



Audit finds no non-compliance issues

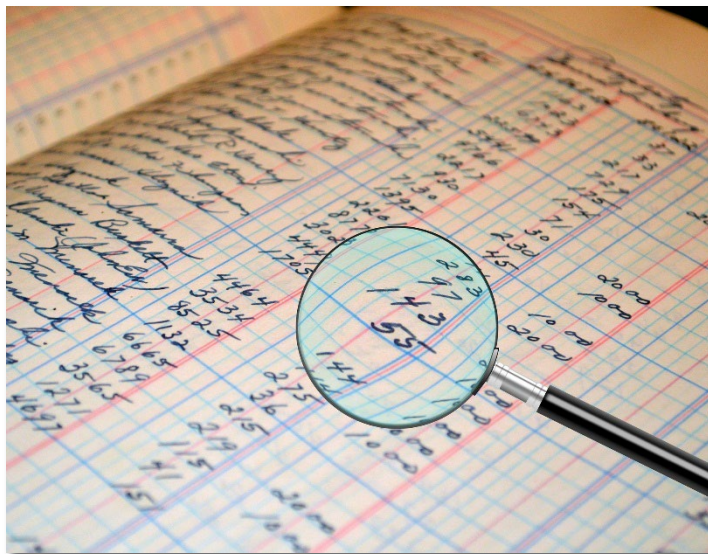
'It has gotten better each year'

An external audit of Poughkeepsie City School district's financial statements and extra activity for the year ending June 30, 2022, reveals that progress has been made in the district's business operations. Conducted by Sickler, Torchia, Allen Churchill CPA's, PC, the audit noted that no new findings were made in the review of fiscal documents. It also noted that the district has made progress in addressing findings that predate the current district leadership and board members and the fiduciary responsibilities regulated by board policy, and state and federal laws and regulations.

"There is a required report in accordance with government auditing standards, which is a federal government consideration and that is related to (a) report on internal controls and compliance with laws and regulations. That report was very extensive five years ago and it has gotten better each year," commented Victor Churchill. "There are still a couple items that you are working on in that report that are still classified as material weaknesses but there are three items that have been resolved in the current year. Further, you used to have some non-compliance issues in that report in prior years and there were none noted in the current year."

This year's Poughkeepsie City School District's audit report is much different than it has been in previous years, most notably the 2019-2020 school year, where the district was embroiled with various audit findings and also was operating in a structural deficit that resulted in the cutting of programs and loss of staff and the audit findings. In January 2020, Dr. Eric Jay Rosser, who was appointed superintendent of schools months before, delivered a presentation to the community highlighting three sections "Responsibility, Findings, and Accountability" to address the financial standing and operations of the district. Entitled "[Financial Accountability Update](#)," Rosser outlined the responsibility of the Board of Education, superintendent and business official in serving as responsible stewards to the financial resources and operations of the school district. The presentation highlighted long-standing NYS Comptroller audit findings dating back to 2016 and audit findings produced by Sickler, Torchia, Allen Churchill CPA's, PC. Rosser concluded the presentation with a list of corrective action steps that he and the team were to implement immediately.

"It's unprecedented in my career to have an audit with no findings and truly demonstrates the massive collaboration of many employees within the business office and beyond to undertake changes to follow board policy and procedures," Assistant Superintendent of Business Louise Lynch said. Earlier this month, the Board of Education approved the audit report for the period ending June 30, 2022. A corrective action plan will be submitted to the New York State Department of Education to address findings dating back to 2017. "Ms. Louise Lynch, Chief Operations Officer Bill Hogan and I are confident that we will continue to strengthen the district's financial posture by using a system thinking approach to address antiquated systems and protocols that led to many of the errors which contributed to the audit findings. Our responsibility as good stewards of the district's financial resources and operations has been strong and places Poughkeepsie [City School District] with a solid fiscal foundation that we will remain steadfast in maintaining" Rosser said.





Senior Ava Cooper, left, speaks with fellow senior Jason Umanzor-Perez about how to present an activity to the rest of the Wingman trainees Nov. 18, 2022.

Wingman program helps students help each other

Losing his six-year-old son in the Sandy Hook Elementary School mass shooting in 2012 led Ian Hockley to found [Dylan's Wings of Change](#), a nonprofit that seeks to help create a kinder, more understanding world student by student with the hope of sparing others that pain. That program is now at Poughkeepsie High School.

"I want to share my story and the importance of what the program can do. It can create powerful connections between humans and that can start to counter the way society is going," he told PHS staff the Monday before Thanksgiving.

A team of students - including representatives from student government - spent two days in Wingman Youth Leadership training Nov. 17-18 learning different activities, how to facilitate them and engage with others. The Wingman program is a social-emotional learning program designed to help students get to

know each other and reduce the feeling of isolation.

Teacher and student government adviser Paul Donnelly brought the program to PHS after meeting Hockley at a professional development program on civic engagement a few years ago. After the Robb Elementary School shooting in Uvalde, Texas in May, Donnelly reached out to Hockley and began the process. In his presentation, Hockley asked staff what is heard about the majority of those committing mass shootings. The answer: They were loners.

Wingman is led by students under supervision of adults - in PHS' case, Donnelly.

"The goal is to spread kindness, awareness and communication that is empathy-based," trainer Ashley Brant said, explaining that the activities the Wingman group learns foster caring, respect and teamwork.



PHS students learn the Pass the Can activity during Wingman training Nov. 17, 2022. Teacher and adult leader Paul Donnelly and Wingman trainer Ashley Brant are seen standing in the mirror.

One favorite activity among Wingman trainees here and around the country is Pass the Can, in which students pass a coffee can or other object around in a circle using only their feet. This group of students will push into younger grades and help conduct activities so students will have peers to relate to. Hopefully, some of those younger students will be inspired to become leaders themselves, Brant said.

"These kids are brand new to the program and have no expectations, but they are showing great maturity and leadership," Brant said. "I think they will be very successful and great examples in your school with what they can offer and they all have opinions on things."

Sophomore Omari James signed up for Wingman because there were issues and topics that needed to be expressed. As part of student government, James voted to start Wingman at the school. "There are a lot of students who have depression and anxiety and we wanted them to have an outlet to express themselves and help them. This is an SEL program and we want them to know they have a voice."

Senior Ava Cooper isn't part of student government but was invited to join the training because of her work on the Pioneer Spirit Committee.

"We wanted to make a student mediation group and our National Honor Society adviser told me about this and it piqued my interest," Cooper said.

The training sessions themselves helped to create a community as Cooper said she met students she likely wouldn't have met otherwise.

"The kids here are really cool and they give me more perspective that people at Poughkeepsie High School want to be involved like you."

Hockley said creating a support network and helping students end that feeling of isolation is key. "Empathy is the antidote," he said, adding that in the program, students talk about the world they want to be in.

"We give them tools to help them connect and tell them they have the power to make changes."

Cooper has applied to Vassar College and said she would like to come back to PHS to help with this program.

Asked about the training, James said "I love it because we will definitely be able to help people with problems they have emotionally ... I feel like a superhero."

Technical theater re-emerges as club after resurgence

The Hudson Valley is seeing an increase in film work. In fact, the Hudson Valley Film Commission reported that through September more than \$60 million in direct local spending is attributable to filming in the area. When you add in local and regional theater and the proximity to New York City and Broadway, there are plenty of opportunities for people with technical knowledge.

That's why one of the pathways Poughkeepsie City School District is creating for students is in all aspects of the arts. Recently, the district made PHS music teacher Neal Grover its technical theater adviser - an extra service position - to help prepare students for working behind the scenes.

"Event production is a career path and we've seen a sharp rise in demand for people to do production in both live theater and film," Grover said.

This work can involve lighting, sound, curtains, striking sets and more. "My idea is if we have a theater program in the area, our kids are working behind the scenes," Grover said, adding that this would include learning how to promote events - with students taking photos and videos of rehearsals and putting together promotional



Neal Grover, PCSD's new technical theater adviser (right) speaks with PMS Principal Kelleyann Royce-Giron about a PA speaker in the PMS auditorium.

materials, helping in planning and analyzing costs and creating programs.

This position came about because of work done by a task force established to review PCSD's performing arts program.

"The goal is to bring it up to a level approaching our neighboring and surrounding districts," Grover said one afternoon as he was reviewing sound and lighting equipment in Poughkeepsie High School's auditorium. For Grover, theater was the one place in his teens where his rebelliousness was kept in check. "I didn't need to mess it up to make it enjoyable for me," he said. "It's nutritious, therapeutic for children to get on stage and act or help others act - it helps them draw out who they want to be."

Though Grover is relatively new to technical theater, he has produced a short play in Catskill which he took students from PMS and PHS to see called "Turning 15 on the Road to Freedom" about the civil rights movement. And, he can draw on members of the task force who bring a wealth of knowledge.

Grover started in his new role Nov. 3 and was beginning to look at what equipment the district had and what it needed. There is already interest in the club.

"I have commitments from students and the Poughkeepsie Professional Arts Association," he said. "I hope by year's end to have a student stage crew that people will call on and have all the equipment handled by students who know what they are doing."

Debate team opens with tie; Dec. 2 next competition



Members of the Poughkeepsie and Haldane teams discuss how to proceed with the debate, exchanging notes and reviewing debate rules before heading to their 15-minute prep.

Poughkeepsie High School's debate team opened the season with a scrimmage against Haldane, ending the session with a tie and being invited back Dec. 2 to compete against Haldane, Arlington, Red Hook and Dover, according to adviser Sankung Susso.

PHS's team has 12 members, eight of whom competed against Haldane: Team A was Rodrigo Vega-Salvador, 10th grade; Amira Ibrahim, 12th grade; Ashley Hernandez, 10th grade; Noell Jones, 12th grade. Team B was Jada Morgan, 10 grade; Katalina Mosqueda, 10th grade; Daniel Johnson, 12th grade; Kayla Hawkins, 12th grade; and Abass Na-aata, 11th Grade.

There were two topics debated using the World School debate format:

- A law outlawing private schools for grades K-12 that would require students to attend public schools.
- Body cameras on police officers are a violation of our right to privacy so we will not fund them.

"Debates give our scholars an opportunity to explore complex social, political and economic issues through a critical lens. They work in collaboration with one another, learning from each other and taking on leadership roles as the occasion arises," Susso said.

Debaters learn to conduct independent research, speak in public and learn to use their shortcomings as opportunities for growth.