



## **Urban School Leadership**

Transcript of Speaker

**John J. Pershing High School**

**“Together We Can Do More”**

**Creating a Top-Ranked School**

**Jo Rossicone, Principal**

### ***Introduction***

Explore this urban school leader’s journey to successfully restructuring an urban school to meet the diverse student and community needs. Principal Rossicone’s vision – to create a top-ranked school in the district - is highlighted in her efforts in creating school culture that addresses the whole child.

The testimonies of the various partners at the Pershing Middle School gives insight into the importance of leadership behavior on partners.

### ***Vision***

My name is Jo Rossicone. I’ve been a principal for the past seven years at John J. Pershing Intermediate School 220, in the former District 20, Region 7, in Borough Park, Brooklyn.

Our mission statement says that we are to build a foundation for success, which I’m sure every school wants to do. But we want to do it one student at a time.

Our vision is that we foster a school community, a learning community, where all children are expected to meet high standards, and all children are going to be able to



leave our school and be successful in any future endeavor because of the basis that we have given them here. We expect them to be literate. We expect them to be able to read, write, speak and listen; to be good communicators; and to be able to have enough skills in numeracy so that as they go on into high school and then to college they can be successful.

We also expect them to live in this diverse city in a way that they will be not only successful community members, but also be people who are our future, who are going to bring us well into this new century.

One thing that I've learned is that perception becomes reality, and Pershing had gone through some hard times. People looked at our school as not being the kind of school that maybe their children should go to, because it didn't have the middle- or upper-middle-class child that most of the schools in this district did have.

Knowing that I couldn't do this alone, I had to reach out to people to convince people that we were the kind of place that we would send our own children to; that we were the kind of place that put children first.

What I started doing was hiring staff. That was basically the first goal that I had set for myself. I needed people at Pershing who were willing to go above and beyond for the children in this school. So, staff was very important. I have replaced my entire cabinet. All of the assistant principals on my cabinet have been selected by me.

Then once we got the pedagogy in place, then we had to reach out to all of the people who worked in the school, which included custodial staff, kitchen workers and anyone else who had an impact on our school.



I have a custodian that keeps this place sparkling, and that's one of the ways in which I expect to propel our image. Our kitchen staff does a wonderful job for our students. We became a universal lunch school where no child has to pay for lunch.

### ***Partnerships & Relationships***

We had to look outside of ourselves. We had to be able to provide for our students what the best school in the city could have; and we had to do it within the budget of the New York City system, which isn't always easy.

So, we reached out to partners. We reached out to Maimonides Hospital, We reached out to Cablevision. We are one of the first Power to Learn Schools.

When the city asked us if we would become a Beacon School, even though we knew that there were problems bringing in an outside organization into your school for after-school hours and Saturdays, we jumped on it because of what it would provide for our students.

We we're very sure to maintain our relationship with Lutheran Hospital so that we could continue our health plan, which is in our building with a nurse practitioner.

We made sure that the department of health kept our dentist onsite. When the Guidance Center of Brooklyn reached out to us because they wanted to put a mental health clinic onsite, I jumped at the chance of having mental health people onsite in order to help our children six days a week—after school, during school and on Saturdays.

So it was a matter of bringing in different types of partners. When they approached me to bring Learning for Life in our building, again, I jumped at it.



Project Arts' money supply partnerships with Roundabout Theater, with Rotunda Gallery, with the Brooklyn Museum of Art, with Inside Broadway so that our kids could get an education that rich kids get; but actually, they don't have to pay anything for it – it's all here for them.

We made sure that when I budgeted money, we budgeted money for numerous clubs; because what we couldn't fit in the school day, we wanted to offer children outside of the school day.

So, reaching out to our teachers, to the staff that works in the building, to our community and our partners outside of this community, we have brought Pershing to a prominence that it hasn't had in a very, very long time.

We still have perception to overcome. We're doing it; and we're getting more and more children from outside of our zone who are looking at Pershing with different eyes because of what we set up here.

### ***Leadership Responsibilities***

Being a leader is not easy, because the responsibility lies on your shoulders. However, if I were stupid enough to think that I could make the changes by myself, nothing would have happened in the seven years that I was here.

You have to open, and you have to be willing to listen, even to things that you don't always want to hear. You have to be very, very patient not to enact too many changes. You have to be able to look at the situation and assess it for yourself as well as opening up the forum to the school community and asking parents, teachers and students what it is that we need to make us the best that we can be.



I take very, very seriously community input. I have to be very honest. We have a school of parents who are mostly immigrants, who work very, very, very hard. They work 12, 14, 16 hours a day, 6 days a week. They are not giving us their input. They are expecting us to do the job for their children.

You have to put the children first. You have to be a leader who is approachable; one who is a resource, a catalyst and a facilitator for the school body, for the children.

It's a very busy job. You cannot let the busyness get in the way. It's a tough job, because we have to be all things to all people. But if you're not willing to do that, you're not going to have a successful school.

You have to be understanding, but you have to set limits. You have to be very adamant about certain things, but then you have to know when it is time to bend.

Again, even though we have our nonnegotiable rules, sometimes you have to step back and say, What's best for the health and safety of students.

As the leader I will not be arbitrary, capricious or discriminatory; but I will do what's best for my staff and my students

I wish I knew my first year as a principal what I knew at my fifth year. I feel five years is the key. As a school leader, I felt everything fell into place at the fifth year. At the fifth year, I began to say, Ah, that's how it's done, or that's how it should be.

Could I have done things differently? I'm sure I could have. But I think it was a learning process. I took the courses that were offered. I went to workshops. I listened to my more experienced principal colleagues. I used the CSA, and I had a mentor principal



come in and visit with me; and that was a wonderful experience. I worked with CEI-PEA with Lorraine Monroe and her leadership academy.

I reached out enough, and that gave me a good basis. However, it really was a true learning experience, and sometimes you just have to fall and pick yourself up and say, Oops, that didn't work, gotta do something different. And that's what I think helped me to be as successful as I am now.

Do I wish the growing pains didn't have to be as painful? Yeah, but that's life. You need the labor pains. As you're becoming a school leader, you have to go through all of the growing pains; you have to listen and reflect, see if it's good for you and if it's good for your school, and then take the best out of all of that and do it.

### ***Meeting the Needs of Every Child***

A perfect middle school, would be one that meets the child's every need – intellectual, social, physical, psychological. And what we've been able to build here through the outreach to the community and through our partners is just that. We have built a staff where instruction is first and foremost; where we have been working with teachers so that in classrooms all students are engaged in their learning.

Our children have some challenges. We have—over 500 of our 1,500 children are English language learners. Forty percent of those children come from homes where English is not a first language. Seventy-five percent of our student population get whatever they get here instructionally right from us, from no one else. So, for 75 percent of the children, whatever they get, they get here.



Psychologically—we have guidance counselors. We have counselors from Lutheran Hospital, And we have the Guidance Center of Brooklyn, which opened up the center for students, teachers and families.

We feed our children breakfast and lunch. What we need to do is to think of the child as a whole being, not just a brain, not just a physical being, not just a psychological being, but a whole being. And we have to see ourselves as the people who meet all of those needs, and I feel that is what is necessary in an urban setting.

Our children do not have the same wonderful opportunities that children in nonurban settings have. That stuff isn't usually part of our children's lives. And my feeling is that they have every right to. If their parents do not have the money to support that, then we in some way should be able to support that.

We are able to bring in the community to meet those needs by being open to any offer that's given. I never refuse anything. So that if someone says to me they want to give me a program, and this is how the program will help our children, I will never say no. So that when I received the call about having a mental health clinic. I jumped on the bandwagon and starting saying, This is exactly what we need in this school, In the beginning of the grant's formation, we had some problems. We had problems hiring staff. However, since then, we have been able to have a full staff contingency, and we have numerous students who are serviced. We actually have a waiting list.

I sent out, oh, I would say, about 35 letters to colleges and universities with flyers saying, Do you want a job teaching? And giving them some information about our



school and asking these perspective teachers to call me, so that we do have a pool of teachers who can best serve our students.

So the way I do it for teaching, I do it for other organizations who want to come in and help our students as well.

I don't like to lose. So looking at my building, and looking at my children, and looking at my staff, and looking at my parents, I decided that Pershing was going to be a place where teachers would say, If I could, I would send my child to this school.

And I knew that I couldn't do it alone. I knew that I needed help. I had to look at what it was that I wanted to do, and I wanted to know how to do it. What I needed to do was to do more than talk and chalk.

So, we had to look outside of us. We had to bring in people who would help our teachers learn that there was a better way of instructing children and dealing with children. We had to bring in organizations that would enrich the programs that we already had in our building.

And I basically did that by encircling myself with people who shared my vision for what I wanted for the children in this school; people who did not work a 6-hour, 20-minute day; who weren't afraid of going beyond, of going above; of doing what was needed in order to be successful. And those are the people that I joined forces with in reaching out to both the community and instructional and educational organizations who would be able to help us do what we needed to do in order to bring this school to success. You'll be meeting some of those people in a little while who have meant a great deal to our school and helped us to achieve the success that we really have achieved.



In my classroom, I once had a poster that said, “Enthusiasm is Beauty.” And one thing that I was given as part of my personality is enthusiasm.

I believe in what I do. I love what I do. I want everybody else to believe in my school. So, it’s enthusiasm; it’s love. It’s something where we’re building a future, and we’re building a future with people’s lives. We’re making a difference in children’s lives and in teachers’ lives, in parents’ lives. My enthusiasm tends to be contagious; and I think that’s what makes people want to join us in what it is that we do.

I don’t ever want anyone to come in here and think that the reason we want them is for their money. We want them for what it is they can provide for our children, and most of that deals with their expertise.

The collaborations brought another dimension to our school as an educational facility. Our children know that they are a community of learners; that their education does not stop here. And all of the partners that have come into this building have provided us with a dynamic that we could not have brought here, because we are limited. In the show “Wicked,” Elphaba, who is supposed to be the bad witch, sings I’m limited, but together we’re unlimited. And that’s how I see collaboration – unlimited, so that our collaborators have taken away from us our limits and have made us unlimited as well for the children who come to John J. Pershing I.S. 220.

### *Beginning the Involvement Process*

**Stella Pappas, Executive Director, Guidance Center of Brooklyn**  
**Robert Bernard, Beacon Director, Chinese-American Planning Council**  
**Christine Morino, Director, Learning for Life Program**  
**Trent Anderson, Cablevision**



By: Stella Pappas

My name is Stella Pappas. I am the Executive Director of the Guidance Center of Brooklyn.

By: Bob Bernard

My name is Bob Bernard. I'm the Beacon Director for the Lead Agency Chinese-American Planning Council.

By: Christine Morino

My name is Christine Morino. I'm the Director for the Learning for Life Program.

By: Trent Anderson

I'm Trent Anderson with Cablevision's Power to Learn Initiative.

By: Stella Pappas

The Guidance Center of Brooklyn is an outpatient mental health and substance abuse agency in the community. And there was a request for proposal put out by the New York State Office of Mental Health to begin some clinic-based, school-based programs. In other words, have clinic services with a psychiatrist, a social worker, a psychologist, an entire team of mental health professionals based in the school. We had a very good experience with the school, a very good experience with the principal, and when this opportunity came up to expand our services, we contacted Jo Rossicone, the Principal, and she was very enthusiastic and supported our application.

By: Bob Bernard



Beacon sites are predetermined by the city of New York, and the Chinese-American Planning Council, the lead agency for the Beacon, chose to apply. And the reason was familiarity with the area here and the Chinese population, which is a significant portion; the total population; and the needs of the community.

By: Christine Morino

We developed our relationship with the Pershing school through the department of education's Break Away Program. Jo Rossicone had a cohort come up to camp for a number of years, and it worked out very well. And she asked us to do the program in schools where we provide citizenship education, environmental programs for the kids. And we also provide summer camp in the summertime.

By: Trent Anderson

Cablevision's relationship with the school really generated from the school reaching out to the community. One of the most effective things that we've seen for schools to do is to work with whomever the local government affairs' representatives are for the big companies in the area.

So it was principal Rossicone and her staff, who had maintained a relationship with our Brooklyn Government Affairs' representative. So that when Cablevision was looking to expand the technological offerings to schools in the area, they were already high on the list because of the contact that they had made with us.

One other key to maintaining the relationship is allowing, in my case, the corporation, to come into the school. One reason we love coming back is the school is



open, we're allowed to work with the kids, and the principal has been great in supporting our efforts in the community.

### ***Importance of the School Leader***

By: Stella Pappas

The leadership of the school is extremely important to sustaining or establishing a relationship with the school.

As a community-based organization, we operate in a host environment; so, unless the host is willing to accept us, allow us access to the school, to the resources of the school, to the children in the school, we cannot do, we cannot fulfill our mission.

Jo Rossicone, the principal of this school, has been an incredible leader in that sense. Even in terms of submitting our application to the New York State Office of Mental Health, it required letters of support; and one of the requirements was a letter of support from the principal of the school stating that she is aware of this initiative; she is a participating collaborator; she is willing to give us space in the school, which is always a valuable commodity. And without that letter, our application would not have even been looked at. So, it is extremely important.

But not only in initiating, but in sustaining that relationship, and year after year, and being a real proponent of the program, advocating for the program and promoting the program within the school and among her staff.

By: Bob Bernard

The leadership of the principal is key. The Principal, Jo Rossicone, has been both supportive and open-minded in our relationship. She has been open-minded in our



ability to bring in other programs. The computers that are in, the school is using right now are there because we were able to bring in the Department of Business Services; and DBS – the Department of Business Services – wanted to serve the community with training for the small business operations.

By: Christine Morino

Having good leadership is key to our program. We cannot form a partnership with any of our schools or our private institutions without having the leadership behind us to support us.

They allow us access into their schools; they allow us access to their children to work with them; they allow us access to promote the rest of our program, which is our summer camp program, which allows our children the opportunity to take part in an extended program in the summertime. Jo Rossicone has been very supportive from the very beginning from where we did our Break Away Program with her. And this has just been a wonderful school to work with.

By: Trent Anderson

The key for us as a corporation is that the leadership has filtered down to Principal Rossicone's staff as well. And that's key in working with any school. And she's trained and empowered the people under her to be able to execute against the plans that are put in place, so that we don't always have to wait for just her in order to get something done.

***Initial Contact with the School Leader***

By: Stella Pappas



The initial contact with Jo Rossicone that really inspired us and impressed us and convinced us that we had made the right decision to pursue Pershing and I.S. 220 was really Jo's commitment to the children. When we spoke with her, it was all about what she could do to bring more resources, more activities, more help to the children. And it was just her devotion and commitment to the children that really convinced us we were doing the right thing.

She was clear about the various resources. It was a friendly host environment; that she was willing to work with outside providers; that she was willing to make the accommodations. She was just committed to the children, and she was going to do whatever it took, including the space issue because it's such a big issue in schools in the urban setting.

And she has so many services in the school that the school is jam-packed; but she was going to make it happen, and she knew that we needed privacy, and she was able to give us that. But her commitment to the children was the number one aspect that convinced us.

By: Christine Morino

Our initial contact with our principals, they have to know that we're forming a partnership, and that we are going to work together.

From my point of view, it has to be that the teachers are going to be ready for us; that there's going to be a schedule made; that we are going to have access to the school that day. Jo has been wonderful as far as giving us access and showing us the commitment.



By: Trent Anderson

In the first contact with any representative of a school, the things that are most compelling to us as an organization would be that it's a collaboration and not just a gift. Having a principal, or having a school, or a representative of the school who understands that you're coming in to work as a partnership, that you're both there to achieve a common goal is important.

And, finally, prioritization of the partner. Principal Rossicone was great in making us feel, as an organization, like we were important to her. And, with simple things, like returning phone calls, being on time for meetings. From a corporate perspective, that goes a long way in ensuring that you're getting what you need for your school. If you make your partners a priority, they will make you a priority.

### ***Commitment & Passion of the School Leader***

By: Stella Pappas

The passion of the leadership is very, very important. Jo Rossicone is a very passionate person. The minute I walk in the door, you see that passion, she knows who you are, she remembers what you do in the school. There are many people here in this school, and she remembers everybody, and everybody's goal, and everybody's mission, and what your project is. She remembers people's names. She remembers the children's names.

She's very committed, and very passionate about the work; about the work that she does, which is to lead a school and to provide the best possible academic education to the children that attend. She knows that it's not just about teaching math and arithmetic



and English and reading. It is also about all of these auxiliary services that children need for a variety of reasons. And she brings that passion, and she makes things happen.

It's important to pass the leadership down and empower the people and empower your staff. But it's also important to keep that passion yourself, and to be accessible, and to, you know, show her excitement. Just her optimism and passion about children comes through in every aspect.

By: Bob Bernard

The passion is important because it inspires the staff and inspires the students. Jo has set a standard for excellence. The children have to know these values and know how the standard of excellence is set for them to follow.

By: Christine Morino

The passion of the leadership is very, very important, and Jo has been a wonderful person. She's very passionate; she loves what she does; she loves the children. You can see it when she walks through the halls. You can see it in her office. You can see it outside on the walls in the things that they have up.

By: Trent Anderson

Principal Rossicone has a enthusiasm for her job, and the key is to make sure it's genuine.

If we didn't share the same vision as the principal and the children in this school, the partnership wouldn't be possible. Find those that share the vision. What makes Jo successful is her ability to find organizations that fit in with her mission and finding those that fit into that mission or what is key in order to be successful.



By: Christine Morino

And we have to share the vision or else we cannot have a successful partnership. Our vision is to create good citizens to help children make ethical choices and that is what we do at the Learning for Life program. It fits kind of right in with what Jo is trying to provide for her children.

By: Stella Pappas

The vision is something that we converge on, which is to create a balanced child, a healthy child, an educated child that can then contribute to society. I think that that is Jo's strength in finding organizations that can support her mission and her vision; to be open-minded and flexible enough to be able to conform her vision and her mission a little bit if she sees that an organization can contribute something maybe that she hasn't thought of or maybe that hasn't existed in the past. Jo has that ability to really pull out the best of all of the resources and provide them to the children.