



Students and teachers watch Harding High School cheerleaders perform during a pep rally. Shahrzad Rasekh/CT Mirror

By Reginald David CT Mirror

Warren Harding High School's transformation was on full display at this year's pep rally as students streamed through the halls just before the event. The atmosphere was calmer than in years past, and Principal Vernon Thompson said that shift reflects the deeper work that helped the school move off the state's turnaround list, meaning the school has met specific improvement goals and is no longer considered one of the state's lowest-performing.

For the first time in years, Harding is now a focus school. This means the Bridgeport high school has made progress, but still receives targeted state support to help students with higher needs continue improving, placing it a step above turnaround status and on a clearer path toward sustained achievement.

Thompson said the school's progress began with changing how staff responded to student behavior. Instead of relying on removal or punishment, the school built a system that treats behavior as something connected to students' needs and well-being. Harding expanded partnerships with mental health providers like Effective School Solutions and LifeBridge, which gave students access to clinical support during the school day.

Thompson said this approach helped students stay in school and helped staff address the root causes of disengagement. "When you look at behavior as clinical instead of punitive, you can actually heal," he said. "That is when you start to see change."

The shift in climate allowed teachers to spend more time focusing on instruction. Thompson said teachers had long been pulled in two directions, trying to teach while managing chronic disruptions. As hallway culture improved, teachers were able to reconnect with professional development, coaching and more consistent classroom expectations. The school has tracked improvements in chronic absenteeism, graduation rates, ninth grade on-track data, and failure rates, which Thompson said are among the indicators the district reviews when monitoring progress.

Harding's improvement is part of a broader shift across Bridgeport schools. Barnum, Roosevelt, and Madison schools all exited state lists of underperforming schools this year after sustained academic gains. Bassick High School has also shown growth in its graduation rates. District leaders say these changes signal that progress is possible when schools have consistent leadership, community partnerships, and targeted support.

The district as a whole has been receiving state intervention for nearly a year. Last January, the Board of Education voted to allow the state to intervene in the Bridgeport Public Schools by providing a "technical assistance team," required training for district board members and having the state approve the district's permanent hire for superintendent.

At Harding, teachers say the changes are real. English teacher Amanda Palmer said this is the first time in years she has seen sustained stability among the staff.

She said teachers feel anchored by clearer expectations and stronger support for students who are struggling. "Students are responding to structure that is built on consistency and care," she said. "You can feel that people want to be here, and that makes a huge difference."

Palmer said she has stayed at Harding because she believes the work is moving in the right direction and because she feels the staff is finally pulling in the same direction.

The academic culture has also shifted, according to English teacher Leah Rosen. She said more students are taking advanced courses and advocating for themselves.

“Students have a stronger sense of what they can do,” she said. “They walk into class expecting to learn, not expecting conflict. That is a real change from a few years ago.”

Rosen said she sees students pushing themselves more and taking pride in gaining skills they once felt were out of reach.

Students say they have felt the changes directly. Some describe the building environment as stricter and more structured. Fewer students roam hallways and teachers enforce rules more consistently. For many students, this shift has raised expectations for themselves.

Rebecca Bristol, a senior, said she regularly used to show up “mad late,” sometimes 30 minutes into the school day. This year she says she takes her time in school more seriously. “I know I have to get there. I cannot be slipping up. I am here to get my education.”

Other students acknowledge that the increased structure can feel overwhelming at times, but they also describe a stronger network of support. Senior David Basnueva said he struggled with stress during his junior and senior years and leaned on a school social worker who helped him manage the pressure. A teacher connected him with a summer college preparation program that he said changed how he viewed his own potential. “If you go out of your way to talk to people here, you build a network,” he said.

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Students say the school's culture has shifted in ways that feel more communal and less chaotic. Junior Jazlee Montalvo said Harding has become a place where students feel comfortable with one another and are encouraged to explore interests beyond academics. She pointed to a health teacher who also coached the volleyball team to a national competition.

She also raised a persistent concern for students: transportation. With many students relying on public buses, late arrivals remain a challenge. "More reliable transportation would make it easier to get here and make school more enjoyable," she said.

Teachers say the improvements they see inside the building still depend heavily on whether students can get there on time and ready to learn. The school has expanded early college opportunities and career programming, but students cannot benefit if they walk through the door already overwhelmed, Assistant Principal Matthew Corcoran said.

"We have the pieces in place," he said. "What students need is stability outside the building too. When that happens, everything inside becomes more effective."

Corcoran said the consistency in leadership has also mattered. "Having a principal who stays, who sets expectations and sticks to them, has been important for building trust," he said.

Thompson said student feedback is central to maintaining the school's momentum. Students have asked for more school events, more spaces to celebrate academic success and more extracurricular opportunities.

The school has responded by building out activities, finding funding for student experiences and doing what Thompson calls small things that make students feel valued, including providing pre-game meals prepared by a local chef for athletes before state competitions. "We may not have all the dollars, but we find a way to make students feel as special as they are," he said.

Teachers say those gestures matter. Rosen said students notice when the school recognizes their accomplishments. The culture shift feels sustainable because it is rooted in relationships rather than shortcuts, Palmer said.

The question now is whether the district and state will maintain long-term support. "We can keep building, but it will take continued investment," Corcoran said.

Thompson said the school still faces significant challenges, especially around trauma that students carry from outside the building. Many ninth graders enter high school already behind in credits or facing family or community stress. "Trauma is not going anywhere," he said. "The question is how we respond to it and how we make education accessible even when students are facing serious challenges."

And even with its progress, Harding still has work ahead. The school continues to support a large population of students with higher needs, and leaders say long-term improvement will depend on consistent resources, strong attendance and stability in students' lives outside the building. At the same time, the school is expanding academic opportunities.

Thompson said the long-term goal is to build a school community that students will trust beyond their own graduation. "When my students become parents, I want this to be a place they are comfortable sending their children," he said.

Reginald Davis is a reporter for the Connecticut Mirror. Copyright 2025 @ CT Mirror (ctmirror.org).