

## Jabali Sawicki (PSL '04) and the Excellence Charter School

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Several years ago, the I Have a Dream Foundation, with the mission to support African-American children in low-income neighborhoods, identified the need for an all-boys school in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. Concerned about current research identifying low high-school graduation rates in African-American males in this area, the foundation sought to do something about it, and my friend Jabali Sawicki got involved. In August 2004, Jabali, as its founding principal, opened the doors of the Excellence Charter School to eighty-six boys in kindergarten and first grade.

A product of independent schools, Jabali spent eighteen months preparing for this new role. First, he attended the KIPP Leadership Institute, a program for charter school leaders. Then, he enrolled in the Private School Leadership program at the Klingenstein Center to complete his preparation for the principalship. This combination of charter school and private school leadership training afforded Jabali the opportunity to explore a multitude of topics relevant to his new job.

As principal of "Excellence," Jabali greets his charges each morning as they arrive for class, imagining how the school's structure and academic discipline will affect their lives. With a mission to focus on the success and scholarship of these young boys, the goal for "Excellence" is to bring each one of them through the eighth grade by adding a new class each year.

Jabali identifies three key factors in his own life that have impacted his educational career: 1) a parent who had high expectations for him and taught him the importance of receiving a good education; 2) teachers and mentors who supported and motivated him; and 3) exposure to opportunities and experiences that were outside his daily routine, forcing him to look beyond himself.



Principal Jabali Sawicki visits with his students

He has brought these three "ingredients in the recipe for success" to the Excellence Charter School. For instance, in his dealings with parents he is known to say, "Just as you have high expectations for us, we have high expectations for you." He has focused much of his energy on helping parents understand the importance of providing a quiet space for their children, helping them process what they have

In addition to parental involvement, the school has designed other means of adult interaction for the children. Most notably, there are two teachers in each class of fifteen students, providing the kind of support envisioned by the I Have a Dream Foundation. Jabali hired the teachers during his year at the Klingenstein Center and quickly transitioned to faculty meetings last summer where they worked on setting

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learned in school each day, and supporting the children with their noticeable presence at school. He has asked the parents to communicate openly with teachers and "believe in the same things that we believe in – especially that [their children] can go to college." The school has even provided a "homework hotline" that parents can call if they need help in assisting their children.

goals, planning curriculum, and agreeing on standards of practice. Excellence Charter School is equally committed to bringing in other adults from whom the students can learn. Community members and parents are asked to volunteer their time to tell the students what their lives are like, what they do for a living, and how they take care of the community. The idea is to provide as many positive adult role models as possible in the course of a school day.

In reflecting upon his experience as a student in the Private School Leadership program, Jabali describes how it has helped him lead "Excellence" each day. "The PSL program forced me to think about a wide range of issues simultaneously. During the year, I was grappling with questions of assessment, fiscal management concerns, teacher evaluation systems, mission and core values all at the same time - which is exactly how I am forced to operate as a principal. The program put me in the same room with intelligent and committed school leaders who were moved by the same passions as I was. The curriculum of the program designed by Pearl [Kane] was exactly what I needed. It forced me to see my school through the numerous lenses necessary to be an effective principal. It was a crash course in almost everything I am sure to encounter along the way." Jabali continued, saying that his PSL experience gave him a sense of confidence that he lacked before entering the program. "In spending time with my PSL colleagues who all supported each others' growth, in seeing how hard they worked and how dedicated they all were, I realized that like them, I love this work, and because I love it, there is no room for failure."

During our interview, Jabali noted that the school community "has a long journey between now and 2020, when our first class will graduate from college, and we are only going to be successful if our parents are in the same canoes, paddling in the same direction." It certainly looks like the members of the Excellence Charter School community are off to a good start. ♦