



PHILADELPHIA
ACADEMY
OF SCHOOL
LEADERS

Making an Impact One Story at a Time

Principal follows family legacy as he leads Feltonville school

In ideal situations, parents and teachers are role models who help children navigate their educational journey. So imagine the potential impact when one of your parents is a classroom teacher. That was the experience for John Piniat, principal of Philadelphia's Feltonville School of Arts and Sciences (FSAS), and now, following his mother's example, he is leading a new generation on its path

Piniat's mother and two sisters all pursued careers in education. Growing up in that culture, it is not surprising he, "fell in love with education, seeing the kids' eyes light up as they learn."

Piniat, 31, eschews complacency and actively seeks professional challenges. There is tremendous synergy binding his heritage, his daily experience as a principal, and his eagerness to continue to grow as a leader of educators.

He began his education career as a middle school science teacher in New Jersey. He said he enjoyed the interaction with students and was committed to teaching but desired more challenging opportunities.

Greater Impact

“I wanted to have more of an impact, to see what I could do to help students get into good high schools and colleges,” he said. “The school I was in had plenty of resources, funding and materials, all any student could want. There were many involved parents. But I wanted to help in a school that maybe did not have that abundance.”

Piniat next took a job at a Philadelphia middle school. Each year, he saw gains in academic performance and parental involvement. He became a math coach and sought more leadership responsibilities.

Taking the initiative

“I took on the role of leading monthly parent meetings, and we saw consistent growth in the numbers of parents who participated,” he said. “We offered tools and strategies the parents could use at home, and they appreciated the outreach.”

That experience led him to pursue more leadership roles and to eventually earn the opportunity to serve as principal at FSAS, a community where there are many challenges and scant resources. Feltonville has the strength of diversity, with 27 languages spoken in homes in the neighborhood, but that creates challenges for students as they adapt to English at school. FSAS also serves many children from single-parent homes, and the north Philadelphia community continues to strive to catch up to Philadelphia averages for high school graduation and college enrollment.

Connecting with students

Piniat works daily with students who do not have full access to resources, and, in some cases, have experienced significant trauma and upheaval at home. To combat this, Piniat is consistently looking for ways to be entrepreneurial, such as applying for and receiving a Philadelphia Academy of School Leaders Teacher-Leader Collaborative Grant.

“I try to be compassionate and caring. I try to understand each individual story of my students and staff. I want our teachers to connect with students as individuals, so they take ownership of their education,” Piniat said. “I want to impact more teachers, and more students. Not just one

student or one class, but as many as possible. I want us to provide something at our school that is worth coming to school for. I want them to be excited to be here, every day.”

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Piniat reports that his approach has resulted in improved academic performance and much lower disciplinary rates at FSAS. He credits his “great team of teachers and the parents and students who are working together and making an impact.”

Becoming a Neubauer Fellow

To further refine his skills as a leader, Piniat applied for the Neubauer Fellowship in Educational Leadership in 2016. The program guides Fellows to hone skills and become entrepreneurial leaders who leverage staff talents and cultivate other partners to increase student achievement. “It’s an amazing way to grow professionally,” he said.

“I have met some of the most talented principals in the city, and one of the greatest benefits so far is establishing those relationships. We call and text each other to share ideas and discuss our challenges and successes.”

“Every minute of this program is planned and maximized to push you to the next level,” he said. “I tell the exceptional leaders I know, ‘This is the one thing you absolutely must do.’”

Being raised in a family that deeply values education inspired Piniat’s career choice. Rising to the challenges his students confront inspires his continued quest to be the most effective leader he can be.