

SUPERINTENDENT'S BRIEF

Together, We are the Champions for Children in Poughkeepsie City School District

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'We persisted and we are here'

Looking out from Poughkeepsie High School's stage to a sea of blue mortarboards and friendly faces, Abass Na-aata reflected on how far one class of students could come in four years.

A Bronx native who spent his childhood in Ghana, Na-aata moved to Poughkeepsie four years ago amid the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. "It wasn't that long ago that we were freshmen who had to spend our first year on Zoom," Na-aata said. "We had challenges, periods of uncertainty and a string of failures along the way. But we persisted through, and we are here."

Determination, both in how the Class of 2024 overcame hurdles and in how it's needed moving forward, was a theme throughout Wednesday night's 152nd Poughkeepsie High School Commencement Exercises.

Several speakers, including administrative staff, keynote speaker Kirk Allen and students like the salutatorian Na-aata, reminded the graduating class of how far they have come, expressed gratitude for the people that helped them face that adversity, and hearkened to the spirit of the school mascot.

"A Pioneer is someone who innovates or tackles new challenges. Someone who is the first to apply or use a method to solve a problem," valedictorian Olivia Groucher said. "It's a great reminder of how you should approach the next chapter."



Top: Abass Na-aata gives his salutatory address; **Middle left:** Valedictorian Olivia Groucher gives a high-five while entering the auditorium. **Middle right:** Donnahugh Simms shows off his diploma while posing for photos; **Bottom left:** National Honor Society President Linsay Perez-Lopez poses with Board of Education President Hon. Thomas O'Neill and Superintendent Dr. Eric Jay Rosser; **Bottom right:** Peter Sealy Jr. gives his welcome address. Visit Poughkeepsieschools.org for a photo gallery and video.



Peter Sealy Jr., who served as student liaison to the Board of Education, summed up a similar sentiment in a blunt piece of advice ending his own address: "Don't complain about your problems. Be the solution."

After the ceremony began with the class entering the auditorium to "Pomp and Circumstance," performed live by underclassmen, the school's Air Force Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps Color Guard presented the flag and senior Maelia Vasquez belted out the national anthem.

Delsie Acevedo followed with a performance of "Lift Every Voice and Sing," which had many in attendance doing just that along with her. Senior



Jalen Lee served as a surprise performer, running through both classical and improvised crowd-pleasing piano pieces on a keyboard in front of the stage.

Principal Dr. Phee Simpson then took to the podium for the first speech of the night. Keeping the energy in the building high, she ran through a list of potential jobs and futures the graduating class may be capable of reaching. For many, the next step is college, with some earning full scholarships to places like Cornell and Syracuse universities.

Simpson reminded the families in the audience of how challenging the "process of self-discovery" in high school is, and

acknowledged it is difficult to watch a loved one go through that crucible.

"There is something about that struggle that is instructive and inspiring," she said. "Your child's knees may have been shaking, their voices may have quivered, their palms may have been sweaty – but they did it. They showed undeniable growth that showed courage and perseverance – and they did it. It's that kind of experience that reminds us that success and happiness in life is not just for some, but for everyone."

Allen struck a similar tone. The 1991 Poughkeepsie High School graduate is a real estate agent, an author, a teacher and a radio host. He also, as he detailed to the students, struggled academically and culturally after spending most of his early childhood living in Canada and Jamaica, experienced poverty and struggled with undiagnosed dyslexia. Still, he explained, he found his way through determination and focus. "At first glance, you may have thought 'If this guy can make it, I can make it, too,'" he said. "You are 100-percent correct. I dared to envision success."

That message and his experience, several students said afterward, was the lesson from the night that resonated most.

"He grew up (with hurdles) and he still accomplished everything," Groucher said.

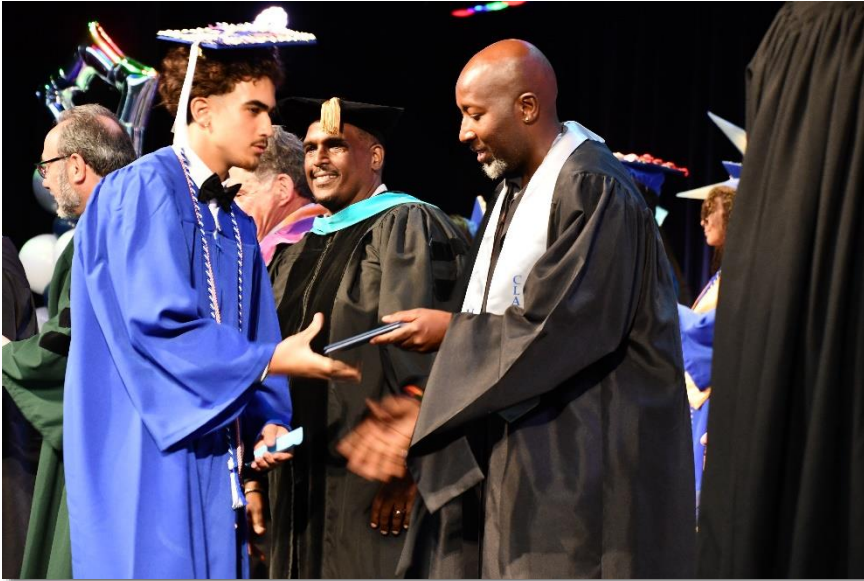
"There's no limit to anything we can do."

Allen also spent time in his speech thanking the specific people from the school district and community 30 years ago who intervened to help him survive those rough beginnings. Gratitude for family and staff was another theme that carried through the night.

Na-aata not only thanked his mother and late father but asked his family members to stand



Abass Na-aata, left, and Saniya Jenkins, center, enter the auditorium at the beginning of the ceremony.



Top: Executive Director of School Engagement Da'Ron Wilson hands a diploma to Bradley Sweda; Bottom left: Maelia Vasquez sings the national anthem; Bottom right: Jalen Lee performs on a keyboard.

and be recognized. Groucher thanked the parents and families in the audience for their support, but also the district's teachers for "your dedication, passion and unwavering support, which has been the foundation of our success. You have challenged, inspired and prepared us with the confidence and knowledge we need to face the world."

When asked her feelings after the ceremony, Saniya Jenkins, ranked third in the class, immediately said it was "really heartwarming" to look into the crowd and see her parents' reactions. She graduated alongside her brother, Travis Jenkins Jr., ranked eighth.

"To watch them watch us walk across the stage," she said, "it was nice to see." Looking at the rest of his graduating class as they crossed the stage and received diplomas was what resonated for Bradley Sweda. "Some of these people, I've known them since elementary school, and some maybe even a little earlier than that," he said. "Just seeing us build character, build up our lives and kind of grow together... It's been 12 years of our lives. Now it's over and we move on to the next path."

Dr. Eric Jay Rosser, superintendent of schools, encouraged students to be persistent, use their talents to find fulfillment, embrace family and friends and use their knowledge to help others, as they embark on that next path. "Each of you have great promise in the world we live in," he told the graduating class. "Embrace the many opportunities. Capitalize on each one of them, learning and succeeding as you achieve your individual and spectacular potential."

Though the future will take many of the graduates away from Poughkeepsie, Na-aata advised them, "Never forget where you came from. ... Never lose sight of who you are. This isn't farewell to PHS. A Pioneer is never truly gone. Go on to rule the world."



Left: Travis Jenkins Jr. poses with Hon. Thomas O'Neill and Superintendent Dr. Eric Jay Rosser; Center: Principal Dr. Phee Simpson, left, and Rosser pose together prior to the ceremony; Right: Keynote speaker Kirk Allen addresses the graduates.



Summer Meals program begins Monday

Beginning Monday, kids ages 18 and under in the City of Poughkeepsie will be able to get a free lunch and breakfast Monday through Friday throughout the summer. The Poughkeepsie City School District Summer Meals program will provide free food at five open locations, in addition to sending food to a wide range of summer camps and programs. No registration is required.

Lunch will be provided at all five open sites, and breakfast will be available only at the Pioneer on the Run bus, which will remain parked at Poughkeepsie High School each day. Seating will also be set up at the site. While some participating camps provide breakfast and lunch, others provide just one meal; contact your camp to learn more. The five open sites, which are subject to change are:

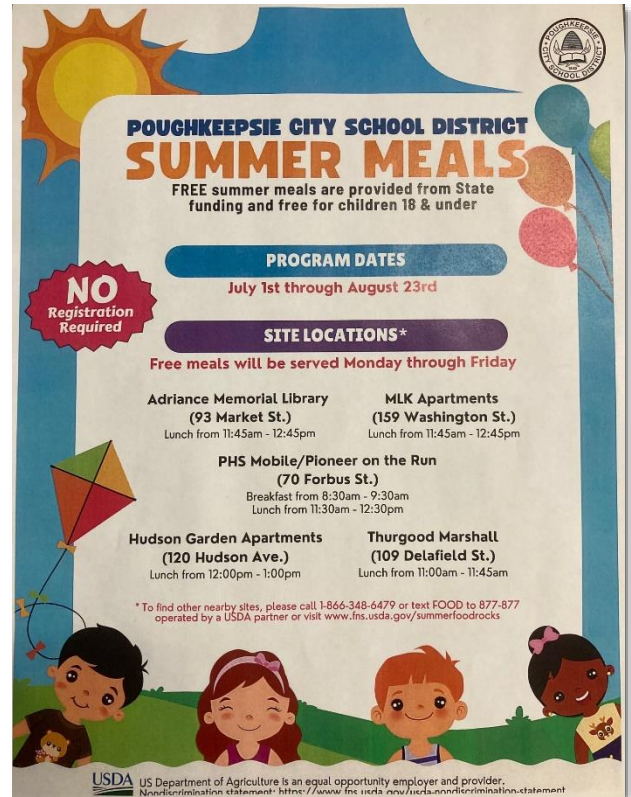
- **Adriance Memorial Library, 93 Market St.**
Lunch from 11:45 a.m.-12:45 p.m.
- **MLK Apartments, 159 Washington St.**
Lunch from 11:45 a.m.-12:45 p.m.
- **Hudson Garden Apartments, 120 Hudson Ave.** Lunch from noon-1:00 p.m.
- **Thurgood Marshall, 109 Delafield St.**
Lunch from 11:00 a.m.-11:45 a.m.
- **Pioneer on the Run bus at Poughkeepsie High School, 70 Forbus St.**
Breakfast, 8:30-9:30 a.m.
Lunch, 11:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

A cold meal will be provided at all sites, which will include deli sandwiches or wraps, fruit, vegetables and milk. A hot meal is available at the Pioneer On the Run bus, which will also be the site that will serve Poughkeepsie's summer school students.

The school district each day prepares hundreds of meals for children around the area through funding provided through the state. "In this district, we have food insecurity," said Director of Food Service Shameka Watson. "There's children right now who are not eating food. Having these sites available will help feed some of our kids in the community."

Each participating site operator received training this week on a variety of topics, most importantly food safety and the temperatures at which supplies and meals must be stored. The operation is subject to health department inspection and held to the same standard as any restaurant or cafeteria, with protocols in place to ensure all children are fed safely.

The summer meals program runs through Aug. 23. To find sites outside of the area operated by a different entity, visit www.fns.usda.gov/summerfoodrocks or call 1-866-348-6479.



Other newsletters to keep you informed:

Poughkeepsie City School District publishes a variety of newsletters throughout the year. Here are the available newsletters now: [Curriculum & Instruction Weekly](#), June 21, 2024; [Puentes](#), May 2024; [7 Mindsets for staff](#), June 2024; [7 Mindsets for parents](#), June 2024; [College Readiness and Workforce Education](#), May 2024.

Upcoming events

- **June 28:** Application deadline for Smart Scholars Performing Arts Academy. [Learn more here.](#)
- **July 1:** Board of Education Organizational Meeting:
5 p.m. at the Columbus Administration Building, 18 St. Perry St.