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Resilience and Results

School leader focuses on getting students to – and through – college

Just hours after an incident two blocks from his school led to a brief lock-down of his building, Noah Tennant focuses conversation on his students' resilience – rather than his own skills as a leader. Tennant's calm, unwavering demeanor suggests that he is a role model worth emulating.

Tennant, a Neubauer Fellow in Educational Leadership who is finishing his sixth year as principal of Boys' Latin of Philadelphia Charter School, recognizes the challenges of the surrounding Cobbs Creek neighborhood and its elevated rates of poverty and violent crime, but repeatedly brings the discussion back to his focus on "results of success, not reasons for failure."

Tennant started his career in education as an English teacher in well-off neighborhoods and schools, but felt drawn to working in a neighborhood like the one he now serves. "It was about serving a new community and trying to understand how to serve it best. I carried a great deal of learning with me to Boys' Latin from my previous experiences," he said.

“But I was especially overjoyed and blessed by what Boys’ Latin taught me. Most notably, the students of Boys’ Latin and the students of the affluent suburbs where I previously served had more in common than not. While their circumstances were often vastly different, their hearts, hopes, and abilities were the same.”

Results, Not Reasons

When thinking about poverty, trauma, and neighborhood challenges in Cobbs Creek, Tennant is quick to focus on “results, not reasons.”

“There are a lot of reasons things can’t happen, but we focus on results. That doesn’t mean those challenges aren’t there, it just means we focus on the outcomes,” Tennant said. “It is about helping the students understand that school should be a safe forum for growth and learning. It should be a pathway for them – a place that provides opportunity and sanctuary, and equips them with the cognitive and non-cognitive skills they will need to navigate the world outside of Boys’ Latin.”

“Our students stand up in homeroom every day and say a pledge,” Tennant explained, “and the first line is, ‘Education is my birthright.’ We make sure they understand their education is an inherent part of their growth process. It is essential to their development, something they are owed. Too many in the community have fallen prey to schools or circumstance that have not served them well, and we want our students to recalibrate the expectations they have for themselves and establish new, powerful norms of success and achievement.”

In his previous schools, Tennant said, there were demands for college attainment and success – high expectations for that level of excellence. He disdains the lower expectations he often encounters.

“Many across this city far too easily say, ‘college isn’t for everyone.’ And I know on some level that is the case, but I can’t help but notice that no one ever said that at the more affluent schools.” Boys’ Latin wants to “buck that trend and let students know college is attainable and it is part of their future.”

Tennant recognizes, though, that the reasons can

sometimes hinder the results.

“To equip our students with only the academic tools they will need for college would be short-sighted. There is a great need to address socio-emotional learning as part of our college-going mission. We know we have to equip our guys with the emotional intelligence and character that is required to navigate college once they leave us,” Tennant said.

“The men we expect our guys to be at school is very different from the men they have to be when they are walking to and from school. They are forced on a daily basis to make this transition and it’s not easy. We remind them every day, who they need to be, what is acceptable and what is not. Every day we have to teach them to recognize there are a lot of false idols of manhood out there that will lead them astray, that will not help them get that educational birthright that is theirs.”

Data that Matters

Tennant said he measures success at Boys’ Latin not in test scores but on getting his students prepared for perseverance and success in college. “On average, our 9th graders have come to us at a 6th grade reading level. He notes with pride the 100-percent college acceptance for the school’s first graduating class, “but that alone was not enough.

We needed to make sure they were not only accepted to college but that they went to college. Our college matriculation rate was 84 percent. Our college persistence rate for attending the second year of college was 67 percent, one of the highest in the state and the highest for boys of color. We then began to focus on the college graduation rates of our alums.

“That first group of Boys’ Latin graduates earned their 4-year college degrees at a rate of 23 percent, significantly better than the national rate for black males, but not good enough. We made adjustments and our (Class of) 2012 4-year college graduation rate rose to 56 percent. Our projected rate of 4-year college graduation for the class of 2013 is 61 percent.”



One Story of Resilience

Tennant has many examples of students seeing results despite reasons, but one story stands out:

“We give our students laptops to use for their schoolwork. One day I received a call from a mom who told me her son had been held up at gunpoint on the way to school and his laptop was stolen,” Tennant said.

“I told her I was sorry that happened, and for her to tell her son not to worry about the schoolwork that day, that I wanted him to be safe and to come back when he was physically and mentally ready. To take his time. And she paused and said, ‘He’s in class right now.’ And he was. Had that happened to me, I would have been shell-shocked. This kid got robbed at gunpoint, lost his laptop and then continued his walk to school.

“There is an amazing level of resilience in these guys. Students can react a lot of different ways to an event like that. They can be angry and resentful, they can be emotionally depressed, they can withdraw, find an affiliation group to help protect them. There are paths that are easier for them, that are within their reach. But they have foresight.

“These boys are resilient.”

Tipping Point

Tennant’s first pursued his educational birthright with his family in central Pennsylvania. He left the state to study English with a concentration in education at the University of Delaware. He was a first generation college student, and his appreciation for the opportunity shaped his career.

“I was a sophomore in college, matched up with a young man when he was 11, and understanding what the school experience was for him, what worked for him and what didn’t, the way his home life and school life intertwined in good and bad ways and trying to help him unpack and process that,” Tennant said. “I knew that was something I wanted to be a part of for my life’s work.”

Tennant, who will become Boys’ Latin CEO in the fall, said his experience as a Neubauer Fellow is exponentially aiding his development as a professional school leader.

“The Philadelphia Academy of School Leaders has a strong sense of how to craft learning opportunities so they are relevant to what we are experiencing in the schools. They are preparing us to think strategically, systematically, and with a spirit of entrepreneurialism.”

Watching and Listening

As he marks his own growth, he reflects on his early experiences as an educator that influenced his growth as a leader.

“I often tell that first group of kids I taught that they taught me how to be a grown up,” he said. “They helped me understand how much educators matter. They were watching me and listening to me, and what I said and how I acted mattered. My voice meant something to them, and understanding and owning that responsibility was part of my own growing up.” ●