

## **Crosby, Walsh wow Waterbury school board**

### **Teachers say state money bringing change**

*BY MICHAEL PUFFER REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN*

WATERBURY — Improvements at two struggling schools receiving millions of state turnaround dollars inspired enthusiastic praise from the city's Board of Education last week.

Crosby High School and Walsh Elementary School had among the district's lowest scores on state standardized tests last spring. But local school authorities see positive signs of budding transformation.

Mid-year district tests show significantly fewer Walsh students "far below proficient" in reading year over year, according to information shared at a Board of Education meeting last Thursday. Walsh staff also showed plummeting discipline statistics.

"Kudos to everyone: the staff, the families, everyone," Board of Education President Elizabeth C. Brown told Walsh staff who came before the board last week. "This is an amazing turnaround."

Walsh teachers made 124 discipline referrals by Jan. 25.

There were 436 during the same five-month period last school year.

Detentions in that time period dropped from 110 last year to 10 this school year. In-school suspensions are down from 62 to 16, out-of-school suspensions from 52 to 12.

Walsh Principal Ellen Paolino attributes dropping discipline to staff adherence to a robust program of positive behavior reinforcement and consistent reminders to students of expectations. She and Vice Principal Jennifer Calabrese were also careful in the mix of children applied to each classroom, so as to avoid conflicts and distraction.

"We have very basic rules here at Walsh and we reinforce them daily with lessons on PBIS (positive behavior intervention and support)," Paolino said. "We really just raised our bar of expectations."

Walsh and Crosby entered the state's "Commissioner's Network" program three years ago. Walsh is receiving \$624,720 to fund its turnaround program this year alone. Crosby is getting \$1.2 million.

Walsh has spent its money on teacher training, materials, and math and reading intervention staff. The state money has also paid for a consultant who reorganized the school under the "Project CHILD" model. Instead of teaching all subjects to a group of students in one grade, teachers specialize in subjects, like math, and students from multiple grade levels rotate through their classrooms.

At Walsh on Tuesday, staff said they've seen big improvements in school climate. Teacher Jamie Razz said it was clear when she led a visitor on a tour last week.

"It was so nice to see every classroom throughout the school was so engaged and doing what they have to do," Razz said. "I think the classroom environments are just a lot more positive."

Custodian Marcus Powell, in his 10th year at Walsh, said he's noticed children are less likely to litter and more likely to behave better. They're not running out of classrooms and into the halls. That's a big difference, he said.

"I told the principal at the beginning of the year, this is the best it's been since I've been here," Powell said.

Crosby Principal Jade Gopie's presentation to the school board did not include performance statistics. Performance tests aren't given periodically at the high school level.

Gopie spoke about progress breaking up Crosby into four academies of special interest, each with its own dedicated administrator. The "freshmen academy" launched this year. Next year sophomores will be able to enter academies of public safety, entrepreneurship, business, and the "STEAM" academy, short for science, technology, engineering, arts and math.

Crosby teachers have been trained in "project-based" teaching methods.

All students will have access to laptop computers throughout the day. Crosby has also set up a college and career center with a dedicated counselor.

During last week's meeting, school board member John E. Theriault raised a note of concern about low scores on state tests.

"Like it or not, people are still watching us with regard to test scores and giving us millions and millions of dollars to improve learning," Theriault said.

Still, board member Thomas Van Stone said he's seen a dramatic change in student behavior and maturity at Crosby in a period of months.

"I have to say Principal Gopie, you are greatly appreciated," school board Vice President Felix M. Rodriguez said. "You and your team. You guys are doing phenomenal work."