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Introduction

A quality K-12 education can, and should, be accessible to all children in the US. Disparities within the education system limit access to resources, opportunities, and support. This does not have to be the reality.

At New Leaders, we know the solution to disrupting systemic inequities is to build the capacity of diverse, equity-minded school leaders who are committed to the success of every child. The leaders we develop serve in over 130 school systems across 41 states. One in five are promoted to district leadership. Many lead national and local nonprofits. Others coach and prepare future leaders. Still, others serve in public office, including Congress.

Read valuable insights from our leaders and learn how they are radically transforming their schools and communities—and the nation—for the better.

How One School Leader is Keeping Her Teachers



Daniela Anello
Head of School, DC Bilingual

In an era of the Great Resignation and educators leaving the field en masse, one school is seeing the opposite trend: almost 100% teacher retention. Here's how.

An overwhelming 55% of teachers reported thinking about leaving the profession earlier than they anticipated, according to a [survey from the National Education Association](#) released in 2022. Those percentages rise even higher for teachers of color, who are already underrepresented in the classroom.

At DC Bilingual Public Charter School, the opposite is true. An overwhelming number of teachers are staying. In fact, they have almost 100% teacher retention.

"We're all experiencing trauma and hardship right now," explains Daniela Anello, Head of School and New Leaders alum. "My job is to notice, to listen, to understand, to

provide space for processing. And then to do everything in my power to help bring people together so we have a community that feels united, connected, supported, and focused on the good ahead."

Rated as a top charter school in Washington, DC, DC Bilingual serves 490 students in grades Pre-K through fifth, with plans to expand to 712 students and a new facility beginning next year. Anello joined the staff as a literacy coach in 2009. After completing the [New Leaders Aspiring Principals Program](#), she became principal, and later, Head of School.

"We want everyone in our community—staff, students, parents, community members—to have a connection to someone who understands them, empathizes with them, and is looking out for them."

Her top five leadership actions are unifying her school and motivating her teachers to stay during this challenging time. They can unify your school too.

1 Make wellness your theme.

Anello takes every opportunity she has to speak about caregiver wellness, including staff, families, and community members. “We need to pay attention to our own well-being and do everything in our power to ensure we are healthy—mentally, physically, social-emotionally—so that we can give our best to the community and to each other.”

She also grounds her decisions, be it around the budget or how someone can contribute to the school, in wellness. “There is no secret about that as our theme. I speak to it very, very clearly and plainly.”

2 Fundraise for wellness.

On Giving Tuesday, DC Bilingual launched a wellness campaign, raising close to \$50,000. They formed multiple committees that put out requests for proposals on how to allocate the funds to support student, staff, and community wellness.

Staff initiatives include fitness classes, a sunshine committee to send meals, care packages, or flowers when someone is experiencing a hardship, and even a weekend respite for the school’s COVID coordinator. Funds also support affinity groups in hosting an in-person event after connecting virtually for so long. “It sounds like they’re small things, but when I listen to staff, they tell me that they feel heard and valued because the funds go where they want the funds to go to.”

3 Listen. Adapt. Differentiate.

People value different things, Anello observes, especially when it comes to wellness: “What I’ve learned is that I can’t assume that just because I find meditation valuable, everyone else will too. So we’ve created opportunities in which everyone has a chance to share what they value, what they need, what helps them.”

For some, it’s the gift of time like half-day Fridays. For others, it’s an exercise class. “There is no one magical wellness initiative that works for everyone. So we listen, adapt, and differentiate—that’s how we demonstrate that we are being thoughtful around their needs.”



4 Budget your priorities.

In addition to wellness initiatives, Anello and her team are taking bold actions to value teachers and keep teachers amid the relentless challenges over the past two years, including retention bonuses, salary increases, and cost of living adjustments. “How could I not do that? We need our budget to reflect our priorities. We’re saying staff matters. Morale matters. Teacher retention matters. Then we have to make that tangible to our staff.”

5 Be transparent with all stakeholders.

Anello prioritizes transparency and communication. DC Bilingual has any number of committees that share in decision-making. During staff meetings, staff members have opportunities to process and ask questions. Community members have avenues to offer feedback.

“We work really hard to be transparent and to put into practice the things we say we care about. Having transparency with all our stakeholder groups sends a good message to everyone about our priorities.”

Jackie Gran, who serves as New Leaders Chief Officer, Policy and Strategic Initiatives, cannot agree more. Her daughter attends DC Bilingual. “It’s such a good feeling as a parent to know that all of our children are being cared for in every dimension of their lives, from accelerated learning to the community garden, to learning a new language, to the strong relationships they are building among the students and teachers.”

Last month, she adds, her daughter's teacher hosted a family Zoom. "All of a sudden, my daughter was grabbing the olive oil and a lemon, trying to make us a healthy salmon dinner and expanding her sense of herself. We know it's a really hard time for teachers right now, and yet, the love and guidance of her incredible teachers are really shaping her identity."

Anello, herself, credits her teachers, students, and community with the growth and continued success of the school. "In this moment, when things are really hard, we're trying to come together to create a situation in which we unify, rather than isolate." With close to 100 percent teacher retention, her leadership shines a light on what is possible.

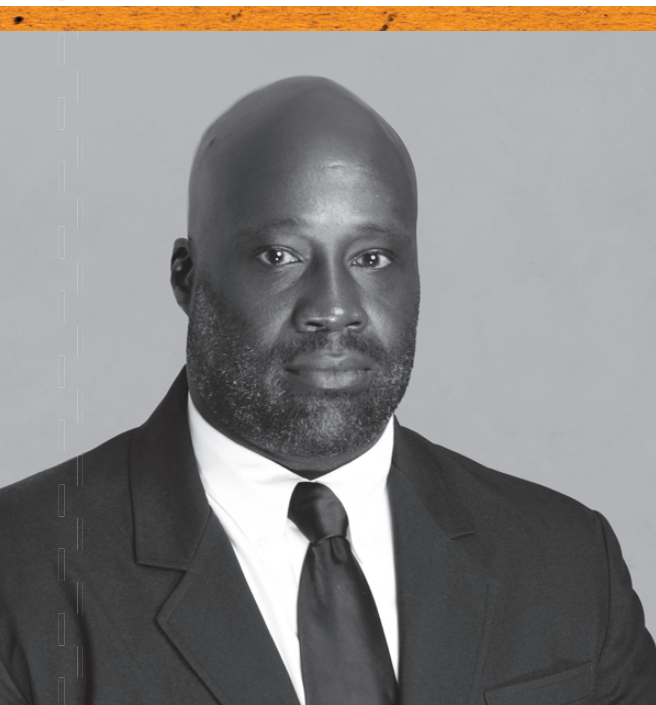
Anello's advice to leaders right now

Find a trustworthy network, a community of school leaders who you can feel really safe with, where you can be yourself and let your guard down. A space to be heard and not judged. It helps you remember that you are not alone. That's the biggest thing, not being alone.



About Daniela: Daniela Anello serves as the Head of School at the DC Bilingual Public Charter School. Anello launched her teaching career in the elementary school classrooms of New York, Boston, and Washington, DC. A New Leaders alum, Anello also served as principal at DC Bilingual before being named Head of School in 2015.

How to Motivate Your School to Keep Doing Better



Felipe Jackson
Principal, Fulton County Schools

A New Leaders alum and principal shares five leadership actions that carry him through the demands of this historic time and motivate his school to continue to do better.

“I can’t tell what day it is,” Principal Felipe Jackson reflected back in March 2020. The pandemic had just begun. He was still in front of his computer long after a normal school day would have ended. Jackson, a New Leaders alum, is the principal at Bear Creek Middle School in Fulton, Georgia. The story of his leadership, which we shared as an [inaugural blog post](#), inspired hundreds of educators across the country.

“We have to rely on each other,” he told his teachers, students, and families at the time. “Given the state of our nation, we are all we have. We will get through this ordeal together.”

We caught up with Jackson this summer to see how Bear Creek navigated the pandemic, first as an all-virtual model and later as a hybrid. We asked him how he changed as a leader and how he and his team are planning for another unprecedented school year.

“I’ve become more of a leader,” he shared over Zoom. “In the bravery aspect and in being transparent about how I feel.” His top five leadership actions carry him through the demands of this historic time. Then, like now, he continues to inspire.

The truth is our students are resilient. More than we are. Our job is to bring that out in them.



1 Create an opportunity culture.

With one-quarter of his students enrolled in person and the rest learning online, Jackson encouraged his staff to use small class sizes as an opportunity to work on their craft. Teachers redid lesson plans and targeted individual learning needs. He visited classrooms and offered feedback. “A lot of times it’s the distractions that prevent us from accomplishing what we want to accomplish,” he adds. “I tried to eliminate all the noise and motivate everyone to stay focused on learning.” Challenges got renamed as opportunities to take charge, to get better. In time, the opportunity atmosphere inside the school compelled more students to return in person.

2 Do something different.

Jackson and his team are determined to shift the way instruction is delivered at the secondary level. After looking at their achievement data, with 50 percent of the student population not meeting learning targets and a widening achievement gap as a result of COVID-19, teachers plan to integrate small group instruction into the classroom in addition to a standard intervention block. The goal is to provide more targeted support around specific skills and standards for students who need more support. This is the priority initiative Bear Creek is launching this fall to drive toward the student outcomes at 90-90-90 schools—90% high-poverty, 90% high-performing, and 90% minority enrollment.

3 Share leadership with your team.

Looking back on last year, Jackson is most thankful for his leadership team. “There were days when I just gave up. Honestly. I used to think that I had to do everything on my own, that it was embarrassing to admit a weakness. But on those days last year, when it felt like every road was closed, I learned to lean on my team and let my vulnerability come out. What I realized is that the more I gave my team opportunities to lead and be a part of the process, the more I knew we were going to be okay.”

4 Motivate, motivate, motivate.

Faced with one crisis after the other, last year, Jackson quickly realized the one thing he could control as a leader: the way in which he motivated teachers to teach, students to learn, and parents to stay engaged. “I became the biggest cheerleader every single day.” *We will get through this together* is a common refrain heard at Bear Creek Middle School along with regular reminders to seek a deeper purpose—why you chose to teach, for example—as a key motivator to keep going. For himself, Jackson learned that modeling high expectations and allowing people to see his vulnerabilities led to more respect, more commitment, more motivation.

“Challenges got renamed as opportunities to take charge, to get better.”

5 Embrace resilience.

Now is the time for urgency, Jackson tells his staff daily. “We don’t have time to play catch up. We don’t have time for excuses. Our kids are going to have to learn how to ride a bike without training wheels, whether we like it or not. We need to put ourselves in the right mindset and prepare ourselves with the strategies and practices that are proven to increase student achievement.” He pauses for a moment and adds: “The truth is our students are resilient. More than we are. Our job is to bring that out in them.”

Jackson’s advice to leaders right now

You can’t do this on your own. If you don’t have a team, develop one. Keep pushing forward, and others will definitely follow.

About Felipe: Felipe Jackson is the principal of Bear Creek Middle School in Fulton County, Georgia. A native of Washington D.C., Jackson has 11 years of experience leading schools in Fulton County and Baltimore City. A New Leaders alum, he believes that schools are the centerpiece of the community.

Empowering Principals to Empower Their Schools



Karen Bryan-Chambers
Senior Director, Leadership Academy, New Leaders



Claire Fisher, Middle School Network Partner,
Oakland Unified School District

Two former principals and leadership coaches, as well as New Leaders alumni, share three essential supports that made a transformative difference in their leadership.

Neither of us were planning to be principals. We loved teaching and didn't want to lose our connections to the school community. But we got thrust into leadership positions very quickly—Karen after Hurricane Katrina and Claire during the founding of a new charter school—and found them both daunting and energizing. In our roles, we had to figure out the systems for instruction, school culture, and a community-building process. It was exciting, but not without challenges.

Research shows that school improvement requires effective teachers, strong principals, and rigorous and engaging curriculum (Leithwood, Anderson, Louis, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Any one of these elements without the other two is insufficient. In that dynamic trio, according to the same research, school leadership accounts for about 25 percent of a school's impact on student learning. Effective principals drive collective efficacy within their schools by bringing all three elements together.

As current principal trainers, our experiences have shown us that principals have the greatest effect when they receive support that allows them to empower their teams and drive meaningful change. Empowered principals create a culture focused on student and teacher success. They establish systems that enable teachers to continuously improve their practice and galvanize the whole community to support students' hopes and dreams.

This article was first published in the April 22, 2021 ASCD Express issue, "[What Makes a Successful Principal?](#)"

But empowered principals are not go-it-alone superheroes. Principals need to drive toward sustainable solutions that engage the whole school community, including students, teachers, families, and community members. Now more than ever, our schools need leaders who bring out the best in everyone.

Three supports have made a transformative difference in our leadership. We'll lay them out alongside some stories from our own learning experiences.

Claire: *As a new principal in Oakland Unified School District, I faced a huge budget shortfall. A grant was sunseting at my school, and I had to be the holder of that change, whether I wanted to be or not. Small class size was the hallmark of the school, but without the grant, that was sunseting, too. Layoffs were on the horizon.*

There was no easy answer. I knew that I needed to engage my staff in the decision-making process. That meant doing my homework really fast: I had to make the budget crisis palpable enough for all of us to understand our financial situation and find a viable solution. I asked for mentorship from two former principals of my school, who both understood the vision of our work and the grant.

After I laid out the numbers for my staff, I reframed the question of layoffs into one about our vision: What did we think was the most important step to take for our students? Was it small class size? Was it educational resources? What drove our success? In the end, my staff voted unanimously to increase class size so we could avoid layoffs and teachers could continue to do what they did best: teach. Sharing information about a challenge and working with staff to help solve it ensured we were moving forward together with more voices in the decision-making process.

An Adaptive Mindset: Principals Need More Than Technical Skills

Principals need to be change agents. Technical fixes offer prescribed solutions, but adaptive solutions require that schools lean into discomfort and transform challenges into opportunities to move forward together.

Like the adage “one size does not fit all,” adaptive leadership is how leaders dig into complex problems that do not have a known solution (Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009). Adaptive leaders step back to understand a challenge from multiple perspectives, explore root causes, consider who is affected, and identify key partners and human resources. They interpret existing data and mobilize all stakeholders in forging solutions for their unique context.

For example, consider the dual crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and systemic racial injustice. The need to deliver high-quality instruction to students, be it in-person, remote, or hybrid, required principals to change their instruction plans to meet a new reality. There was no one right answer for every school. Principals had to lean into the ambiguity and cull feedback from staff, students, and families to pave the way for instruction that reflected unique needs.

Similarly, addressing systemic racism in schools does not have a singular fix. It remains an ongoing adaptive challenge, requiring leaders to engage in open dialogue.

Principals need to create safe spaces for staff to surface

internal biases and provide professional learning opportunities to build culturally responsive practices (Desravines, Aquino, & Fenton, 2016). How principals ensure equity of voice and coalesce their community around this work illustrates adaptive leadership.



Karen: *In my first years as an elementary school principal, I wanted to give students exactly what I thought they would need to be successful. I looked at formative and interim assessment data and observation data from classroom visits. Then, I redid the school schedule to allocate more time for ELA instruction. I created a reading intervention block, trained paraprofessionals to teach small reading groups, and identified weekly curricular goals for every grade. But I didn't feel like our school was invested in the changes.*

In my 4th year of leading, I got a leadership coach. One day, he asked me if I knew what my teachers said about me. "They think you do all the work yourself," he said. "You don't empower people."

His authentic feedback shifted my leadership. A lack of empowerment also meant a lack of trust and capacity building. The next time I got my staff together, I told them why I became a principal and what I value as an educator. I asked the staff to reflect and share their "whys." Then we created a shared vision for our school by imagining the ideals we desired for our students and our aspirations for the future. We needed a clear image of what success looked like for us.

Technical skills alone—like executing safety protocols or developing bus schedules—will not enable principals to create cultures in which every student thrives. But adaptive leadership, when paired with technical skills, has the capacity to drive high expectations and student success. Developing such leadership requires deep reflection of practices, personal leadership, and systems and structures. This type of reflection doesn't happen in a day—it must be measured over time.

A Coach: Principals Need Real-Time Support

Leaders need someone who is looking in from the outside. Coaches can push you to see what you cannot, translating the knowledge in your head into real action. In turn, your openness to learning can motivate staff to be open as well.

Successful coaching reflects adult learning theory—the idea that adults learn best when their learning is applicable to their goals. Principals need opportunities to hone their leadership skills in day-to-day work in ways that are authentic and relevant as well as continuous (Joyce & Shower, 2002). Coaching, with progress monitoring built in, can provide that kind of practice.

The idea is to build leaders' capacity to strategically think through goals and how to achieve them. A coach's actionable feedback often marries observations with multiple data sources (e.g., qualitative data, artifacts, video review), which allows leaders to see the connections and gaps between their current practices and effective decisions. To be impactful, the feedback needs to be paired with self-reflection. Though the coach plays an important role, coaching is only truly successful when leaders own applying the insights to their action steps and identify what is in their control.

Claire: It is so important for school communities to make decisions for themselves. During our budget crisis, teachers wanted to understand the complexity of the situation so they could make their voices heard. And they wanted to shape the process and the outcome. Principals cannot lead by themselves—they need thought partners and instructional teams to be leaders as well.

A Team: Principals Need a Community of Leaders

Bringing a school's vision to life, as we both discovered, is the real work of schools. Rather than limiting leadership to a specific role or title, leaders need to cultivate the skills and knowledge that exist across the building. Sadly, this talent often goes untapped.

In distributed and shared leadership models, an empowered principal distributes leadership across

multiple teams, using their varied skills and experiences to advance the school's vision—whether through instructional leadership, cultural leadership, or personal leadership. An instructional leadership team may develop a plan for implementing a new teaching practice at every grade. A school-based team may analyze disciplinary data and create new systems when there are inequities. Another team may facilitate peer observations or develop proposals for new hybrid schedules. Working with the principal, these teams drive collective action.

Principals can determine which leadership strand or what part of the work educators are uniquely aligned to drive. Then, they can be the process keepers, designing project plans, check-ins, and action items to track progress with ongoing support.

Research suggests that distributed leadership models are linked to more sustainable school improvement (Harris & DeFlaminis, 2016). Specifically, distributed leadership has been found to improve teacher motivation and performance, which correlates with stronger student outcomes (Leithwood & Mascal, 2008). Teachers in schools that use a distributed leadership model tend to show more optimism, efficacy, and trust (Mascal, Leithwood, Straus, & Sacks, 2008). They also report a higher sense of job satisfaction (Torres, 2019).

Building a community of leaders increases the sustainability of school improvement efforts over time. Trust your team and show them how your leadership evolves. As an added bonus, you'll feel less alone and more supported.

Transform Your Leadership, Transform Your School

As principal coaches and trainers, we have met with principals from across the country who are working to navigate this unprecedented school year. The most empowered principals are leaning on their teams. They are managing ambiguity and adapting quickly to a changing landscape. They are seeking out professional support via a coach or other learning opportunities. Together, all three supports are helping them to empower others and build the kind of schools all children deserve.

About Karen: Karen Bryan-Chambers serves as the Senior Director, Leadership Academy at New Leaders. She has more than 26 years of professional experience, including 16 years as a teacher, five years as a principal, and five years in leadership development. A New Leaders alum, she speaks across the country, inspiring and motivating education leaders.

About Claire: Claire Fisher serves as a Middle School Network Partner in Oakland Unified School District. She has worked in public education for 20 years in a variety of roles, including as an AmeriCorps volunteer, teacher, dean, assistant principal and principal. A New Leaders alum, Fisher also served as a leadership coach at New Leaders.



Five Ways to Invest In and Keep the Best Teachers and Leaders



Dr. Melissa Kim
Deputy Chancellor, District of Columbia Schools

Learn how one New Leaders alum and district leader is investing in teachers and leaders in our nation's capital to redefine public education and motivate them to stay.

“My hope is that with every interaction, I leave leaders stronger and more confident to face whatever comes their way,” reflects Dr. Melissa Kim, Deputy Chancellor for District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). “That is my barometer for how I lead and develop leaders across our district.” A New Leaders alum and former principal, Dr. Kim drives instruction and equity work in all 116 DCPS schools. Her team of ten instructional superintendents and their offices lead leadership development, teaching and learning, strategic planning and innovation, school and student supports, and post-COVID recovery and acceleration.

It’s not something she ever imagined as a young immigrant girl, an English language learner in schools where her Korean identity and accent were not accepted. “I never felt included in school. I never had a sense of belonging there and thus was never able to fully be myself.” This, she is quick to point out, is not unique to her identity. People of color, as well as those with varying linguistic backgrounds or sexual identities, often face norms that let them know they do not belong. That pattern of exclusion based on identity is not one she wants repeated in schools.

Today, she is working to not only get—and keep—the very best teachers and leaders in front of students but to cultivate a mindset in both that ensures students are embraced in their full identities so they can grow without limitation—and thrive. “We are aiming for something bigger and higher than what education aspired to be twenty years ago. We know all children can and should succeed, not just some children who often fall along race and socioeconomic lines.”



We sat down with Dr. Kim to learn more about how she prioritizes inclusion in schools, how she is working to retain high-quality teachers and leaders during this unprecedented time, and how together they are working to redefine public education. In this era of the Great Resignation, here are five leadership actions that can work for your district and school too.

① Drive equity transformation via practice and policy.

“We’re changing the way we do things,” Dr. Kim explains. Prior to the pandemic, DCPS launched an initiative to become a whole-child and anti-racist district. Hundreds of staff participated in a DCPS ARE-U (Anti-Racist University) that was open to all staff. The district also launched a multi-year review of the teacher support and evaluation system to examine patterns of inequities and bias and create a path to address them. DCPS also has plans to repeat the same for leadership evaluation. “To be whole-child and anti-racist,” she adds, “you have to look at every single system and policy and practice through that lens. We’re far from having it all fixed, but our people can see that change in tangible ways and in our systems. And they are engaging and leading in this work with us.”

Being on the cusp of meaningful change and having your values amplified by your district is a motivator to stay.

2 Offer opportunities to be a part of something bigger.

“I definitely lose many nights of sleep worrying about not having enough people to do the work, but I also know that it is incredibly motivating to be a part of something worthy and full of purpose,” offers Dr. Kim. She argues that crises are also ideal times for new ideas and innovations to grow. In her work, she intentionally seeks to bring more voices to the table, many that have gone untapped for too long, and create spaces in which educators are actively engaged in redefining how schools work. “Being on the cusp of meaningful change and having your values amplified by your district,” observes Dr. Kim, “is a motivator to stay.”

3 Provide incentives that reflect your values.

“We want to keep our very best educators with students who need them the most,” explains Dr. Kim. With support from a Department of Education grant that the district sought and won, DCPS is offering financial incentives for teachers to stay in the schools that are serving communities furthest from opportunity. “Our people power this, and we have to do whatever it takes to get and keep our awesome teachers with our students.” Incentives include retention bonuses, hiring bonuses, stipends to attend courses, and expanded access to professional development. According to Dr. Kim, these incentives are a reflection of what the district values for student learning and for growing teacher talent.



4 Keep thinking outside of the box.

After listening to the perspectives of teachers and leaders, Dr. Kim and her team are exploring options beyond the traditional workday, including more flexible schedules, sabbaticals for the strongest teachers, and supports that allow staff with young families or aging loved ones to stay in the profession and take care of their families during different stages of life. “We haven’t cracked the nut yet, but we need to make the variety of options wide enough so we can meet people where they are. Everyone needs something different.”

5 Champion a broader, more inclusive mission.

“This is where leadership really matters,” offers Dr. Kim. “We have to cultivate and bring on people who have a different purpose for why we do this work. It’s more than just closing the achievement gap. It’s about students becoming whole, being ready to engage in and take on the world right now.” To do that, Dr. Kim leads regular conversations, large and small, that engage a diversity of stakeholders in figuring out how to find solutions and create new systems. This kind of adaptive leadership, she observes, requires that leaders pull more people into the process, tap people who don’t typically get tapped but in whom they see greatness, and then push toward the larger goal of redefining public education.

The pandemic, she notes, affirmed this need for change. “As a mom, I was working to run a school system while I was watching my children experience their own version of that at the classroom level. I was immersed in it, which made me even more committed to a whole-child and anti-racist approach.” And, looking forward, she adds, to developing benches of diverse talent that will further interrupt the pattern of who has been historically included and traditionally excluded in our school communities.

Dr. Kim’s advice to leaders right now

You can see obstacles for what they are: something that gets in the way. Or, you can see them as many great leaders do: a speed ramp that will help you get to where you need to go even faster. Flipping that paradigm can be freeing. It can illuminate the many other possibilities you didn’t see before.

About Melissa: Dr. Melissa Kim is the Deputy Chancellor of DC Public Schools. She leads the district’s 116 schools as well as all programs including academics, human capital development, interventions, innovations, equity, school and student supports, strategic planning, and post COVID-19 acceleration. A New Leaders alum, Dr. Kim has been an educator in DC for 25 years.

Offering Hope and Belief to Our Nation's Youth



Joaquin Tamayo
Chief of Staff, Deputy Secretary of Education

New Leaders alum Joaquin Tamayo shares his leadership journey from high school teacher to chief of staff to the U.S. Deputy Secretary of Education—and what fuels his work.

“I just fell in love with the craft,” Joaquin Tamayo reflects on the start of his career in education. “I fell in love with the opportunity to help guide and develop young people so they could really understand and live out their best potential, whatever that happened to be.”

Tamayo is currently the chief of staff to the U.S. Deputy Secretary of Education, Cindy Marten. A New Leaders alum, he has served in multiple leadership roles: from high school teacher to principal, national nonprofit director to federal policymaker. He is passionate about redesigning our public education system so that equity in all of its dimensions—equity of experience, opportunity,

relationships, gender, race, and more—has a greater chance of being achieved for our nation's youth.

We sat down with Tamayo to learn more about how he got to where he is now and what his vision is for the future of our schools.

Where does your passion for redesigning our public education system come from?

I began my teaching career at a year-round school in Los Angeles. Due to overcrowding, we had three tracks, or essentially three schools, on one campus. There, I learned that I loved teaching social studies. I also loved the year-round schedule and, especially, having four months of time off each year.

But I also learned really quickly that my high school enrolled 1,500 freshmen annually but only graduated 700 seniors four years later. And yet my classes were routinely oversubscribed. When I did some simple math, I was, like, wait a minute: this system is predicated, at some level, on the failure of a whole lot of kids.

It dawned on me that if our school was any more successful, if our graduation rates got any higher, if upwards of 800 students didn't disappear between freshman and senior year, the school would quickly run out of quality teachers, space, or resources for many more students. It was a sobering realization.

Just operationalizing those two things alone—equity and excellence, at the same time—would revolutionize our public education system.

Scales fell from my eyes: the system wasn't designed to deliver successful outcomes for all of our students. It was then that I truly understood my responsibility to be part of a systemic solution to ensure equity for all young people.

If you could redesign our K-12 education system right now, what would your top three priorities be?

There are so many ways to redesign, but I would make sure that every young person and adult connected to any learning community in this country understand at a visceral level that **they belong there**. And that they belong not just because they were told they do, but because the relationships and the experiences and the environments are purposely designed to give them what they need, when they need it, and in the way they need it. When this happens for young people, no matter who they are or where they are in their development, they understand that they belong.

In addition to belonging, which is the foundation of anything good that happens in education, my second priority would be that everyone gets an **equitable and excellent education**. Just operationalizing those two things alone—equity and excellence, at the same time—would revolutionize our public education system.

My third priority, and it's intimately connected to my first two priorities, would be to design learning communities that convey **respect, love, and care** for young people and for the adults who work for them—schools that our kids deserve.



Additionally, and because I've been deeply involved in the ***science of learning and development*** over my career, I would want everyone to understand the three things that create the cognitive fuel any young person needs to learn and develop: positive developmental relationships, rich learning experiences, and supportive environments. Together, these three design elements support every young person in finding their own potential and intrinsic motivation to succeed.

We need to replace our current system and mindsets with a system designed for belonging, equity and excellence, and caring for adults and children alike—all of which would be guided by what we know from the science of learning and development around how young people thrive.

Is there a vision at the national level for how we can reimagine K-12 education?

At the Department of Education, in alignment with President Biden, the secretary and deputy secretary's vision is that we need to have a public education system that not only serves America but looks like America. Our schools must be responsive to our young people, to their individual communities, their families, their needs, wants, and aspirations.

We have a diverse country, so it matters that we have diverse representation in our schools. When we look at the landscape around the representation of leaders, teachers, and other school staff of color and compare it to the overall population of young people in our schools, it strongly suggests that the current system isn't designed to have parity between who is developing our young people and our young people themselves.

And we know that one determinant of young people's life trajectories, either the opportunity or lack thereof, is to deeply know people who have a shared identity, a shared cultural experience, a shared language. Our brains and bodies are constantly searching for that shared space. It feels safe. In those spaces, young people are able to make meaning of their experiences in a positive way so their minds are open to learning and expanding their horizons.

Our education system is an opportunity to really invest in the young people in our country. I never went into this to be a role model for Latino people in this country, but I tell everyone, particularly people of color, that education is a rewarding career. That our country needs you. And our young people need you, too.



What drew you to New Leaders?

After teaching, I went to graduate school for public policy to see if I could learn to do something about educational inequity at a systems level. I soon realized I wanted to be back with the kids. So I applied to New Leaders. I was 26 years old. I had so much naivete paired with a pretty limitless supply of hope and optimism and dreams about what I could do.

After a successful residency at the Bronx Academy of Letters, I founded a small high school—The Urban Assembly Academy of Government and Law—in New York City. I was a principal there for four years.

What New Leaders provided for me was a deeply personalized path to becoming a school leader. I'd never been in such an immersive experience. It profoundly shaped who I became as an educator and a human being. It's why I am at the U.S. Department of Education today.

I believe to my core that every system is perfectly designed for the results that it gets. If we want different results, we have to redesign the system.

Tamayo's advice to leaders right now

We need more leaders in the system who are able and willing to offer hope and belief to our young people, and not just in rhetorical ways, but through relationships, experiences, and environments. We need leaders who demonstrate that all of this matters. If you think you're that person, then persevere. Be resilient and good things will happen as long as you keep holding hope and belief front and center.



About Joaquin: Joaquin Tamayo is Chief of Staff in the Office of the Deputy Secretary at the U.S. Department of Education. He previously served as the Director of Strategic Initiatives for Elementary and Secondary Education in the Obama administration. A New Leaders alum, Tamayo is a founder of the Urban Assembly Academy of Government and Law in New York City.

Be a powerful and positive force for change.

New Leaders is redefining how schools are led. The leaders we develop serve as an example of what is possible, supporting students in fully realizing their futures as the next generation of great thinkers, innovators, and leaders for our society.

Our leadership development programs support:

- **School systems** in building a diverse pipeline of equity-minded leaders who champion instructional excellence.
- **School leaders** in implementing policies and practices that advance equity and accelerate learning outcomes.
- **School communities** in defining and upholding learning environments that are safe, inclusive, affirming, engaging, and meaningful for students and educators alike.

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