

Recommend 0

Tweet

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

April 24, 1998 | By Kris Antonelli | Kris Antonelli,SUN STAFF

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.

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.

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.

Related Articles

School rallies for tests' challenge Van Bokkelen must raise...

May 5, 1996

Van Bokkelen parents seek overhaul role Cooperation urged...

February 9, 1996

School gains a testing victory

July 1, 2005

State board approves plan for Van Bokkelen

May 29, 1996

Van Bokkelen's turnaround MSPAP: Tests brought needed...

April 29, 1998

Find More Stories About

Teachers

Maryland School Performance

Tasker

Van Bokkelen

"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."

From the Web

Sponsored Links



Thinking about going solar? Read This First

Sunrun



Homeowners Are in for a Big Surprise in 2016

AmeriValue Rate Quotes



Brilliant Mortgage Payoff Method Has Banks On Edge

Comparisons.org





People in Heavy Credit Card Debt May Not Know This

Freedom Debt Relief



5 Stocks That Make Retiring Easy

Newsmax Subscription



How This Razor is Disrupting a \$13 Billion Industry

Dollar Shave Club

by **Taboola**

MORE:

[After 20 years, freedom nears Judge orders parole for Isaacs, 36, who took part in deadly '73 rampage](#)

[Questions, concerns over pastor's divorce](#)

[Why expansion tank is needed](#)

[Biggest Snowstorms In Baltimore History](#)

[Ravens tackle Michael Oher takes big brother job seriously](#)

['Blushing' ear is no cause for alarm](#)



[Index by Keyword](#) | [Index by Date](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)

Please note the green-lined linked article text has been applied commercially without any involvement from our newsroom editors, reporters or any other editorial staff.