

Striving to boost hopes, scores; Van Bokkelen principal says she is on 'a mission'

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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Van Bokkelen Elementary started out with big disadvantages. Built in 1973, the school serves some of most impoverished communities in the county: Orchards on the Severn, Warfield Homes and Still Meadows. Some 760 female heads of households are raising children under 18 in those neighborhoods, 300 of them on income below the poverty line of \$13,359 for a family of four. About 89 percent of Van Bokkelen's 600 pupils receive free or reduced-price lunches and all of the pupils are eligible for federal reading programs.

FULL TEXT

Principal Rose M. Tasker must hear the clock ticking.

Two years ago, she took on an impossible job: Within five years turn around Van Bokkelen Elementary School in Anne Arundel County and prevent a state takeover of the troubled school. She has three years left.

"This isn't just a job to me, it's a mission," she said recently. "I am not worried that it can't be done."

Tasker, 50, is strict but soft-spoken, a hard worker whose office lights are often on well after school days end. Those long hours have paid off with an improved school attendance record, fewer disciplinary problems and noticeably more motivated and enthusiastic pupils and teachers.

She has made inroads -- though small ones -- against her biggest problem: raising Van Bokkelen's dismal Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP) test scores.

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It was, for a while, a forgotten school in an area where children dodged bullets at night and came fearfully to classes during the day. Administrators and teachers struggled to keep them safe, tame their wild behavior and teach them.

"We would get students from those neighborhoods, and one of them said they used to go to bed at dark because they didn't want to go outside," said Ron Peiffer, the state school board spokesman and a former teacher at Arundel Middle School, where Van Bokkelen pupils continued their schooling.

Cathy Anderson, who taught at Van Bokkelen in 1978, remembers those difficult days.

"Those were the tip-over-the-desk and throw-the-chairs days," Anderson says of her first years at the school. "I came from an inner-city school in Kansas, and I had never seen anything like that."

Dedicated instructor

There was little improvement for years, with students performing below county and state averages on standardized tests throughout the 1980s. In January 1996, the students performed so badly on the state tests that the state threatened to take over the school.

Enter Rose Tasker.

Growing up in Arnold, Tasker dreamed of teaching. She rounded up her 10 siblings and played make-believe school in front of a chalkboard where she gave math and reading lessons. She took them on nature field trips in her neighborhood collecting leaves and acorns to study.

"We just did the same little things that I was learning in school at the time," Tasker recalls.

Always the teacher, Tasker trains Sunday school teachers at her church -- the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Broadneck -- and has begun a program to help people learn to read. She and her husband, Thomas, have a son, Tory, 22, and daughter, Ava, 24, who as a fifth-grade teacher in Talbot County emulates her mother. Ava Tasker is the Talbot County nominee for the Sally Mae First Year Teacher Award.

"My mother always had high expectations for us as we were growing up," Ava Tasker said. "She expected my brother and I to bring home A's and B's."

Reputation as a motivator

Rose Tasker had been the principal at Woodside Elementary in Glen Burnie for three years before taking the Van Bokkelen job with a reputation for motivating struggling students. Her years as the county coordinator for federal education programs for underprivileged students as well as the improvements she had made at Woodside made her the perfect match for the Van Bokkelen post.

"She has a real heart for high-need students and has high expectations for them," said Nancy Mann, assistant superintendent for instruction.

But it takes more than heart to raise test scores.

Tasker walked in the door at Van Bokkelen with a plan. News of the possible state takeover had scared the pupils, their parents and the teachers; she intended to take advantage of the fear with a combination of inspiration and iron-fisted control. She spoke to her new students during a short assembly in the school gym.

"If you have respect for others, they will respect you back," she told them.

She taught them the words to the school poem: "Believe in Yourself": "Whatever I wish, whatever I dream, whatever I hope to achieve, whatever I try for, whatever I plan, it is mine if only I believe."

High expectations

After the assembly, Tasker started cleaning house.

By September 1996, only three of the original teachers at the school remained. Tasker kept only the best. She held a summer retreat to motivate her new teaching staff and to make her expectations clear.

"It is very challenging here," she said. "Some people can't take it. It's not that I expect 120 percent, I just want them to do their job."

Tasker's plan to raise the test scores was ambitious: a 10 percent rise the first year and 50 percent this year. The school fell short of the goal last year, and it is unlikely that scores will jump 50 percent when the students take the test next month. But Tasker said she is not discouraged.

"If you strive for excellence, you will achieve effectiveness," she says. "But if you strive for only effectiveness you will fall short of it."

To push the children, Tasker began a class devoted to the skills pupils use on the test. Students attend the MSPAP Lab about 40 minutes a week.

On a recent day, a fourth-grade class studied the growth of plants by cultivating them under different conditions -- some without water, light or air. The idea was to show them what a plant needs to thrive.

"It's all hands-on activities, and they work in teams," said teacher Stephanie Pochet as the class worked. "They have had units on chemistry, electricity and now plants. They design their own experiments with controls and variables."

When Pochet asked the class what plants need to survive, Ola Dovi, 10, piped up.

"Plants need CO, light and water to survive," Ola answered, restating the question just as the MSPAP requires students to do.

Discipline enforced

Tasker probably can relax a bit -- since 1993 when the MSPAP tests began, the state has never taken over a school, Peiffer said. There are no guidelines to determine whether a school should be taken over, so bad test scores do not necessarily doom.

And Tasker has made big improvements. The numbers of children carrying knives or needles to the school, fights and loud arguments all have fallen off. Another administrator handles discipline so that Tasker is free to take on more constructive projects. An in-school suspension program now takes in the young offenders who used to be sent home to watch television for punishment. Tasker holds summer retreats for teachers and staff development. For the

first time in years, the school has met the state attendance requirement of 94 percent. There is a student government and Boys and Girls Clubs. And Tasker's long-range plan to avoid takeover has been the model for other at-risk schools in the state.

But a key element required to raise test scores, Tasker acknowledges, is almost nonexistent at the school: parental involvement.

Last May, 13.6 percent of Van Bokkelen's students did satisfactorily on the test. And although that is an awful showing compared with the overall county score of 47.1 percent, it is a 4.8 percent improvement from the year before. "The schools can't do it alone," Tasker said. "I need happy families and happy children."

So, Tasker has gone into her children's homes. Last month, she began PATT CHAT. The Parents Are Teachers Too "chat" sessions are held in a different parent's home each month. April's meeting was the second and six mothers -- three more than the first meeting -- showed up to talk about their worries.

The mothers talk over coffee and a takeout-chicken lunch. Some parents, one mother said, were intimidated by Tasker and shied away from attending. Sometimes they have no baby sitter for their children or they are working. Tasker tells the mothers to bring their friends to the next meeting -- their children too -- and to get involved.

Tasker shows them the PATT bag -- a sack of family activities, a family journal and math and reading games -- all for parents to do with their children. Tasker has sent one of these bags home with the oldest child in each family attending Van Bokkelen.

Parents' role

"We have to give our children vision so that they see beyond elementary school, into middle school and high school and then adulthood," she said. "It has to start in the home."

At the end of the meeting, the mothers applauded Tasker, who spent about three hours with them talking about problems in the school and the neighborhood.

Pauline Harrison, who has two foster children at the school, said there have been improvements since her 14-year-old daughter attended the school seven years ago.

"When I walked into the school this time it was like night and day," she said. "I see changes because of the school activities the children are involved in."

Tasker loves hearing comments like that, although she does not like being the center of attention. When a teacher stops her in a hallway recently to say that Tasker is her "light" and sole motivator, Tasker asks her to stop before she bursts into tears.

"I think we have done here what we came here to do," Tasker said. "All of the elements are in place and we just have to make it work."

Illustration

PHOTO 1; AMY DAVIS : SUN STAFF PHOTOS; PHOTO 2; AMY DAVIS : SUN STAFF PHOTOS; Caption: Encouragement: Principal Rose Tasker talks with Jarett Merritt, 8, on Success Avenue, a school hallway with walls

of positive messages.; Lab work: Stephanie Pochet teaches fourth-graders a lesson in science in Von Bokkelen Elementary's lab created to improve Maryland School Performance Assessment Program test scores.

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