

Robert C. Watson Biography

Robert C. Watson is a civic leader and former public school administrator with over 30 years of experience working on issues of educational equity and community development in the City of Poughkeepsie, Dutchess County and across the United States. His experiences range from leading schools and school systems to teaching, mentoring, grassroots community organizing and nonprofit management.

Mr. Watson was born one of eight children to a working-class family in the City of Poughkeepsie. He grew up on Garden Street on Poughkeepsie's Northside and attended Poughkeepsie City School District (PCSD) for the entirety of his K-12 education. Within PCSD, Mr. Watson was a special education student whose own struggles in the classroom informed his understanding of the challenges students and families face every day.

As a teenager, one of Mr. Watson's defining life experiences was participating in a summer Christian missionary program in Mendenhall, Mississippi. In Mississippi, he learned about intergenerational poverty and witnessed compelling examples of communities coming together to improve the lives of children around a shared vision. The service trip also brought Mr. Watson face to face with members of the Ku Klux Klan who threatened and chased him; it was foundational in informing his understanding of racism and structural inequities. That experience inspired him to return to Poughkeepsie and create a community-based Pre-K-5th grade academic and civic organization, "Harambee of Poughkeepsie, Inc.," in partnership with three teenage friends and a community pastor.

At 19 years old, Mr. Watson became the Executive Director of Harambee and one of the youngest nonprofit Executive Directors in the Tri-County area. Watson held this role while completing his Bachelor's Degree in Social Work at Marist College. Harambee engaged hundreds of Poughkeepsie City School District students in afterschool and summer enrichment programs that aimed to close opportunity gaps. Many of Harambee's former staff and alumni went on to successful careers in the Mid-Hudson Valley and across the United States.

After leaving Harambee, Mr. Watson was recruited to serve as an Administrator Student Attendance Program Organizer with the Poughkeepsie City School District (PCSD) where he worked with families on issues of chronic absenteeism. He also continued to be involved in a range of community activities including teaching incarcerated men with the Marist College Prison Program at Green Haven State Maximum Prison.

As a school district employee, Mr. Watson continued his education, obtaining a Master's in Public Administration (MPA) from Marist College and a Master's in Education from Teachers College at Columbia University, along with doctoral coursework at Columbia. Within PCSD, Mr. Watson continued to gain notoriety as an emerging educational leader; he was recruited to become an assistant principal at Poughkeepsie High School, a turnaround principal at Poughkeepsie Middle School and eventually, Superintendent of Schools. During his tenure within PCSD, Mr. Watson delivered transformative improvements in student achievement, whole child supports, community-school district partnerships and teacher/administrator satisfaction.

Today, Mr. Watson works as an educational consultant and remains dedicated to supporting children, youth and families in the City of Poughkeepsie and beyond. He continues to serve as a mentor to generations of teachers, school leaders and administrators across the nation, many of whom worked with him at Poughkeepsie City School District.

He is also a proud father to Rob Watson Jr. and Samantha Watson, two Poughkeepsie High School graduates who have dedicated their lives to social justice. Samantha is a graduate of Siena College and the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill School of Social Work. She works at the Mom Project leading national programs that tackle issues of gender equity for mothers and women of color in the workforce. Rob Jr. holds an undergraduate degree and two master's degrees from Harvard University. He is now an administrator and lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, co-founder of the Poughkeepsie Children's Cabinet, Lead for Poughkeepsie and consultant with the Harlem Children's Zone working on issues of racial equity and cradle-to-career solutions to eliminate intergenerational poverty. Mr. Watson is also a proud grandfather to Amari, Quincy and Maia, the newest additions to his family that continue to motivate his commitment to a better world.