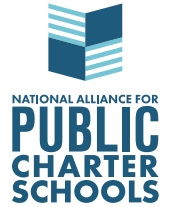


IDENTITY AND CHARTER SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

PROFILES OF LEADERS OF COLOR: BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE STAFF

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BY: NATIONAL ALLIANCE FOR PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS AND PUBLIC IMPACT



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INTRODUCTION

How does being people of color affect the ways in which successful public charter school leaders shape their schools and do their work? This series of reports from the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools and Public Impact profiles diverse leaders to show some of the ways their experiences and perspectives influence how they build school culture, parent and community relationships, and effective staffs.

Many aspects of good leadership are universal, and we are all, of course, more than our racial and ethnic identities. At the same time, our identities—including our racial and ethnic identities—shape how we approach a situation. In these reports, we highlight how leaders say their experiences as people of color affect how they lead. Our purpose is to inform practice for the broader charter sector, where leaders have considerable flexibility to act in different and innovative ways to support students.

The profiles in this series also aim to inspire more people of color to pursue charter school leadership because research makes two points clear. Students benefit in many ways from having teachers who look like them, including achieving better academic outcomes and getting disciplined less often.¹ The same studies have not examined the impact of having a school leader of the same race, though it seems reasonable that the same patterns would persist. Moreover, a recent study found that Black principals are more likely to hire Black teachers and retain those already working at their school.² Yet while more than half of the students enrolled in public schools are people of color³, the same is true of fewer than a quarter of traditional public school principals and fewer than a third of charter school principals.⁴

We do not intend to suggest that only people of color can effectively lead schools that serve students of color. Rather, this report aims to acknowledge the

unique value leaders of color bring to their schools, and to share thoughtful and effective practices that other leaders—regardless of their race or ethnicity—would be apt to adopt.

ABOUT THE LEADERS PROFILED

The charter school leaders we spoke to for this series run schools across the country, from Massachusetts, California, and Louisiana to Missouri, Wisconsin, and North Carolina. Those schools include a mix of academic models, including college preparatory programs, schools that are “diverse by design,” and dual language programs. Some leaders run one school, while others oversee as many as six. They predominantly serve students of color and students from low-income families, though not always.

Similarly, the leaders we spoke with are diverse. They are Black, African American, Latina, Latino, Latinx, Asian, and multiracial.⁵ They include immigrants, as well as lifelong residents of the communities in which they now serve or ones much like them. Still others lived a childhood markedly different from the students in their schools. And they all bring to their schools a unique culture that reflects both their identities and their experiences.

HOW THE REPORTS ARE ORGANIZED

Despite their differences, we found common themes across the leaders we interviewed. (See “Diverse perspectives, common themes” on p. 2.) Each report in this series explores those themes through a different topic and through profiles of different leaders. Although each leader we interviewed is profiled just once, they all had insights to share on each of the report topics. The reports highlight what stood out as particularly thought-provoking or innovative, and where the leaders most clearly said their approach reflected their experience as a person of color. These short profiles offer a glimpse

into what these leaders say contributed to their success and to the success of their students.

The rest of this report focuses on building an effective staff. Three charter school leaders of color explain how their identities and experiences—as well as the flexibility and autonomy the charter model offers— have shaped how they recruit and develop their teachers and how those approaches spill over into their interactions with students and the broader community.



DIVERSE EXPERIENCES, COMMON THEMES

Many of the practices the leaders we interviewed described are the same practices we see and hear about from high-performing school leaders generally. Yet three themes related to their experiences as people of color ran across both their individual stories and the three topics this series explores:

- 1. Addressing holes and creating opportunities based on personal experience.** Several leaders described holes in their own academic experiences as a person of color or as a child from a low-income family. In response, they laid out the sometimes nontraditional steps they have taken to address those same challenges in their own schools and to serve as role models for students and the school community. Similarly, some leaders shared opportunities that proved pivotal for them, and which they have aimed to replicate for their students and the broader community.
- 2. Emphasizing value over deficits.** At each of the schools featured in these reports, students from low-income families and students of color make up the entire student body or a significant portion of it. There are many examples and much discussion of the deficits—both real and perceived—with which many such students enter school.⁶ In contrast, the language many of the leaders used was very different. They emphasized the *value* students and their families offer. They spoke of the ways their schools address student needs by tapping into and encouraging that value, rather than seeing their primary roles as compensating for or working around deficits.
- 3. Providing an equitable educational experience to produce equitable student outcomes.** All the leaders we spoke to have high academic expectations for all students regardless of their background. But many also aim to provide students an educational experience like that of their more advantaged peers—an experience full of art, sport, travel, and the like, as well as the space to try new things and learn from their mistakes. In some cases, they even built their school around themes and curricula seldom available in low-income districts. The leaders we spoke to argue that a well-rounded, enriched student experience ultimately fosters student achievement and creates active, engaged citizens. They stress that one does not exist at the expense of the other, but that their students can have – and deserve to have – both strong academics and rich educational experiences.

Of course, these perspectives and approaches are not exclusive to leaders of color. All leaders can reflect on their own experiences and take a holistic look at the families they serve to build a school that has as its foundation a commitment to accentuate and develop the best of what is already there.

Yet these themes consistently came through the stories we heard from the leaders profiled and their statements about how they say their experiences as people of color influence the way they approach education in real and substantial ways. Hence the profiles included in this report and others in the series center around these common themes while also highlighting the ways they play out in practice.



BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE STAFF

The importance of teachers and their impact on student learning is well documented.⁷ But finding, training, and developing teachers and other school leaders capable of supporting outstanding outcomes, as well as happy, confident children, is no small task. And it can be especially challenging when the world students face outside of school includes hardship, trauma, or voices of doubt.

ABOUT THE LEADERS

All the leaders profiled in this series take calculated steps to ensure the staff members leading their schools are positioned to support student achievement. Moreover, the value of a charter model that allows them considerable autonomy over who they hire and for what, how they hold staff accountable, and how they develop and compensate their teams shines through the stories we heard.

This report, however, focuses on just three leaders—Frances Teso of Voices College-Bound Language Academies, Eric Sanchez of Henderson Collegiate, and Jamar McKneely of InspireNOLA. Like others, these leaders implement a range of proven strategies to train and support their teachers, including weeks of new-teacher onboarding before the school year begins, opportunities to advance and

lead others as master teachers, and a protected hour within the school day for job-embedded professional development. And these examples form just the tip of the iceberg; all three charter organizations employ a vast array of proven and tailored strategies to build their teachers’ capacity and support student learning day in, and day out.

Each of these three leaders also stands out, however, for a particular approach they take to develop teachers and leaders:

- ▶ **ERIC SANCHEZ** and his team train all the teachers at Henderson Collegiate in empathy as a way to fight biases;
- ▶ **FRANCES TESO** has developed a leader training program that both encourages and provides a clear pathway for her teachers to pursue school leadership; and
- ▶ **JAMAR MCKNEELY** took his responsibility to mentor beyond his charter school network, InspireNOLA, and founded the Alliance for Diversity and Excellence to develop future charter school leaders of color across the city of New Orleans.

FIGURE 1: ABOUT THE SCHOOLS*

| | HENDERSON COLLEGIATE | VOICES COLLEGE-BOUND LANGUAGE ACADEMIES | INSPIRENOLA |
|----------------------|----------------------|---|---------------------|
| Founded | 2010 | 2007 | 2013 |
| Grades Served | K-12 | PK-8 | PK-12 |
| Number of Schools | 3 | 4 | 6 |
| Number of Students | 1,227 ⁹ | 1,122 ⁸ | 4,540 ¹⁰ |
| % non white | 95% ⁹ | 97% ⁸ | 99% ¹⁰ |
| % eco. disadvantaged | 90% ¹² | 72% ¹¹ | 86% ¹⁰ |

*Based on 2018-19 data unless otherwise indicated

APPROACHES TO EFFECTIVE STAFFING HIGHLIGHT COMMON THEMES

According to Teso, Sanchez, and McKneely, the ways they have chosen to develop and support teachers and aspiring leaders in their schools (and beyond) reflect their personal stories as people of color, which touch on the same core themes we heard across our interviews. (See “Diverse experiences, common themes” on p. 2.)

- ▶ **Addressing holes and creating opportunities based on personal experience.** Both Teso and McKneely consider themselves lucky for having had mentors who encouraged them in their journey to school leadership and helped them to recognize what they could achieve. They both also insist that luck should have had no role. In response, Teso developed a program within Voices to encourage her predominantly Latina staff to consider school leadership. She then provides them with the coaching and learning opportunities needed to develop into the role. McKneely took a slightly different tact when he founded the Alliance for Diversity and Excellence, which develops and trains people of color from across New Orleans to lead high-performing charter networks.

In contrast, Sanchez’s experience growing up as a person of Puerto Rican descent in New York, moving between different racial, ethnic, and religious groups, emphasized for him the opportunities his identity as a person of color affords. He’s learned to adapt to different environments in a way that is still authentic to who he is, a lesson that shapes how he interacts with his staff and his students.

- ▶ **Emphasizing value over deficits.** All three leaders spoke passionately about their students’ abilities and their potential. They make a point of reinforcing these beliefs with their staff, even when the challenges may seem overwhelming. Sanchez leads book discussions and role-plays difficult conversations with

parents and teachers. McKneely makes a point of reviewing data through an equity lens and encouraging his teachers to hold one another accountable when they may be lowering their standards for what students can accomplish. Meanwhile at Voices, Teso has worked to help her predominantly Latina teaching staff recognize their own value and what they might achieve professionally.

- ▶ **Providing an equitable educational experience to produce equitable student outcomes.**

Student performance results at Voices, Henderson Collegiate, and InspireNOLA schools speak for themselves. They are all crushing stereotypes and setting their students up for success both in college and in life. And they all take care to provide the experiences students need to get there, including trips to new places and opportunities to lead both within their schools and in the community.

NEW THEMES ON BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE STAFF EMERGE

Conversations with Teso, Sanchez, and McKneely also revealed two additional themes specific to building an effective school staff:

- ▶ **Prioritizing mindset as the first indicator of teacher quality.** All three leaders said they seek out teachers who demonstrate a real and genuine belief in what their students can accomplish and a willingness to work tirelessly on their behalf. Sanchez described looking for staff who are “humble, hungry, and smart.” Teso recruits from social justice programs as often (if not more often) than from schools of education, and McKneely’s team canvasses the community and asks for referrals. Because the charter model frees them from hiring only teachers with a particular set of credentials, they are able to prioritize these competencies and skills. It is much more difficult to change the way someone thinks than it is to teach pedagogy, all three leaders said.



- ▶ **Navigating the tension between compassion and high expectations.** Teso, Sanchez and McKneely also all acknowledged that there is an inherent tension between the compassion their students need and deserve and the high expectations teachers must have for students' academic achievement. It is true that teachers need to recognize what students are living from day to day in order to better address their needs and tap into their passions. But compassion can sometimes open the door to excuses. All three emphasize the need to have honest dialogue among staff to call out faltering expectations when they arise, and to work collectively to improve.

The rest of this report shares the leader profiles.

ERIC SANCHEZ: TRAINING IN EMPATHY

With family roots in Puerto Rico, Eric Sanchez was raised in New York City, where diversity was just part of life. For Sanchez, being a person of color has largely meant interacting with a variety of underrepresented groups and communities. His two best friends growing up were Colombian and Haitian. When hip hop ruled his world, he hung out in predominantly African American and Latinx circles. Meanwhile, his roommate in military school was Senegalese, while his college roommate was Puerto Rican.



As Sanchez grew up, though, he didn't just co-exist with people who looked or believed differently than himself; he made genuine connections with them, evident in the mix of friends who served as groomsmen on his wedding day. And those relationships developed in him an uncanny ability to ignore easy stereotypes in favor of seeing individuals with perspectives worthy of consideration.

FIGHTING PARADIGMS

When Sanchez moved to rural North Carolina to be a sixth grade English and Social Studies teacher with Teach for America, however, he was not always received in the same way. He didn't fit neatly into a box where residents tended to be African American, white, or Mexican. As a result, the community struggled to get their head around him. "In one of my first interactions in North Carolina... the janitors [where I was staying] asked me, 'What are you?'"

Sanchez recalls. "I had never been asked [about my heritage] that way before. Eventually, I said that I'm of Puerto Rican descent, and their reaction was, 'But you speak so well.'"

That exchange highlights the kinds of paradigms Sanchez faces every day. Just as those janitors made assumptions about who he was, what he could do, and even how he should speak because of his ethnicity, he sees society make assumptions about his 1,200+ students, 95 percent of whom are students of color and 90 percent of whom come from low-income families.¹³ As he and his wife Carice founded Henderson Collegiate—a network of three schools serving elementary, middle and high school in Henderson, North Carolina—members of the community questioned their motivations, loyalties, and stances on a range of politically charged issues. His antidote has been to shatter stereotypes in

the classroom, to nurture empathy in his staff and students, and to represent and advocate for all of the families in his “Pride.”

TRAINING TEACHERS IN EMPATHY

Teachers lie at the heart of his approach. As Sanchez and his team consider new candidates, “social intelligence” is a top priority. “Do they know how they’re coming across? Are they globally aware?” Sanchez asks. If not, Henderson Collegiate is not the place for them.

Once hired, staff members continually practice how to fight biases so they can enter each situation with genuine objectivity. Everyone reads *Leadership and Self-Deception*,¹⁴ a book that focuses on the way we view the people with whom we interact, and the need to see them as mattering as individuals, rather than simply as obstacles to get around. After finishing the book, staff discuss how the lessons from the book can translate to practice at Henderson Collegiate, including a willingness to both call out and address conflict and demonstrate vulnerability.

Staff also practice having potentially uncomfortable conversations with students and parents. For example, Henderson Collegiate requires that parents walk students into the building when their children are late—something parents do not always want to do. At one point, staff practiced talking with parents

about the policy, including acknowledging the understandable reasons a child might be late, why it is important for students to arrive on time, and how the school might be able to help. As they practiced, staff focused on choosing the right words, as well as conveying the right body language to indicate they were trying to understand parents’ perspectives.

Similarly, teachers learn to treat parents as experts on their children who play an important role in their education. Like many high-performing schools, Henderson Collegiate opens its doors to parents in a variety of ways and communicates about goings-on and student progress. But teachers are also trained to value and honor parents. They reach out to parents to understand what is happening in students’ lives outside of school and ask parents for advice, based on the belief that parents know their children best. “I have always felt respected,” says Ayana Lewis, both a parent and the Family Engagement Coordinator for the high school. “I always feel like the teachers are proactive.”

Admittedly, there can be a tension between empathy and accountability. Knowing the real and difficult challenges a child is going through can inadvertently open the door to lower expectations, something Sanchez works to avoid. “When you enter the conversation, you want to know your end goal. I need to have that one sentence in my head that I’m holding myself accountable for saying. I won’t indulge in certain conversations or make excuses for that person,” Sanchez says. He holds his teachers accountable for doing the same.

DEVELOPING AUTHENTIC AND EMPATHETIC STUDENTS

Sanchez also tries to instill empathy in his students. He knows from experience what it feels like to be judged, and even doubted. But rather than let disgust or frustration overcome him in those situations, Sanchez chooses to assume that these assumptions come from a place of ignorance, not malevolence. “It’s about seeing people as people,” Sanchez says. “The guy who cut you off on the highway may have done a jerk thing, but that doesn’t necessarily make him a jerk.” Moreover, ignorance



provides an opportunity to educate. “When I get people to think that a person like me is possible,” Sanchez says, “they realize that the kids in my school are possible.”

Of course, that kind of generosity of spirit is not easy, and it often requires a certain amount of code-switching to meet people where they are. But based on how Sanchez has navigated his own race and class, he believes there’s a way to interact with different kinds of people—including those who question him—in a way that’s still true to who he is, and he believes his students can too. His students seem to be hearing that message. “Mr. Sanchez tells us to ‘shine our light,’” says Victor Clifton, a recent graduate of Henderson Collegiate. “It means being yourself unapologetically, because that’s what makes you unique.”

STRONG ACADEMICS, POSITIVE OPINIONS

In the case of Henderson Collegiate’s students, part of being authentic is excelling academically. Students at the network’s three schools have exceeded growth expectations from the state every year,¹⁵ and student proficiency in both English language arts and math exceed district and state averages.¹⁶ In addition, Henderson Collegiate has earned the state’s top school accountability grade for the past four years, and 100 percent of the school’s first graduating class in 2019 was accepted to college.¹⁷

Sanchez and his staff are changing community opinions at the same time. He’s noticed others slowly letting go of the low expectations they once held for his students. “What we’ve seen in the community [is that] people are getting excited about our kids and their possibilities—not just to be productive members of society, but their potential for the future.”

FRANCES TESO: DEVELOPING LATINA LEADERS



As a child, Frances Teso was “underprivileged” by most definitions; her family didn’t have a lot of money, her parents didn’t complete high school, and she spoke only Spanish when she entered kindergarten. Nonetheless, Teso became the first in her family (and one of the few from her community) to go to college. Then she went on to earn a master’s degree, and eventually acceptance into a prestigious national principal training program. Today, she is the founder and CEO of Voices College-Bound Language Academies, a network of four dual-language charter schools in the San Francisco Bay area of California where 94 percent of students are Latinx,¹⁸ 54 percent of students are English Learners,¹⁹ and across the schools, Latinx students consistently outperform their peers in both the surrounding district and statewide on state exams.²⁰

Growing up, Teso dreamed of becoming a teacher in her east San Jose neighborhood, but she never imagined herself where she is today. Reflecting upon the experiences that led her to found a charter network, Teso credits not only her own drive and hard work, but also the luck of having teachers and

mentors who recognized her potential and built her confidence to lead. “I’ve had a lot of opportunities because people believed in me, not because I’d proven myself,” she says.

INVESTING IN POTENTIAL

Now in a position of power and influence herself, Teso wants both to pay it forward and make sure that leadership opportunities are not simply a product of luck for her mostly Latinx staff. “I want to give them the opportunities, the same benefits as I had. I feel an obligation to help them succeed,” she explains.

The process starts by finding the right people to teach at Voices. Teso knows she can train staff in the skills they need to be effective educators. Adult learning is one of her passions, and the network invests heavily in professional development and staff training, which includes an intensive summer session for new hires and ongoing coaching throughout the year. What is much more difficult to teach is mindset.

Consequently, Teso doesn’t look for the most impressive credentials when she’s hiring. Instead, she seeks out teachers who believe in the Voices mission and will be personally invested in students’ success. Teso is just as likely to recruit from social justice and ethnic studies courses at surrounding universities as from teacher education programs. She also recruits heavily from the community, recognizing that teachers from the community will understand students in ways other teachers cannot and will foster a sense of hope and belief in the community. According to Teso, sometimes the teachers she recruits do not even know they want to teach until they talk with her team.

The result is a school that reflects the community and can empathize with its members, that understands at a personal level what is at stake. It is a school where, she explains, “no one has to explain their *frijoles con arroz*.” Gaby Quintanilla, a Voices

principal-in-training, reflects on what attracted her to work at Voices. She remembers when she went on a school tour, “I saw teachers of color, students of color, and a deep level of respect for all backgrounds and cultures. I made the decision to join Voices, and Frances made the decision to have me.”

A PATH TO LEADERSHIP

Teso has also made it a priority to offer her teachers opportunities in leadership. Her own pathway to leadership was accidental in many ways; she happened upon people and opportunities that opened doors for her. In contrast, leadership is anything but accidental at Voices. The school prioritizes internal promotions and provides all staff with a readiness and willingness to advance into leadership with a clear pathway for doing so.

To start, the network hosts Saturday leadership workshops open to all teachers. During the workshops, they dive into some of the tenets of leadership, such as developing a growth mindset, conflict resolution, and sustaining a staff when the work is demanding.

Every teacher completes an annual survey that asks

about their interest in leadership opportunities and which, if any, they would like to pursue. Teachers then have a follow-up meeting with a member of the leadership team to discuss the survey results and have an honest conversation about the competencies and skills needed for different positions, teacher’s strengths and growth areas, and a timeline for advancement.

The process becomes even more intentional from there. Recently, Teso hosted a dinner for aspiring leaders and invited a panel to talk about their own journey into leadership and the competencies underlying their success. Teso, along with her administration, also works with these aspiring leaders to identify a leadership plan, including “stretch assignments,” which are specific experiences meant to address a specific development area. These might include delivering professional development as a way to build confidence managing more veteran teachers or working with families in the special education department to build expertise.

According to Quintanilla, the process is working. “When I stepped into a classroom for the first time,



I had no goal of being a principal. It wasn't until we did these yearly conversations and I heard, 'This is what we're noticing...these are some opportunities... what *are* you interested in?' that I started considering leadership."

CARE AND HIGH EXPECTATIONS

Equally important, Teso makes clear she believes in her aspiring leaders and what they can accomplish. As a Latina who has often felt a sense of imposter syndrome, Teso understands the impact that vote of confidence can have on a teacher's career.

Chief Academic Officer Elizabeth Aguilar had this experience when she was a teacher at Voices: "She [Teso] showed me that she believed in me by asking me to attend an external professional development and then share what I learned with the school. That told me she trusted me. She told me, 'No one is doubting you; you are doubting you.' Now I'm trying to do the same for other people."

At the same time, Teso holds the highest expectations for her teachers. While she believes she has a responsibility to give them the tools and opportunities they need to grow and develop, she also recognizes that not everyone will endure the challenge of leading schools like she does. It is her job to empower staff, but they must advocate for themselves and do the work. "Everyone is not going to make the cut," she acknowledges. "We tell teachers how we can support them along the way and put the ball in their court, but they need to run with it."

HEIGHTENED RESPONSIBILITY

As much as she values and supports her staff, her students are what drive her, and her students need great teachers and leaders from the moment they step in the door. For Teso, being a charter school leader of color brings a heightened sense of responsibility—not only to her teachers, but also to her students, and to the broader school community that society so often undervalues. "I don't go into my work thinking, 'I am a leader of color,' but I *am* a leader of color. It is really hard work that I cannot separate myself from."

Based on school data, she is holding up her end of the bargain. For the fourth consecutive year, Innovate Public Schools has named Voices a "Top Bay Area School for Underserved Students" in 2018. To make the list, economically disadvantaged and Latinx students must have higher proficiency rates than all students in the state, effectively closing the achievement gap.²¹ And that's what VOICES is doing: in 2018, more than 60 percent of Latinx third grade students across Voices schools were proficient in Math compared to 49 percent of *all* third grade students across the state.²²

Her staff offers another perspective on the numbers. "It's very inspiring to have a Latina leading this charge," Quintanilla says. "It is an example of power in the greatest sense. This woman, who is from this community, is using her intellect and her experience to benefit this community."

JAMAR MCKNEELY: MENTORING A CITY

Jamar McKneely didn't grow up in the best neighborhood or attend the best schools. When he thinks about what got him to where he is today—leading one of the highest-performing charter school networks in New Orleans and its roughly 4,500 students—he thinks about his parents, and he thinks about his mentors. There were his principals—Mr. Spears at Baker High School and John Hiser at Edna Karr High School—who built up McKneely's self-esteem and convinced him high expectations were worth having. And there was his college advisor, who introduced him to the writings of Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, and Thurgood Marshall while challenging him to define for himself what it meant to be an African American man.

His mentors did more than encourage McKneely, though; they provided examples of success and instilled in him a responsibility to pay it forward, a responsibility he lives every day in the experiences he creates for his students, the priorities he conveys to his teachers, and the place he has made for himself and his many mentees across New Orleans.

THE FUTURE OF A COMMUNITY

New Orleans can be a difficult place for children to thrive. In 2017, it had the highest poverty rate of any metropolitan city, and that rate was nearly twice as high for African American residents as it was for the city overall.²³ According to the Institute of Women & Ethnic Studies, access to jobs offering a living wage, reliable transportation, and affordable housing are all persistent challenges.²⁴ In addition, the threat of gun violence looms, with more than 200 shooting incidents in 2018 alone. Meanwhile, the rate of children suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is four times the national average.²⁵

This is the context within which InspireNOLA



operates—a network where 90 percent of students are African American and 86 percent come from low-income families²⁶. McKneely acknowledges the many challenges and traumas students face. He does what he can to address them by coordinating back-to-school and holiday drives, providing an array of wraparound services, and even hosting vigils. But when McKneely looks at his students, he does not linger on what they do not have or the adversities before them. Rather, he sees the future of a community.

RECRUITING MENTORS TO TEACH AND LEAD

As McKneely recruits new staff, he looks for people who share his high expectations for students and who will not just educate them, but will also build them up to see what they are capable of achieving. His team pushes candidates about their motivations for working at InspireNOLA and looks for evidence that they understand the responsibility they're stepping into. "Teachers can sometimes look at students and parents as just poor and disadvantaged, instead of what they can

accomplish,” McKneely explains. “But compassion of life doesn’t provide opportunities for freedom. I’d rather students grapple with success in life so they can understand how to handle challenges.”

Any teacher with the right mindset, who is willing to work hard and balance empathy with high expectations, can have a place at InspireNOLA. But as much as possible, McKneely also looks to the community for leadership. “Before I could understand what my life could be, I had to see the influence of people like me and have people willing to keep pushing me,” he explains. Therefore, his teachers largely reflect his student population; McKneely estimates that between 60 and 70 percent are long-time residents, including teachers who worked in Orleans Parish before Hurricane Katrina.

McKneely has gone one step further, though, developing a local leadership pipeline for both his schools and the city’s larger education sector. As InspireNOLA grew from two schools to seven, funders challenged McKneely’s leadership picks,



all people of color, asking if they were sufficiently “ready” to do the job. While McKneely believed they were, he wanted to put the question to rest once and for all.

In 2013, he partnered with other African American community leaders to start the Alliance for Diversity and Excellence (ADE), which he leads as its president. The ADE offers senior education leaders opportunities to network and collaborate, advocates

for the city’s charter students, and celebrates excellence. However, its primary goal is to develop and train people of color to lead high-performing charter networks, which it does through a senior leadership institute, a professional development symposium, and a leadership panel series.

SUPPORTING THE WORK

Finding the right people is just one part of the process, though; InspireNOLA staff must then do the hard work of lifting students up. Mentor teachers play a key role. They support their colleagues by running professional learning communities, reviewing student data, working with teachers to discuss goals and progress, and coordinating with both instructional coaches and school administrators about trends and next steps. The network routinely reviews its curriculum and intervention strategies to identify and address areas for improvement as well. And McKneely is a constant presence; he’s often in schools talking with parents, students, and staff in addition to observing, problem-solving, and jumping in as needed.

McKneely’s team relies also on some less-traditional strategies, including having staff reflect on their struggles as leaders and in life. “Many of the people I hire come from deficits,” McKneely notes. “If people can reflect on their own experiences and struggles, we can better understand what students go through.” Moreover, acknowledging the deficits in their own lives better enables teachers to see that those obstacles need not be barriers to success. “He always uses something personal,” principal Ingrid Jackson says.

At the same time, InspireNOLA’s leadership team makes a point of holding staff accountable for maintaining high expectations, even when it’s hard. As an example, when McKneely and his staff realized suspensions were higher than they thought was appropriate, they looked at the data and found themselves coming back to the same question: Were they treating students in ways that inspired them? When they realized the answer was no, they overhauled the network’s discipline system to reinforce and reward positive behavior, rather than to

punish the negative. “You can always do better, even on your best days you can do better. [Mr. McKneely] uses data to push that every day,” Ms. Jackson says. “He looks at the disparities and how our schools are chipping away. But he pushes us to chip harder and be thought leaders.”

BELIEF IN ACTION

Currently, InspireNOLA is among the highest performing CMOs in New Orleans, defying the odds of what students of color can achieve. In 2018, all but one of its schools earned the state’s top grade for student growth, demonstrating the network’s ability to accelerate learning and continually narrow the achievement gap²⁷. The results are all the more impressive given that half of the schools were chronically low-performing when InspireNOLA took the helm.

But for McKneely, academic success is just one piece. He is also responsible for creating the next generation of community leaders and mentors. “I am grounded by the number four. That is the number of students affected by gun violence [this past year],” McKneely explains. “We have to touch the communities students come from, but also inspire and empower those communities...and be a positive beacon of what is going on.”

To that end, McKneely has embedded opportunities for students to be in the community and to lead as part of their education. InspireNOLA holds community forums with students, motivational rallies, drives and fundraisers. In 2018, the school also launched Project Live and Achieve, a yearlong program bringing schools, community groups, and faith organizations across New Orleans together to promote nonviolence, academic success, high expectations, and community involvement. As McKneely explains, “When we have models like that, hopefully kids will understand the commitment of paying it forward and the investment we have made in them.”

If Jahquille Ross is any indicator, they are. McKneely taught Ross as a high school student. After graduating from college, Ross joined Teach for

America, where he landed a position teaching for InspireNOLA. Ross has since pursued additional degrees and participated in the first ADE leadership cohort. McKneely mentored Ross through it all. “[Mr. McKneely] loves what he does for students and families in the communities in New Orleans,” Ross said, “and when many have criticized and said people from New Orleans are not capable... [members of the community] look up to him as an African American man leading an organization in New Orleans and allowing other people of color the opportunity to do this hard and necessary work.”

FOOTNOTES

¹Goldhaber, D., Theobald, R. & Tien, C. 2015. "The Theoretical and Empirical Arguments for Diversifying the Teacher Workforce: A Review of the Evidence." Center for Education & Data Research. <https://www.cedr.us/papers/working/CEDR%20WP%202015-9.pdf>; Rosen, J. 2016. "Race Biases Teachers' Expectations for Students." Johns Hopkins University. <http://releases.jhu.edu/2016/03/30/race-biases-teachers-expectations-for-students/>

²Bartanen, B. & Grissom, J. (2019). School Principal Race and the Hiring and Retention of Racially Diverse Teachers. Annenberg Institute at Brown University. Retrieved from <https://edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai19-59.pdf>.

³Enrollment projections reported by the U.S. Department of Education in 2017 indicate that in 2019, students enrolled in public schools are 15 percent black, 28 percent Hispanic, 6 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, 1 percent American Indian/Alaska Native, 3 percent two or more races, and 47 percent white. National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.) 'Enrollment and percentage distribution of enrollment in public elementary and secondary schools, by race/ethnicity and region: Selected years, fall 1995 through fall 2027.' https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_203.50.asp?referer=raceindicators

⁴The 2015-16 National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS) found that among 90,400 public school principals of K-12 schools in the United States, 78 percent were non-Hispanic white; 11 percent were non-Hispanic black or African American; 8 percent were Hispanic, and 3 percent another race/ethnicity (i.e., American Indian/Alaska Native; non-Hispanic; Asian, non-Hispanic; Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, non-Hispanic; and two or more races, non-Hispanic. These data can be found at: Taie, S., Goldring, R., and Spiegelman, M. (2017). Characteristics of Public Elementary and Secondary School Principals in the United States: Results from the 2015-16 National Teacher and Principal Survey, First Look. National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017070.pdf>.

⁵This report and others in the series focus on identity. Though some of the leaders may appear to share the same ethnic or racial identities, the words they used to describe themselves differed at times. In response, we chose to use the same terms the leaders profiled used, even if it meant using different terms in different parts of the series.

⁶"Deficit thinking" or a "deficit model" presumes that some students, particularly students who are minorities, come from low-income families, or are disabled, are deficient in some way and thus cannot be held to the same achievement standards as their peers. See Valencia, R., ed. 1997. *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking: Educational Thought and Practice*. Psychology Press.

⁷Rivkin, S. G., Hanushek, E. A., & Kain, J. F. 2005. "Teachers, schools, and academic achievement." *Econometrica*. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1468-0262.2005.00584.x>; Wright, S. P., Horn, S. P., & Sanders, W. L. 1997. "Teachers and classroom context effects on student achievement: Implications for teacher evaluation." *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education*. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/1677/01cd3fba9fdf5ef850eaca75b1b101334ed2.pdf>

⁸California Department of Education. 2019. Enrollment by School, 2018-19. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/sd/filesenr.asp>

⁹North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. 2019. Charter and Regional School Membership by Race and Sex, School Year 2018-19. The Statistical Profile Online. <http://apps.schools.nc.gov/ords/f?p=145:1>

¹⁰Louisiana Department of Education. 2019. Feb 2019 Multi Stats (Total by Site and School System). <https://www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/library/data-center>.

¹¹California Department of Education. 2019. Student Poverty FRPM Data. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/sd/filessp.asp>.

¹²North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. 2019. Title I Schools, 2018-19. <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/program-monitoring/titleIA/>.

¹³North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. 2019. Charter and Regional School Membership by Race and Sex, School Year 2018-19. The Statistical Profile Online. <http://apps.schools.nc.gov/ords/f?p=145:1>; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. 2019. Title I Schools, 2018-19. <http://www.dpi.state.nc.us/program-monitoring/titleIA/>.

¹⁴Arbinger Institute. (2010). *Leadership and self-deception: Getting out of the box*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.



¹⁵ Henderson Collegiate. 2018. Results. <http://hendersoncollegiate.org/results/>.

¹⁶ North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. 2018. 2017-2018 School Report Card, Henderson Collegiate. https://ncreportcards.ondemand.sas.com/src/school?school=91B000&year=2018&lng=en&home_lea=910LEA.

¹⁷ Henderson Collegiate. 2018. Results. <http://hendersoncollegiate.org/results/>.

¹⁸ California Department of Education. 2019. Enrollment by School, 2018-19. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/sd/filesenr.asp>.

¹⁹ California Department of Education. 2019. English Learners by Grade & Language, 2018-19. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sd/sd/fileselsch.asp>.

²⁰ California Department of Education. 2018. Search Smarter Balanced Test Results. <https://caaspp.cde.ca.gov/sb2018/search?lstTestYear=2018>.

²¹ Innovate Public Schools. 2018. "Top Bay Area public schools for underserved students." <https://reports.innovateschools.org/top-bay-area-public-schools/>

²² California Department of Education. 2018. Search Smarter Balanced Test Results. <https://caaspp.cde.ca.gov/sb2018/Search>.

²³ Louisiana Budget Project. 2018. "New Orleans poverty top among U.S. metros." <https://www.google.com/>

²⁴ Institute of Women & Ethnic Studies. (n.d.) "Emotional wellness and exposure to violence: Data from New Orleans youth age 11-15." <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5679a070c21b86984b62ab2c/t/568ad499bfe873d47864a70c/1451938969160/EWS-Report-2015.pdf>.

²⁵ Robin, N. "CrimeTracker: New Orleans gun violence by the numbers." February 26, 2019. <https://www.fox8live.com/2019/02/27/crimetracker-new-orleans-gun-violence-by-numbers/>; Louisiana Center for Children's Rights. "New Orleans city council commits to addressing childhood trauma." August 17, 2018. <https://www.laccr.org/news/new-orleans-city-council-commits-to-addressing-childhood-trauma/>.

²⁶ Louisiana Department of Education. 2019. Feb 2019 Multi Stats (Total by Site and School System). <http://www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/library/student-attributes>.

²⁷ Louisiana Department of Education. 2018. 2018 School Performance Scores. <http://www.louisianabelieves.com/resources/library/performance-scores>



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