this throughout the city."

But several stubborn challenges remain. Attendance, which hovers around 80 percent, is still a problem, in part because large numbers of students attend school part-time. Student achievement also remains low, although Hope's Leadership Academy hit all of the targets set by the state and the No Child Left Behind Act. And, while Hope has made progress in the area of parental involvement, much more work needs to be done.

The principals realize that they can't take the pressure off in any area or else the school will begin to backslide.

"Every single day," Petrosinelli said, "we're in the corridors, we're teaching, we're picking up paper. Every single day is like the first day."

"I almost cried. That we accomplished in two years

what people never thought could be accomplished was a dream come true."

Mary Markey
a science teacher in Hope's Leadership Academy

lborg@projo.com