



## **Urban School Leadership**

Transcript of Speaker

**“Living the Dream” at Thurgood Marshall Academy for Learning & Social Change**

**A Unique Community Partner**

**Doctor Sandye Portier Johnson, Principal**

### *Evolution of a School Partnership*

It isn't often that one actually gets to live their dream. Doctor Sandye Johnson, Principal of the Thurgood Marshall Academy for Learning and Social Change, is doing just that. Join her incredible journey to lead this unique high school toward success. “It takes a village to raise a child,” is an old African proverb; however, it rings true in the village of Harlem, New York.

Follow along as this urban leader's story unfolds from within the surrounding community, a community-based organization which stepped up and partnered with the department of education to improve education in a historically failing school community. Listen as community partners and Doctor Sandye Johnson tell how the dream evolved and came to fruition from the boardroom of the Abyssinian Development Corporation, to city hall, to the department of education.

Examine the purpose, commitment and hope for a better community as a result of this unique partnership.



## ***Evolution of a School Partnership***

By: Doctor Sandye Portier Johnson

My name is Doctor Sandye Portier Johnson, and I'm the Principal of Thurgood Marshall Academy for Learning and Social Change.

About 12 years ago, I was sitting in church one Sunday, and my pastor Reverend Butts came to the pulpit and said that he had just received a RFP on his desk that would allow individuals, institutions, organizations, anybody to submit a proposal for a better school, a better public school, that would significantly impact student performance.

And our church, Abyssinian Baptist Church, sits in a school district which historically has had poor student performance. And we felt that with all the academic development that our church was involved in that the only way to sustain it is to have a well-educated community. And, so, we needed to have some stronger educational initiatives in our vision of enhancing and improving the quality of life in Central Harlem.

So, myself and about five other church members, wrote the proposal for Thurgood Marshall Academy for Learning and Social Change, and we were one of the first new vision schools that opened up 12 years ago.

There was a high incident of behavior problems. Students were performing at the bottom of the continuum. Teachers felt they were not teaching; that they were only just holding fort until the end of the day.

Two chancellors had come to see the school. They said it was the worst school they had ever seen. And at the end of the third year, it was imminent that they were going to close Thurgood Marshall Academy.



And Reverend Butts went to the board and asked for just one more chance. And at that point when they gave it to him he reconvened the committee that originally wrote the proposal for Thurgood Marshall Academy—because none of us worked there—and asked would one of us take the leadership role in Thurgood Marshall Academy.

And he approached me. He approached me privately, and I said no at first. But I really thought about it long and hard. And I really had a personal vision of what a good school could be like in our community.

I think it's time that families in our own community had a choice of quality education; and that if they wanted to send their kids away to school—I mean, outside of the community to school—it should be a choice, not a forced option. So, I said a quick prayer, had a talk with my family.

So, I decided to take on the leadership in June of 1992. I was frightened; I was scared. I didn't know if it would work. I hate failure. I know a lot of people were counting on me, and I just had to make this school work. And, I did a lot of outreach in the community.

I did a lot of outreach to the students. I got a cohort of students who I were told were leaders in the school; introduced myself and let them know who I was; that we were going to be the best school in Harlem.

So in 1996 we opened the doors. When the kids came in we had removed every piece of graffiti in the hallway. Every kid came in with a white shirt and black pants and black skirt. They were in uniforms; they weren't doing uniforms before that. I had done a lot of outreach



Teachers had decorated their classrooms. There were positive images – motivational posters. I put plants and pictures, anything to make the school look comfortable, look inviting and look nurturing.

And when we opened our doors and the kids walked in, they knew something was different. The school looked different, everyone was saying the same thing to the kids about the uniform and what the expectations were.

But after three months, there was a significant change in the school. Number one, we really worked on developing the school culture. Before you can think about improving academic performance, you gotta get kids to buy into the school and into the school culture, and let them know what your expectations are, and that no matter at what level they come in, you are willing to work with them, that you will not accept anything less than the highest expectations for them to be successful. That's number one.

Number two is, our kids have forgotten how to dream. Many of our kids have a lot of adult responsibilities; they have a lot of major issues in the home. We have to work with the children and the family to deal with those other issues before we could even deal with the academics. So, it was critical that we had a lot of support services in the school.

### ***Involving the Community***

At Thurgood Marshall, we have a school-based clinic that is sponsored by Columbia Presbyterian. It doesn't come out our budget; it comes out of the department of health and some federal funds. They are here five days a week.



We have a dental clinic, and we also have an ophthalmologist that comes in and gives our kids free eyeglasses, free screening and eyeglasses. And we have a full-time psychologist.

You gotta get kids to buy into the mission of the school. You can tell them what it's about, but they have to really understand it and believe it and take ownership to it. And it took us three years to do that.

We have taken a public school that was completely failing, with more than 80 percent of the students scoring what they call Level 1 now. How could you take a failing public school and in six years make it a premier school? It's because we had a vision. We had a personal vision; we had a personal commitment; we had a personal ownership; and we just knew it could happen.

I can go out and sell this school. I mean, most people will help if they knew how to contribute, or if you go to them and ask them for something that's realistic within their purview that they could contribute.

I look at my community as a wealth of resources. And I kind of analyze what resources are in my community and how they can support my school.

The YMCA is right down the street, and they have a youth center. So I went to them, and I said, You know, I would like to buy a membership for each child in my school so that they could have phys ed classes over here, because I did not like, you know, the physical educational space that we had at the school. I said, But I don't have any money. Can you tell me what the price would be, and I could go out and raise this money; but I need the cheapest price you can give me.



They asked, Why do you want us to provide phys ed services? You could hire a phys ed teacher. I said, It's not just about phys ed during the school day. I know that you're open six days a week, you're open until 10 o'clock at night, so not only will they only phys ed, but they'll have a place where they can have safe recreation after school and on the weekends and not be at risk in the street.

And they gave me a wonderful reduced price for all of my kids which I was able to raise the money through Abyssinian Development Corporation and New Visions for the Public School. They charged me something like \$9,000 for a year.

If you are a new principal, if you're in a community, get to know it. Just don't come to work there and leave or stay in your office until 8 o'clock at night. Get out and meet the community – that grocery store on the corner, the super who has the apartment building next door, the church. See what CBOs are in the community; see which ones are the more influential or the more visible. See how you can connect and integrate your program with the community and not be just a school in the community, but be a school of the community.

### ***Team Alliances***

One of my strengths, I think, are I'm a people person, and I really assess people before I approach them. If I want the teaching staff to take ownership or accept a project, I kind of scout out who are the leaders in the group who could get something going with the teachers. And if once they see a certain group of teachers doing it, the others will take the lead.



As an urban school leader, at first I tried to do everything by myself. And it just doesn't work; you burn yourself; it's just impossible. And, so, I had to figure out a way to get a team of people that could assist me.

Parents and volunteers – critical. Make sure that you have a strong cohort of parents. It doesn't have to be a lot. You don't want a lot. You don't want too many chiefs at the table. You just need six to ten parents; and they could be so critical in developing a strong volunteering core – just having them help in the lunchroom, monitoring the hallways, calling parents.

Also, we also include students on our team. We took some of the older students, who we felt were leaders in the school, to help with the operations of the school on our school team. And, so, it's like a cabinet that we build. And you have to build it to meet your school needs.

I seek the assistance of the community-based organizations in my community, various organizations. Sometimes I only go for one thing. But once that piece starts going, and the community-based organization really buys into what I'm doing and really gets excited along with me, they come to me with things that I never even thought of. And they expand my educational program.

### ***Advice for a New Principal***

I have been asked to give you some advice if you are a first-year principal. You know, what are some things I would share with you.

Well, number one, I would say to you that your first three years are going to be your hardest years. So, expect that. But the hard years can be good years. Don't let any



of those challenges steer you away from your vision. Once you have established a vision and a mission for the school, you stick to it. Regardless of funding, regardless of staffing, regardless of bureaucracy, never compromise your vision.

Number two, dream. Dream large, live large. I always tell the kids we're living large, even though we only have 2 cents in our budget. Never give up hope. You can find it out there. Don't ever scrap an idea because of money. Go find it; find human resources. You can do it. Do not give up. You may not do it year one, but you certainly can do it year two or year three.

And the last thing I think I would say is do a strategic plan, because sometimes when you come in that first year you want it all to happen in that first year. I thought everything could happen in that first year; and if it didn't happen, it would be a failure. Do a three- to five-year strategic plan and set some benchmarks, some realistic benchmarks for yourself. And measure your growth by that.

It took me six years to really feel good about what I have done here. Progress happens in small steps. It doesn't matter how small they are, it's that they're small steps and that they're going in the right direction.

So, never give up. There will always be challenges. Always revisit your vision. Your vision is an ongoing vision. You can enhance it, you can build on it, but never give it up.

My most famous quote from Reverend Martin Luther King. He said, "The measure of a man or a woman is not determined by where they stand in times of comfort and convenience, but where they stand in times of challenges and controversy." So,



remember that. You know that if you're comfortable something's wrong. You know, education is a challenge.

### *Developing a School Partnership*

#### **Reverend Kevin Johnson**

My name Reverend Kevin Johnson. I serve as the Assistant Pastor there at the Abyssinian Baptist Church, and I've had a chance to see the church continue to evolve; and I've had a chance to see Thurgood Marshall grow. I also sit on the board for the Abyssinian Development Corporation.

This collaboration began as a vision Doctor Calvin R. Butts, III. He saw the need in the Harlem community where there were children who were not having a fair chance at getting their educational opportunity here in this village. And, so, he began to think about how could we approach this. And one way to do that was to start with a new vision school. We were very big on not trying to start a school that would just be for a certain class of society, but start a school that would be available to the entire community.

And so, with that vision came Thurgood Marshall. And the vision really began as a kind of small seed, very few classes initially; but it has grown and blossomed.

### *Importance of Leadership & Community*

Leadership was very, very important. Doctor Johnson's a natural leader. You naturally want to follow her. Her leadership is one that if you look at her as a person, you will be able to see her heart and see her passion and, therefore, you will be inspired to follow her in the same way.



I would also say about her leadership is that it's one that has as clear vision. She knows where she wants to take and how she wants to develop the students here at Thurgood Marshall. She has provided a clear vision, and the students and teachers have galvanized behind her and said we're going to follow Doctor Johnson because we know where she's headed.

And, so, when I look at Doctor Johnson and her leadership and how it relates to the community, how it relates to the parents, you see someone who knows how to connect people. And it's almost like grandma's quilt, if you will—there may be different patches, but yet she has the thread and the needle that it needed to connect every person so that we all fit together for the common good.

The collaborative spirit, I think, that Doctor Johnson has and has used to her advantage in order to bring together the school, the church and parents, everyone, I think it really boils down to a kind of almost selfless nature. People want to work in collaboration. And, so, what she's been able to do to bring collaboration is to put the focus on the children. And, so, by putting the emphasis on the children, she has focused in a, I guess, in a very direct way, everyone's attention on children, on making sure they improve their scores, making sure they go on to college, making sure that they have better relations with their community, making sure they just become good citizens. And, so, that collaborative spirit is first selfless.

This school could not have come to fruition by just the help of one person. It required for there to be a number of persons involved. When we had the grand opening of this school, you had the politicians there; you had educators there; you had persons



who were well-known – Caroline Kennedy – there. You had Mrs. Thurgood Marshall there. You had the head of the Legal Defense Fund, Ted Shaw, there. And, of course, you had Doctor Butts and you had Doctor Johnson.

When I look at Thurgood Marshall, it began as a kind of baby of the Abyssinian Development Corporation. And, of course, the Abyssinian Development Corporation was trying to improve the community as a whole. And when you look at the community as a whole, one of the areas you have to definitely focus on is education.

And, so, when I look at Thurgood Marshall, and I look at this model, it required the church; it required politicians; it required investors; it required parents; it required so many community persons because no one person could have done it by him or herself. It required someone; it required a community, rather, to make sure that all were on the same page for the benefit of the community as a whole.

Doctor Johnson is a principal who believed in the children, who had a staff who believed in her and her vision, and then we had parents who believed in not only their children that they could succeed, but believed in the leadership of the school.

I'm looking for somebody, especially if you're talking about a principal, somebody who is going to be a leader; somebody who is going to have the passion for the children; somebody who is not going to treat this like a nine-to-five; somebody who, if need be, they're going to open up the school on Saturday, open it up on Sunday, stay late in the evening. They're going to inspire their teachers.

I'm reminded of a principal. Her name is Miss Cash. She has long since been retired, but she was my principal. And one of the things that I loved about Miss Cash is



that she believed in me when I didn't even believe in myself. And, so, what I would be looking for in a principal is somebody who can be Miss Cash. Somebody who can say, Kevin, you can make it. I know what you're family situation is. I know where you grew—where you've grown up. I know what challenges you have experienced. I know that your brothers and sisters, they may not have been successful; but I believe in you.

And, if the truth is told, all you're really looking for in a principal and a teacher is for somebody to believe in you. And what has to take place with the teacher, the principal, the leader of education is that he or she must understand that they have a responsibility to educate by any means necessary. This is not something that they can just advocate and just release and let kind of flourish on its own, but they have to understand that there is a young boy, there is a young girl who is dependent upon him or her to show them the way.

It's almost like beginning a journey, if you will. And all you really need to take place is for somebody to put you on the right path. Our job, is to make sure we put our children on the right path. And if they get on the right path, I believe that they will be able to finish this maze of life.

How does a principal and our leaders really show they are really committed to the community?

It begins with the principal, first of all, putting him or herself in that child's shoes. And as they look at that child who has come through the doors—and if they were that child coming through the doors—what is it that they would expect of their principal?



The young men and the young women who come through those doors, have great aspirations and they have great hope of how they see the things.

And I think that in order to make this happen is that a person cannot just be there for money; it has to be something that almost that they are born with. It's a passion; it's a calling, if you will. But I believe that if someone has the burning passion, that you will naturally—like Sandye Johnson—be able to attract other persons to come and work with you.

### *Inspiration, Standards & Direction*

#### **Larry Dias, Chairperson, Abyssinian Development Corporation**

My name is Larry Dais. My day-to-day responsibilities are at Columbia University in the Office of Government and Community Affairs. I am also the Chairperson of the Abyssinian Corporation.

I think that the relationship between Thurgood Marshall and Abyssinian Baptist Church and Abyssinian Development Corporation and the Harlem community is a special relationship and very unique.

First and foremost, the vision for this relationship came from Abyssinian Baptist Church. The Reverend Cavanaugh Butts, III, saw the need for Abyssinian Church to be engaged in public education. And, honestly, there's only so much a church can do relative to public education.

And, at the same time, we had Abyssinian Development Corporation, which was concerned with rebuilding the local community in partnership with other development agencies.



This vision of a school came about between the discussion with Reverend Butts, other community leaders and, most importantly, then, the Chairperson of Abyssinian Development Corporation, Doctor Sandye Johnson.

The importance of the leadership within the school is the same as it is within a corporation, within a university. The leader inspires others, the leader sets standards, the leader helps to provide a direction as to where the school is going to go.

It is extremely important that a school is led by a leader who is dedicated to the mission of the school; someone who can appreciate the value of parents and understand that parents are giving the first born, in many instances, to a school to take care of.

Doctor Johnson's style and leadership skills are very unique. She has the wherewithal to motivate young people. She has an understanding of young people that is just unbelievable, and her level of patience, I think, is unique to most of us.

And, Sandye has very high standards and a very profound belief that every person can learn, every person has the capacity to take on more than he or she believes they can.

If we were looking for a leader, we would look for persons who are already engaged in the community, who are visible.

Sandye, had a vision of what she wanted to do as an educator. But she put her vision, I think, on the side and listened to the leadership of Abyssinian Baptist Church, and listened to the community, and then integrated all three, including her own, to make this happen.

Not everyone was in favor of this happening. There was great opposition from some of our local neighbors. It's been 50 years since a new high school has been built in



the Harlem community. So, therefore, there was not a great expectation that this would be realized. But because of Sandye's dedication and commitment, her willingness to work, again, with the parents—and I can't overemphasize the importance of working with parents and being able to convince the parents that this can work.

Parents in New York City have multiple opinions. By large, most folks in the Black community, relative to education, feel that public education does not work. We know that's not true. Public education works in this city, and it works in certain neighborhoods. What we had not seen in abundance is public education working in low-income and minority communities in New York City. Sandye was dedicated to making that a reality for the Harlem community.

Sandye's ability to work with parents, I think, is based upon her ability to communicate. She is able to adjust her language, adjust her style and relate to folks on a one-to-one basis.

Sandye is very effective talking to the funders; she's very persuasive in terms of elected officials; she will wear you down relative to getting people to understand the necessity of supporting the school and, more importantly, helping the school function well.

I think that passion is a very important part of leadership. Sandye has demonstrated that on many occasions. Passion, but reasonable and rational. In order to motivate your teachers, you have to be compassionate. You have to understand that they come to work every day, and you can't assume they're not carrying a burden themselves.



And you have to make sure that people feel comfortable coming to you and sharing their concerns.

### *Engaging & Understanding the School Community*

If I was going to offer some advice about how you would engage in a partnership relative to replicating this school, I would recommend highly that you get to know the community that you would like for the school to serve. And that means spending time in the community; it means walking around the community, getting to know who the players are, understanding the dynamics of the community; and not make any assumptions about this community, but learn about it, and then develop some partnerships – informal partnerships initially, and then work toward formal partnerships.

You want to find out who are the opinion makers; who are the persons who can get things done. And understand the politics of the community also. It's a learning experience that will take some time; but once you are able to understand the community, the makeup of the community and who the opinion makers are, and the natural leaders and the elected leaders, you then can figure out who you should sit down with and develop a relationship with.

The other element, I think, is to make sure that the community is committed to the vision also, and that there are persons out there who will be your ambassadors in different social settings, different professional settings; one who will endorse the idea and, most importantly, one that will be able to convince others that this is a project that is doable; it's one that you are to invest in; it's important; and that it will make a difference in the lives of individuals living in a geographical area.



The individual coming asking for the support must be able to convince the person they are seeking the support from that they're credible, they're committed, and they have a passion for what they're asking for and what they're looking to do.

Without the ability to communicate that passion and to come across as being very credible, it is very difficult to, in my opinion, to have someone to support a vision that they may or may not fully understand. Oftentimes, we will commit ourselves to something that is based upon our perception and how we feel about the individual asking for our help or involvement.

That's the first step of the relationship. The first step is to make sure that the person is someone that you feel that you're comfortable with. Relationships are long-term; they're not short-term. And in looking for a community partner relative to a vision that you're trying to share, one must be credible; one must be able to come across as having a sincere commitment to making this thing happen.

### ***Conflict Resolution & Sustainability***

The other part of the leader is that he or she must be able to engage in conflict resolution – internally and externally. You have conflict within the organizations that can carry over externally. And one must be able to recognize the source of the conflict and be able to sit down and try to figure out how do you get the other person to come across to your side.

A leader must be able to listen carefully, and then be able to address the concerns of the other party. And sometimes it means giving that person something in return for what you need.



One of the things that Sandye was very good at doing was resolving a conflict around the construction. We had many problems in terms of neighbors who engaged in lawsuits, but it was Sandye that was able to sit down with them, understand the real issue at hand. And she had a unique ability to help the individuals to better define their problem and then look for a solution jointly. She did not impose a solutions, and I think that's the key element in terms of conflict resolution.

I think there's a combination of things that will help with the issue of sustainability. One is to make sure that you have the talent that you need within the organization to do the jobs that need to be done professionally. Secondly, you have to continue to convince the community and other organizations and community leaders, elected officials that their investment is making a major return relative to the products. The product is the students. The students are graduating on time; the students are going onto college; the students are good potential neighbors for the community.

I think the idea of sustainability is based upon people believing that their investment is paying off; that there are great rewards.