

Brockton High School was once a model for the nation. So what went wrong?

By Deanna Pan Globe Staff, Updated March 18, 2024, 7:44 a.m.



Isabela Katzki, a sophomore at Brockton High School, voiced her concerns during a Brockton High Community town hall meeting. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

BROCKTON — Two decades ago, [Brockton High School](#) was hailed as a national model in urban education. Under the leadership of former principal Susan Szachowicz, the state's largest high school underwent a stunning transformation: After years of posting dismal scores on the annual statewide assessment, students, starting in 2001, began passing the exams at record rates.

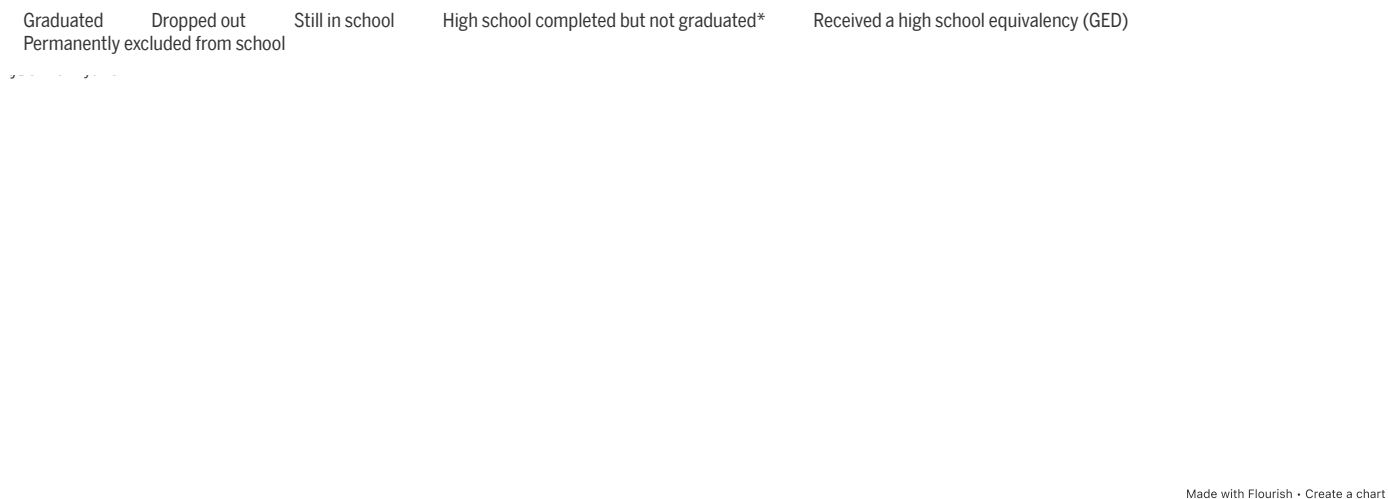
Those were the beginning of the halcyon days, when “Boxer” pride was sky-high. But now the city's flagship high school is in turmoil: Fights break out multiple times a week, according to students and staff, attracting stampedes of students, eager to record the melees on their cellphones. Scores of teens roam the halls during class, as though the sprawling campus were a shopping mall instead of a school building. Meanwhile, [a ballooning districtwide budget crisis](#) has left the campus so woefully understaffed, [hundreds of students have missed hours of valuable class time](#), stranded in the cafeteria, because they had no teachers or substitutes. At a recent School Committee meeting, [distraught staff and students](#) begged for help. In response, several members of the School Committee [called on the National Guard to intervene](#).

In 2010, The New York Times featured Brockton High on the front page under the headline, “[4,100 Massachusetts Students Prove Small Isn't Always Better](#).” This month, however, the New York Post called (without evidence) Brockton High “[America's most violent high school](#).” The story landed in Szachowicz's inbox, like a dagger plunged straight through her heart.

“It shouldn't be this way,” said Szachowicz, now semi-retired and living in Florida. “Brockton kids deserve better than what they're getting now.”

Brockton High has significantly lowered its drop out rate

The graduation rate rose until 2016. Then it started to decline.



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How conditions deteriorated so drastically at Brockton High and what should be done to restore the school back to its former glory have been subjects of intense public debate. At a town hall Tuesday evening, hosted by several of the area’s nonprofits at a local church, dozens of residents, including parents, students and lawmakers, bandied about ideas: The school needs more mentors, many suggested. The curriculum is disengaging, others said. Students’ mental health must be prioritized, some argued, above academics.

Leona Martin, chair of the education committee at the Brockton chapter of the NAACP, rattled off a list of Brockton High’s past accomplishments, recalling when it was [recognized as a national leader in school change](#) for raising student achievement.

“We’re gonna get back there,” Martin said to applause across the room. “We must get back there.”

It’s not all doom and gloom, many acknowledged. Brockton High offers an array of advanced courses, despite some electives being cut due to the mounting budget crisis; a renowned theater program; and a powerhouse football team. Not discussed on Tuesday were the drivers that had fueled Brockton High’s ascension at the turn of the 21st century, which current and former faculty members described in interviews with the Globe: an almost fanatical commitment to building literacy skills, a structured discipline system that held students accountable, and a culture of high standards for all.



Parent Lise McKenzie spoke during a community town hall meeting at New Life Christian Church in Brockton for residents to discuss the problems at Brockton High School and possible solutions. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

They credited the practices put in by Szachowicz, who was named principal in 2004, and ran a tight ship.

Brockton, about 20 miles south of Boston, is among a handful of Massachusetts' cities where [the Black population has grown rapidly](#), drawing over the years waves of Cape Verdean and Haitian immigrants and [Black families priced out of the state capital](#). Brockton High remains the state's largest high school with roughly 3,500 students, of whom nearly 70 percent are low-income and about a third are learning English. The demographics have shifted over time, but the school was similarly diverse and even larger when Szachowicz was at helm.

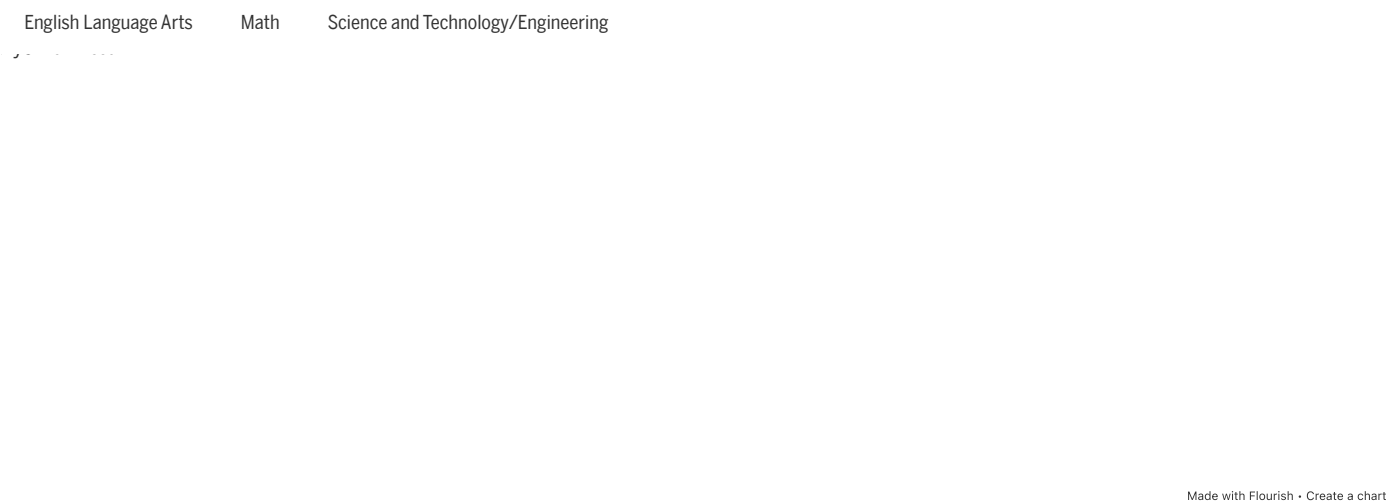
Ronald Ferguson, a public policy lecturer at Harvard and national expert in the achievement gap between white students and peers of color, started studying Brockton High in 2009, examining performance on students' yearly Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System, or MCAS, exams.

In a report published a year later, Ferguson detailed how Brockton High became "exemplary." Before she was principal, Szachowicz launched a school-wide literacy initiative in 2000 that emphasized four core skills — reading, writing, speaking, and reasoning. The initiative charged every teacher in every department with incorporating those skills into their curricula through open-ended writing assignments. The stakes were high: That year, more Brockton 10th-graders had failed than passed the MCAS exams, which students soon would be required to pass in order to graduate.

Just one year later, Brockton High cut in half its failure rate on the MCAS. It was no fluke: Year after year, Brockton High made more progress on the MCAS than the bulk of their peers across the state. What's more, the achievement gap between Black and white students shrank.

Brockton High's students made major gains on the MCAS, for a time

The school's scores peaked on the Grade 10 MCAS exams in 2012-2014.



Brockton High succeeded, Ferguson said, because “they basically structured their school and school culture in a way that produced a lot of learning.”

Back then, teaching at Brockton High was a “dream job,” said Jeff Driscoll, who taught business education there from 2002 to 2016. Staff morale was soaring. Expectations were clear. Students seemed proud to go there. Paul Laurino, a former English department head, agreed.

“It was a very well-run, organized school,” Laurino said. Educators from as far off as Ghana, Cambodia, and Brazil who toured Brockton High to study its methods would inevitably remark on how quiet the corridors were. “They expected, of course, mayhem,” he said. “The city of Brockton was a tough town.”

Szachowicz retired in 2013. When she returned to the district for a brief stint as interim deputy superintendent in 2021, she saw first-hand how much of the high school’s hard-earned progress had eroded. Although the drop-out rate had improved, MCAS performance had steadily declined. In its [2020 review of the school district](#), the state Department of Secondary and Elementary Education pointed to significant budget cuts that forced the district to eliminate critical leadership positions, resulting in “a continual decline in academic outcomes.”

Her successors, Szachowicz learned, abandoned her comprehensive literacy initiative. They had also phased out a demerit system that the high school used for many years to keep student behavior in check. When Szachowicz was principal, students faced an escalating set of consequences for persistent rule-breaking, starting with lunch and after-school detentions before being disciplined with a Saturday work program where they’d spend the morning cleaning the school under teacher supervision. An out-of-school suspension was the final measure on the disciplinary hierarchy. In the 2012-13 school year, Szachowicz’s last full year as principal, 22 percent of Brockton High students had received an out-of-school suspension, compared with 4 percent of students statewide.

The demerit system worked, several current and former teachers said, because the rules — and repercussions for breaking them — were straightforward.

But in 2014, Chapter 222 went into effect, a state law that [requires schools to exhaust “alternative remedies”](#) for addressing student misconduct before resorting to long-term suspensions. In the 2015-16 school year, the out-of-school suspension rate dropped to less than 9 percent.

Chronic absenteeism began rising before COVID struck

Last year, one-third of Brockton High students missed at least 10 percent of school days — one day every two weeks.



After Szachowicz left, teachers noticed standards for student performance and behavior started to relax. In the absence of the demerit system and under pressure by central office to limit suspensions, teachers told the Globe consequences for student misconduct are now applied inconsistently and arbitrarily. As a result, teachers report [students coming and going from classes as they please, blatantly disregarding rules against vaping, and even threatening them with violence.](#)

Out-of-school suspensions, which jumped to a rate of 1 in 5 in the 2021-22 school year, are strictly reserved for offenses that carry criminal penalties, such as selling drugs or assault, teachers said. Meanwhile lunch detentions no longer exist. After-school detentions only resumed several months after the school year began. In-house suspensions virtually disappeared after the pandemic, but the new principal of Brockton High, Kevin McCaskill, [has started bringing them back to get a grip on school safety.](#)

“We know we got to get better,” McCaskill told the crowd at Tuesday’s town hall. “The question is going to be, do we have the will — *the will* — to do the work necessary to make this the jewel of not only Brockton, but the jewel of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts?”

Brockton residents lined up to speak during a Brockton High Community town hall meeting. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

A Brockton Public Schools spokesman did not respond to Globe questions asking why the literacy program and demerit system were dismantled. McCaskill denied a Globe request to interview him or tour the school.

Many teachers worry the recent backsliding in student behavior has impaired the academic experience. Students can’t learn, said Faith Tobon, a longtime Brockton High School teacher and parent, when they are faced with so many distractions and disruptions, and teachers don’t have the tools to deal with them.

“We’ve lost sight of our job as educators,” Tobon said. “Now it’s all about the discipline.”

Brockton parents, meanwhile, are desperate for solutions. Lise McKenzie was alarmed when her daughter, a junior, told her about a student who tried to steal her expensive headphones while she was wearing them and another who swore at her in the halls. She and her husband considered transferring her to a nearby parochial school, but they worried about affording the tuition.

McKenzie graduated from Brockton High in 1993. She recalls teachers and students getting along and a pervasive school spirit that made her proud to be a Boxer. She certainly wasn’t afraid.

“I remember it being a good school,” she said.

She doesn’t feel that way now. Before, whenever she dropped her daughter off at school, McKenzie would tell her, “I love you.” But as the school climate has unraveled, McKenzie has begun saying instead, “Be safe.”

Rahsaan D. Hall, president and chief executive of the Urban League of Eastern Massachusetts, highlighted points made during a Brockton High Community town hall meeting. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

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