

Reimagining Educational Equity through Collaborative Action:

A Profile of the Poughkeepsie Children’s Cabinet

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Introduction

In August 2019, more than 20 civic leaders from the City of Poughkeepsie, New York convened for the Poughkeepsie Summit at Harvard University. Their mission was to bring together local leaders around two major goals related to the City of Poughkeepsie’s future:

1. Developing a **citywide collective impact agenda** for child development in public education.
2. Creating **talent pipelines** to enlist young people and emerging leaders in strategic projects related to pressing community development challenges and opportunities.



Pictured, left to right: Tamoya Norwood, President of the Parent Teacher Association, Poughkeepsie City School District Early Learning Center; Karmen Smallwood, Dutchess County Assistant Commissioner for Youth Services; Robert Wright, President of Nubian Directions II Inc.

As a first-of-its-kind event, there was a lot of anticipation. Summit co-organizer James Watson recalled the atmosphere that day: “There was a sense in the room of possibility. It was powerful [and] pretty inspiring.”

James and summit co-organizers Rob Watson Jr. and Kylynn Grier have deep roots in Poughkeepsie as alumni of local school systems; all three have committed much of their professional lives to finding solutions to Poughkeepsie’s most pressing economic and human development issues. They hoped the summit would serve as a call to action for the city’s leaders to consolidate their efforts and advance a new social compact. By the end of the convening, Poughkeepsie Mayor Rob Rolison was convinced that change was imminent. He remembers thinking, “How can we help? How can city government help?”

That day, the Poughkeepsie Children’s Cabinet was born.

‘Resource Rich, Systems Poor’:

Using Data to Identify Opportunities in Poughkeepsie

The City of Poughkeepsie is well suited to host a collective impact initiative like the Cabinet. Home to approximately 30,000 residents, Poughkeepsie is located in New York State’s Hudson Valley region and is a part of historic Dutchess County. Poughkeepsie is also surrounded by several well-known institutions of higher learning, including Vassar College, SUNY New Paltz, Dutchess Community College, The Culinary Institute of America, and Marist College.

Yet, despite its proximity to well-resourced institutions, approximately 19 percent of Poughkeepsie’s population lives below the poverty line (compared to just 11 percent in New York State),¹ and 73 percent of Poughkeepsie’s children are economically disadvantaged (vs. 38 percent in Dutchess County).² This distinction is even more apparent at the school level. In 2020, Poughkeepsie High School’s graduation rate was 60 percent, in contrast with Dutchess County and New York State’s rates of 85 percent.³

Rob Watson describes Poughkeepsie’s predicament as being “resource-rich, but systems poor”:

It’s a tale of two cities. On one hand, we have a county median income of over \$70,000, six higher education institutions within a 30 minute drive of our city, major businesses such as IBM and a robust healthcare industry. The Walkway Over the Hudson brings 600,000 tourists to our community a year. At the same time, one in four children grows up in poverty, educational inequity is as severe as anywhere in New York State, and we have well documented racial disparities in socioeconomic mobility. So there are rampant intergenerational inequalities, but there are also a tremendous number of assets in the Poughkeepsie region with the potential to transform realities. Unfortunately, we haven’t done a good job of making those resources work for everyone.

The Cabinet’s Design

Officially formed in February 2020 under the direction of an Executive Committee co-chaired by Mayor Rob Rolison and Poughkeepsie City School District Superintendent Dr. Eric Jay Rosser, the Poughkeepsie Children’s Cabinet (PCC) is developing a citywide cradle-to-career agenda comprised of four focus areas:

- Early Childhood
- Integrated Health and Human Services
- Out-of-School Enrichment and Learning
- College, Career and Civic Readiness

A dedicated working group made up of highly motivated members of Poughkeepsie’s community will explore each focus area. To date, the Cabinet has launched citywide Working Groups in Early Childhood and Out-of-School Enrichment and Learning. “The Working Groups are meant to be a strong representation of different kinds of expertise, and the folks who make them up are either parents, practitioners or individuals with direct service experience,” shares co-founder Kylynn. Collectively, the Working Groups are tasked with leveraging the insights of their members and the community-at-large to recommend solutions to Poughkeepsie’s most pressing public problems and identify strategies to develop citywide systems of opportunities to support children and their families in key issue areas. In preparation of the launch of its Working Groups, the Cabinet team partnered with Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Professor Ceasar McDowell’s *We Who Engage* initiative to develop a Civic Design Toolkit to guide each Working Group’s participatory process and ensure that their proposals are equity-centered, inclusive, and systems-oriented. Nationally, Poughkeepsie is a member of the Education Redesign Lab’s

(EdRedesign) *By All Means* consortium, a group of communities building cross-sector systems to support children’s wellbeing through Children’s Cabinets.

“There are rampant intergenerational inequalities, but there are also a tremendous number of assets in the Poughkeepsie region with the potential to transform realities.”

-Rob Watson,
Poughkeepsie Children’s Cabinet Co-founder

Three of the Cabinet’s co-founders—Kylynn, Rob, and James—serve as the organizational backbone staff of PCC, providing strategic, logistical and facilitation support for the Cabinet’s meetings and tracking the benchmarks and recommendations surfaced.

Superintendent Rosser describes the Cabinet’s work as being deeply grounded in an understanding of data:

Data drives everything. When we initially met, the team [of Summit organizers] brought together information that was eye-opening, that really spoke to the outcomes of school-age children of the city of Poughkeepsie. It spoke to those who were in certain communities and what their financial outcomes were... For me, it was really helpful in getting me acclimated to what needed to happen in the city of Poughkeepsie by way of us all coming together to work together. Data, I can’t stress this enough, is really important to help lead this effort... it is very important that we all—no matter where we come from—have an understanding of what our children are experiencing in the here and now, here in Poughkeepsie, NY.

Mayor Rolison is also excited about the opportunities for improving the lives of children, youth, and families that the data presents. He believes that “sharing that data across all the lines in the Cabinet’s system will also give everyone else the opportunity to make intelligent decisions.”

Supplementing the recommendations submitted by the four Working Groups, the Cabinet has launched a citywide youth engagement strategy in partnership with Marist College, Vassar College,⁴ and the Forum for Youth Investment to ensure that youth perspectives inform the Cabinet’s policy agenda and that over time, local institutions institutionalize a permanent youth civic engagement infrastructure. The Cabinet is also partnering with social entrepreneur and *Finding Common Purpose* founder Andrew Wolk to design a cradle-to-career community data dashboard. The dashboard will serve as an accessible resource to inform how best to support, enhance, and strengthen the systems serving Poughkeepsie children and their families.

Building Coalitions: Convening Stakeholders to Establish a Shared Vision

Undoubtedly, one of Poughkeepsie’s strengths is its people and their enthusiastic commitment to improving their community. The Cabinet has found the best way to capitalize on this strength is by building coalitions in two specific ways.



From left to right: Mayor Rob Rolison and Superintendent Dr. Eric Jay Rosser. Courtesy of City of Poughkeepsie.

First, the Cabinet intentionally selected an Executive Committee representing the business, nonprofit, state, and local community sectors. “There are great assets here in the City of Poughkeepsie and the region of Dutchess County,” shares Superintendent Rosser. On the selection of the Executive Committee, Mayor Rolison adds, “It was a perfect fit because there were so many individuals within our community and outside of our community [who] wanted to support the work.”

Additionally, Cabinet Working Groups were carefully assembled to ensure that the resulting proposals were inclusive and representative of the diverse views and demographics of the local community. Community members were invited to apply to the Working Group that most reflected their interests and expertise. Then the backbone staff and Cabinet co-chairs selected members based on their availability and commitment.

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-Dr. Eric Jay Rosser,
Superintendent, Poughkeepsie Public Schools

The resulting Cabinet became “just really a good representation of individuals across different sectors, who have access to different kinds of resources that align around a strategy for essential systems work,” Kylvynn concluded.

But building coalitions with invested stakeholders is not just a means to an end. It is also about cultivating trusting relationships to facilitate lasting change. That trust helps broker cooperation between the community and the Cabinet to ensure accountability. Superintendent Rosser summarized this notion:

... [Improving children's outcomes] really requires a school and community effort. And when I learned about the Children's Cabinet, the Mayor and I had some conversations. We thought this would be a perfect opportunity to bring all these community assets together, have conversations around alignment, around purpose, around being able to identify common focus areas. Hence, there's not duplication of effort or duplication of services. When we speak about the continuum of prenatal through college and/or career, we are having a conversation with a group of stakeholders who in many of their responsibilities, are interested in a place or space on that continuum... and want to support the healthy development of children and their families.

When COVID-19 Arrived

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unexpected challenges and opportunities for the Cabinet.

“Well, Eric and I have both said this, but when the Cabinet was formed, we did not anticipate a worldwide health crisis. We did not anticipate a shutdown of our way of life,” reflects Mayor Rolison. He continues, “The Cabinet was able to be a defined structure of assistance for the school district to do what it needed to do. So many things were happening so quickly. I think for city government, being able to have those conversations with the Cabinet was important because it [COVID-19] became—and still is—a bit overwhelming.”

In partnership with community leaders, the Cabinet's Executive Committee was able to brainstorm immediate solutions to address the shifting needs of youth in Poughkeepsie. It created two task forces in digital learning and strategic citywide communications. As a result of these efforts, Executive Committee members were able to fundraise \$62,000 to support Poughkeepsie City Schools with funding to address the digital divide and purchase chromebooks for its students as a part of an initiative to provide one-to-one devices for all students. Through Cabinet meetings, the Poughkeepsie Public Library District stepped up to provide Wi-Fi hotspots for school district families.

On the strategic communications front, the Cabinet staff team published a COVID-19 Response Guide for Families in English and Spanish as a go-to resource for Poughkeepsie families and community members to navigate federal, state and local programs, benefits, and opportunities. In addition, the Cabinet organized two citywide town halls on Facebook Live with the Mayor and Superintendent of Schools. These joint City-District town halls were first-of-their-kind events that engaged the public around critical issues related to COVID-19 across the City and within the school system. Together, the Mayor and Superintendent shared key information on issues that ranged from where to access free meals, to where to get support on issues of housing, unemployment, and public health. Local residents were able to ask questions; share challenges they were facing; and obtain real-time information on community resources

for economic and educational hardship. These events set the tone for a new era of collaborative action in the City of Poughkeepsie.

Ultimately, COVID-19 revealed the vast socioeconomic issues that impact the learning of Poughkeepsie children and youth. As a comprehensive response to the crisis, the Poughkeepsie Children’s Cabinet, Poughkeepsie City School District, and Dutchess County Government have joined forces to launch a new partnership with City Connects, a nationally acclaimed program that provides students with individualized student supports to address their in-school and out-of-school needs and coordinate wraparound service delivery in partnership with key community institutions. This partnership aligns with EdRedesign’s focus on Success Planning, a personalized, relationship-based strategy to supporting children. The Cabinet is also partnering with the Children’s Funding Project to initiate a fiscal map to establish a better understanding of Poughkeepsie’s existing web of public and private funding streams that support youth programs and services, in order to better align spending and generate new funds to address coverage gaps.

The Cabinet Moving Forward: Sharing Lessons and Dreams for the Future

In just a year and half since its creation, the efforts of the [Poughkeepsie Children’s Cabinet](#) and its members are continuing to elevate the issue of child and youth development to new heights. During the month of August 2021, Children’s Cabinet Co-chairs, staff and Working Groups have partnered with three City of Poughkeepsie Common Council Members to present a proposal to create a Division of Youth Services in city government, an unprecedented effort to institutionalize cradle-to-career programming and policy at the local level.⁵ Additionally, the Poughkeepsie City School District Board of



Courtesy of Community Matters 2 Inc.

Education recently passed a resolution to authorize the negotiation of an intermunicipal agreement with the City of Poughkeepsie on a citywide positive youth development strategy.⁶ The resolution will allow the Superintendent of Schools to commit up to \$200,000 of District funds to support the positive youth development strategies as set forth in a future intermunicipal agreement, paving the way for City-School District collaborations on issues of positive youth development, youth violence prevention, and further institutionalizing the work of the Children’s Cabinet cradle-to-career agenda.

With two of the four working groups entering the final stages of proposal development, the Cabinet at large is in a unique position to reflect on its progress thus far and consider its next steps. Rob Watson shares his enthusiasm for the future possibilities of the Cabinet: “ What probably excites me the most is to see people and organizations bringing fresh ideas to longstanding problems. We don’t yet know

what's possible or what our ceiling could be. But we do know that by bringing an entire community together, we just might have a shot at getting the job done and ushering in a revitalization of Poughkeepsie that starts with its people.”

Kylynn echoes his sentiments: “It feels like something is possible that hasn't felt possible for a long time, and for a lot of different reasons, despite our community's best efforts, I think the City of Poughkeepsie is full of folks who really love and care and have a tremendous amount of pride.”

Rob's dreams for the Poughkeepsie Cabinet reflect the hope and potential all Children's Cabinets hold. “The Cabinet can be a vehicle to advance the mission of great equalizers across many different domains and provide the sense of urgency that positions children, youth, and families at the forefront of public consciousness. It can be representative of many different voices and elevate those voices. And it can create the kind of accountability that's needed to move the work forward and push our public and private systems to be better.”

Lessons for the Field

The Poughkeepsie Children's Cabinet offers five recommendations for other organizations looking to implement Cabinets in their own backyards:

1. **Build trust and relationships.** Working with multiple people to move forward on a collective impact agenda takes more than good planning and execution. There needs to be a sense of trust that the convening entities and leaders at the helm are deeply committed to sustaining this work and the community's needs will be genuinely heard and acted on.
2. **Create opportunities for exposure early and often.** Provide opportunities for local leaders to learn about how Children's Cabinets and local backbone organizations are creating systems of opportunity for educational equity and community development. Connecting leaders with national thought leaders and peers across the nation can help build excitement, momentum, and a sense that this is possible and we can be a part of a national movement. The Poughkeepsie Children's Cabinet founding team has consistently leveraged the power of convenings to propel its work forward.
3. **Remain reflective in your practice.** This work is akin to flying a plane while also building it. Potential leaders or members of a Cabinet need to remain flexible to the bumps in the road, be quick to seize the opportunities that crises can represent, and constantly reflect on the ways they can improve.
4. **Build public demand.** Children's Cabinets have to figure out how to build public demand for their work. Community buy-in can create a societal expectation for this work and foster new collaborations that will contribute to the Cabinet's long-term sustainability.

5. **Think about who's next.** This is complex work that requires not only bringing together leaders across sectors, but leaders from different generations to be in dialogue with one another about what social change looks like. In doing so, It is critical to consider how the Cabinet is creating space for new leaders and types of leadership to emerge, reinvigorate its mission, and create a durable institution that withstands the challenges of turnover in leadership.

Resources

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3. ["How to Work with Your Working Group."](#) Poughkeepsie Children's Cabinet. Civic Design Brief. 2020.
4. [MIT We Who Engage Initiative](#). "Q&A: Ceasar McDowell on better public conversation." <https://news.mit.edu/2021/ceasar-mcdowell-public-conversation-0224>.
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6. [Poughkeepsie Children's Cabinet: Meet the Working Group Members](#). The Poughkeepsie Children's Cabinet. 2020.
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Endnotes

¹ “Financial Stability, People Living in Poverty,” *Mid-Hudson Valley Community Profiles*, https://mhvcommunityprofiles.org/financial_stability/people-living-in-poverty.

² Poughkeepsie City School District Graduation Rate Data 4 Year Outcome As of August 2020," *New York State Education Department*, 2020, <https://data.nysed.gov/gradrate.php?year=2020&instid=800000053351>.

³ “Education, High School Cohort Graduation Rate,” *Mid-Hudson Valley Community Profiles*, <https://mhvcommunityprofiles.org/education/high-school-cohort-graduation-rate>.

⁴ The Cabinet is currently working with the Marist College Center for Social Justice Research, Marist Center for Civic Engagement & Leadership, and the Vassar College Office of Community-Engaged Learning.

⁵ “Mayor Rolison Calls for the Creation of City Division of Youth Services.” City of Poughkeepsie, August 25, 2021. <https://cityofpoughkeepsie.com/mayor/2021/08/25/mayor-rolison-calls-for-creation-of-city-division-of-youth-services/?fbclid=IwAR3skTgns2FW-HdEL47gcD9sBJOQFJSoP9kaSHImyOLIL-5ovA7GxUzazc>.

⁶ Poughkeepsie City School District Resolution to Authorize the Negotiation of an Intermunicipal Agreement with the City of Poughkeepsie - Resolution #22-42.

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About the Education Redesign Lab

Founded in 2014 by Paul Reville, former Massachusetts Secretary of Education and Professor of Practice of Educational Policy and Administration at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the Education Redesign Lab (EdRedesign) is a university-based action research hub. In the pursuit of equity and social justice, we support the field in building cross-sector, community-wide systems of support and opportunity for children from birth to adulthood.

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