

CASE STUDY

Waterbury Public Schools Creates “Waterbury U” To Address Teacher Retention



From the outside, Waterbury, Connecticut looks like a classic Northeast city from the 20th century. Nicknamed “Brass City” for a manufacturing base that no longer exists, the city on a river boasts numerous empty brick buildings that serve as a reminder of an industrious past and an undecided future for modern business.

But inside the city’s [school district](#), a story of local innovation and talent is being crafted. In 2016, one of its own, [Jahana Hayes](#), was named national teacher of the year. She’s since left the classroom to become the area’s two-term congresswoman and an advocate of public education. Just two years later, [Dr. Verna Ruffin](#) was named the superintendent of the 18,000-student district.

And, while Waterbury faces the twin challenges of financial hardship and stagnant school budgets, Dr. Ruffin has unleashed a host of programs to set students up for success. From magnet schools to an early-college high school to a career academy, the leader has the academic needle pointing up. She's even created a seal of biliteracy, which verifies that students who graduate from the district can be deemed proficient in at least two languages.

But like so many other urban school districts, Dr. Ruffin and Waterbury constantly face an uphill climb to attract and retain the best teachers in the area. The city and the district have collaborated to provide renovation funding to several school buildings within the district. Although renovations are not currently finalized, in the next few years improvements to buildings will be complete.



Dr. Verna Ruffin at a Signing-Day Celebration for her teachers beginning Waterbury U. courses.

Dr. Ruffin's Vision

Dr. Ruffin knew the challenge of retaining teachers wasn't just financial. Many told her they wanted professional learning that helped them improve and also offered a way to advance in their careers without having to leave the district. "I heard that repeatedly," Dr. Ruffin said.

While investigating ways to bolster the district's professional learning to meet teachers exactly where they are, Dr. Ruffin found [BloomBoard](#)—a talent development provider that offers turnkey programs that help K-12 school districts move educators forward at all points of their professional journey.

The Pittsburgh-based company connects school districts to higher education institutions that offer educator preparation, certification, and degree programs using a unique, on-the-job instructional model. Immediately, Dr. Ruffin and her staff realized that BloomBoard's offerings could not only help the district retain its current teachers but also offer them the ability to earn graduate degree credits.

"We realized that BloomBoard offered something that was much more intense and, I think, much deeper than professional learning," said Janet Frenis, the district's supervisor of elementary mathematics. **"This is a cut above everything else that we've been seeing."**

Partnering with BloomBoard, Waterbury Public Schools created Waterbury U., an initiative in which the district will offer free college-credit courses for up to 800 current staffers. The effort is paid for using some of the district's federal Covid relief funds. In October 2022, the first cohort of WPS teachers began taking on-the-job courses.

Benefits for Current and Future Teachers

Waterbury U provides an avenue for teachers to earn a full degree, leading to salary advancement in addition to professional growth.

“This partnership gives our hard-working educators a voice and choice in their own professional learning,” Dr. Ruffin said.

In addition to helping current teachers advance within their careers, Waterbury U also plans to provide a path to help paraprofessionals begin their track toward becoming full-time teachers.

“We need to grow our own and need to bring people to Waterbury to be invested in Waterbury,” Dr. Ruffin said.

As the district works to fill remaining vacancies, the ability to offer paraprofessionals the opportunity to become teachers without requiring them to leave their current positions will be key.

“I see this as a major, major response to how we best meet the needs of our current employees and attract people to come to Waterbury with a desire to keep them here,” Dr. Ruffin shared.

Waterbury U also sets new teachers up for success by pairing them with a cohort of peers to learn and advance with while earning a master’s degree on-the-job, rather than on countless nights and weekends.



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- Dr. Verna Ruffin, Superintendent

Long Term Plans

The official launch of Waterbury U took place in Fall 2022. In partnership with BloomBoard and a higher education partner, teachers at the district had the opportunity to enroll in the following offerings:

- Foundations of Leadership
- Foundations of Instruction
- Foundations of Attending to Equity
- Foundations of Addressing Student Well-Being
- Classroom Management

Although Waterbury Public Schools leveraged ESSER/ARP funds to launch Waterbury U, Dr. Ruffin expects the program will prove its worth over the next two years—and will eventually be funded by the district.

“I’ve found that a lot of people in Waterbury are excited about being involved in something we’re creating for the future, and I think this decade is going to really allow us to do that, not just for this year. This is a step for us—a big, big step.”

Learn how apprenticeship programs can help district leaders solve pipeline and retention challenges in [this brief](#).



BloomBoard is a talent development provider that enables K-12 school districts to grow, advance, and retain educators by making professional education a benefit of employment. Our platform connects districts to higher education institutions that offer certification and degree programs, including apprenticeship-based bachelor’s degree programs. Learn more at bloomboard.com.