A Vision for Leadership

#Homecoming2021: Equity, Voice, and Vision
An interview with Chancellor Meisha Ross Porter

The New York City Department of Education’s Office of Leadership, Empowerment, and Development (LEAD) had the opportunity to speak with Chancellor Meisha Porter to learn about her vision for leadership and the spirit of #Homecoming2021.

**LEAD:** Please take a moment to share what you are most passionate about relative to leading during these times in your home city?

**Chancellor Porter:** I am most excited about the opportunity. This moment gives us an opportunity to reinvent our system in service of children and to think about what it means to reinvent our schools as places that are more welcoming and affirming for students, ways that acknowledge what our students have been through. It’s also an opportunity to think about the system from many different spaces and think about how to reorganize our system and central spaces to truly work in service of schools.

I think about our system from many different spaces. This moment is an opportunity for reorganizing our system from the Central and BCO levels in ways to work deeply in service of schools. I am also interested in thinking differently about what we do, who we are, and how we show up and I am most excited about the opportunity to create a system that so many have dreamed about.

**LEAD:** Can you paint a picture of what that looks like?

**Chancellor Porter:** It looks [and feels] like the first day. When I think of every role I have played in this system, the first day of school has always been special. From that night before the first day when you can’t sleep because you’re so excited and continues into the moment when students arrive in buildings where teachers, leaders, school safety agents, the cafeteria staff and all of the people in the building eagerly anticipate this return and are...
excitedly welcoming students back. It feels like students walking into classrooms where they see themselves in the curriculum in very real ways. At the summer Principals meeting one of our graduates, Sakura, recalls a time in 11th grade, reading a text by a Ghanian author and seeing herself. In the system we are creating it will become normal that every child, whether you're Black, White, Asian, Hispanic, LATINX, or LBTQUIA, you see yourself as a powerful figure in the system because you see yourself in the curriculum, you see yourself and representations of you in the learning and trust that teachers know how important that is. This reimagined system, and this theme, this vision of homecoming is about that. It’s about celebrating learning, reconnecting, building new routines and rituals to create that new normal of what our school system should be.

**LEAD:** What is your vision for equitable leadership and how do you envision culturally, responsive and justice based leadership?

**Chancellor Porter:** We have to invest in our leaders as not everyone knows what that means and we have to have a common definition. When I took on this role I wanted to see how we defined equity in this system. Do we have to have a common definition and a common belief around what it means to advance equity? And in that definition, we speak to meeting the needs of all students, meeting them where they are and bringing them to the place of their greatest potential. As we move forward and into #Homecoming, we have to normalize that and take that out of the silos of groups of students into the place of, how do you see each and every student you serve and see your work as pouring into them? We have to invest in developing our people and that has been a priority of this system for a long time and we have to develop them in service of what we believe. We have to be invested in grounding ourselves into what it means to be a New York City Department of Education public school and what it means to lead one. We also need to have [Central/District] leaders at the table with principals helping us make those decisions about how we invest in them. Additionally, we need to develop a bench of potential leaders who are ready to lead the system that we desire. We have to pour into our leaders so that they can pour into our teachers, so that they can show up for each of our students in an individualized way.

**LEAD:** Describe a leadership characteristic that you have cultivated and/or refined over the past 15 months, transitioning from Executive Superintendent to Chancellor.

**Chancellor Porter:** It has been those adaptive leadership qualities. At the start of the pandemic I was in the Bronx and I knew that my community would experience it very differently. And so yes, it was about teaching and learning, but it was also about eating, devices, and shelter. Being adaptive was to know it was about so many things that were important in getting our babies to the point where they could learn. In that moment, we did many things that were community-based and parent and family facing. Shifting into this role, in the middle of the mayoral election and in a pandemic, I moved into a space of making decisions about whether to return to school and what that should look like. Every day I’m learning something; about a new community, a new constituency group and learning about another part of the system. So I am leaning into all of those adaptive qualities that leaders need not only in crisis but in transition.

**LEAD:** What is your vision for a more expansive view of leadership and development for the New York City Department of Education?
**Chancellor Porter:** Really lifting up to the story of what we do well as a system from the classroom all the way up to the Chancellor’s office. We need to lean into our collective strengths as an organization. I want to lean into what’s already happening in classrooms, what’s already happening in schools, districts, and BCOs, and here at the central level. A system this size should be able to have its own story, its own guidebook. I would love for us to create the story of a New York City public school. A successful New York City public school. I would love for us to tell stories that lean into and demonstrate our successes.

**LEAD:** What are your top three priorities for reopening this fall?

**Chancellor Porter:** Number one is that very first day. That the theme of #Homecoming is a real-time physical manifestation for students. Number two is that our leaders from BCOs, Districts, and school buildings feel supported and wrapped around by the central office. I said this to Principals and CSA that we are not going to leave leaders alone. That we [central leadership] are going to wrap ourselves around them and I’ve gotten a bunch of emails from Principals saying “thank you!” The last priority is around reopening and that we continue to lean into what we have learned through the pandemic. This includes health and safety protocols so that we continue keeping our buildings safe and our communities healthy, and continue leveraging technology in new and exciting ways in our classrooms.

**LEAD:** What is your go-to leadership tip?

**Chancellor Porter:** It has always been connecting and staying connected and I aim to do the same as a Chancellor. When I was a principal I stood at the doorway, every day to greet and see everyone, teachers, students, everyone. It was an intentional act, so that I could see what was happening with people as they entered the building. When we talk about Social Emotional Learning (SEL) we are talking about connection, connecting, as well as seeing and hearing people.

**LEAD:** Please share your motivational or inspirational message for leaders as we prepare for fall re-opening.

**Chancellor Porter:** The mandate from the Chancellor’s office is to experience joy and leading and learning.
Leadership in Focus

#Homecoming2021 Calls for excitement, empathy, energy and courage. Guest writer Lawrence Pendergast of the Chief Academic Office shares inspirations, considerations and thoughts on the path forward.

On September 13, we will reopen our New York City schools with in-person learning opportunities for all our students. This is an exciting and important moment for all of the members of our school communities, and an equally exciting and challenging time to be a leader in New York City schools.

A superintendent friend of mine has a saying: "Everyone thinks they want to be a leader, until it becomes time to make and own tough decisions." There are lots of reasons some leadership decisions are tougher than others: some because they involve limited options, others because the path forward is unclear, and still others because they demand courage in the face of uncertainty. With full reopening of our schools, our path forward is clear, but it is far from easy.

For nearly two years the world has struggled with the CoViD-19 pandemic; while its ramifications will echo for decades to come, the impact on our students is already plainly visible. Research from around the world clearly shows that remote learning has proven to be far less effective than in-person learning when it comes to supporting the social-emotional and academic development of our children. This is why the CDC [https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/k-12-guidance.html] and the New York State Education Department [http://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/back-school/nysed-health-and-safety-guide-for-the-2021-2022-school-year.pdf] have urged districts to prioritize in-person learning for all students.

Leadership also demands a commitment to the health and safety of all the members of our school communities. This is why we are requiring all students and staff to wear masks in school, why we are once again investing in ventilation, air filtration and regular cleaning, ensuring distancing wherever possible, and urging everyone to get vaccinated, which the CDC describes as the most important strategy for ending the pandemic.

The reopening of our schools requires leadership that welcomes our students and families with empathy, energy, and enthusiasm. Our students deserve the opportunity to return safely to school, and our leaders are making sure they have that opportunity at this momentous time in our city’s history.
Wide Lens: An Expanded View of Leadership

LEAD had the opportunity to sit down with Kaya Henderson, Chief Executive Officer of Reconstruction and former Chancellor of the District of Columbia public schools to learn about her perspectives on leadership capacity building and culturally responsive leadership.

LEAD: Please share how you define culturally responsive leadership for social justice.

Kaya Henderson: Culturally responsive leadership for social justice means leaning into your history, culture and traditions, to inform your leadership style and your leadership philosophy. It is drawing on the positive values and characteristics of your community and bringing them to bear on important problems that need to be solved, for your community. Leadership is about unleashing the potential in others. Leadership for social justice is unleashing that potential to solve problems of equity and inclusion.

LEAD: Can you describe a leadership practice that you have witnessed, learned, or developed that serves to advance capacity building in leadership practice in others?

KH: The practices that I have witnessed, learned, and developed are around collective leadership. For me, collective leadership means co-creating solutions and strategies with the people who are closest to the problem. I also emphasize and mean co-creation. I don’t say partnership, because I don’t mean partnership, I mean co-creation. This is something I would say often during my time in DC public schools and to my staff because sometimes they were the hardest people to convince. I would say ‘we are not the smartest people in the room. We don’t have all the answers. We have data, but we have some data’. The community also has solutions and strategies, and data and it might not be in a PowerPoint deck or an excel spreadsheet, and the Community has leaders; and so we’re going to take our expertise and combine it with their expertise and we’re going to get to something way better than either of us could get to on our own. Some people call this participatory decision making for participatory philanthropy. What I know for sure is that a smart bunch of people in offices cannot solve the problems and community members alone cannot solve the problems. Both need power, access, voice, agency, creativity, and traditions. We need all of these things, working together to make better decisions and achieve stronger solutions. This helps change become sustainable, because the community will hold folks accountable, no matter who the leader is.

LEAD: What are some key practices that all leaders, from central level and districts, to school houses can incorporate to ensure that their leaders soar?

KH: The first thing that great leaders do is pick amazing people. Many times, people who are smarter than they are and they are not afraid of that capacity. They attract amazing folks and set clear expectations. Next, great leaders ask the team, “what do you need to be successful?” I used to sit with all of my principals at the beginning of every year, every single principal and we’d look at what happened last year, what their goals were for this year and what tools, resources, and support they needed to be successful. That was really important and coupled with that, leaders are thought partners with their team. They push, challenge and listen. When your team knows what you’re trying to do and what success looks like because the expectations are clear and they feel that they
can come to you and then people take off right. And through that, you enable creativity, new ideas, and innovation to happen.

LEAD: Please complete this prompt: To truly build leadership capacity for the good of children and community leaders should or must...

KH: Leaders have to involve the community. Community has to be part of the chain. Transformation doesn’t just happen from above. The community has to be deeply and significantly involved in creating the change that you all are trying to realize. Complex problems don’t always get solved simply. It takes complex solutions and multiple perspectives.

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**LEADers on the Move**

The Office of Leadership, Empowerment, and Development (LEAD) is taking a moment to celebrate and offer congratulations to our talented leaders on the move. We offer and extend congratulations and salute to former District 5 Superintendent Dr. Danika Rux who will serve Manhattan as the Acting Manhattan Executive Superintendent. We would like to congratulate Robin Davson who is now serving as Acting Superintendent of District 5. Davson was also a member of the Division of the First Deputy Chancellor Equity and Excellence EdPacesetters, cohort I.

Please join us in sharing celebratory greetings to our leaders!

Dr. Danika Rux  
Robin Davson
Leadership in Action!
Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is a “Way of Being” at Urban Assembly Media High School
by Jacky Grossman

“This work has truly changed not only the climate and culture of our school, it has paid dividends over and over in terms of academic progress, improvement of teaching and learning, and increasing teacher and student efficacy,” shares Principal Delia Veve (pictured right). In the beginning, UAMedia utilized the Resilient Scholars’ Curriculum developed by Urban Assembly, and began to implement it in their advisory periods. This helped faculty and students alike begin to normalize the habits of mind, protocols, skills and strategies needed to develop strong relationships, increase trust, foster student agency and link all of these ultimately to academic achievement. Teachers began incorporating the SEL Competencies into their academic classes, and students began speaking the language of SEL in all of their classrooms.

Expounding further Principal Veve shared “Because we saw the impact of this work in advisory, we started to ask ourselves ‘how do we create spaces in our classrooms where students are more willing to share, and where divergent thinking is not only encouraged but celebrated? We started to realize that SEL was about much more than just behavior. It was about really using these tools to change the way classrooms function for both students and teachers. The staff unpacked the competencies and discovered ways they were applicable to teaching and learning. As a result, in addition to plummeting suspensions and a noted increase in trust throughout the school, classrooms are now alive with the sounds of student engagement, rich discussion, and the honoring of students’ lived experiences. “People often think of these as ‘soft skills.’ They are not soft skills – they are critical skills” Veve concluded.

This approach proved to be especially helpful over the last 19 months. Student engagement during remote learning was much higher than anticipated, because students’ voices were honored and centered. “The hybrid environment reinforced for us what we already knew: the data around student learning was just as individual in remote times as it is in person. But because we created shared routines as a school while engaged in remote learning, we actually were able to address student needs that existed before the pandemic as well.

Principal Veve has been thinking a lot about #Homecoming2021. “Our juniors were only halfway through their freshman year when we went remote, and many of our sophomores have never set foot in our building. Our plan is essentially to “double down” on all the approaches we know have been successful and even to incorporate some of our best practices from remote learning into our in-person setting. For example, beginning each day with check-ins for every student, and using tools like Peardeck to help with checks for understanding and in-the-moment feedback for students. No one wants to go back to old ways of collecting student data. If SEL is not tethered to things that need to happen in classrooms to improve learning for students, then it’s really just about behavior and control. Our learners know now that their voice and their thinking is not only welcomed in their classrooms but celebrated. They are their own best advocates. We really look forward to using all of our SEL work to make the return to in-person learning as meaningful as possible for all of our students and can’t wait to see them in September.”

Jacqueline Grossman is a Borough Leadership Director and LEAP faculty member for the Leadership, Empowerment, and Development (LEAD) Office.
What We’re Reading (and Listening to)

Centered Leadership Creates Connection in Turbulent Times
by By Joanna Barsh and Diane Brady

In this episode of The McKinsey Podcast, Joanna Barsh speaks with Diane Brady about the lessons of centered leadership amid the pandemic. An edited transcript of their conversation follows. Click to listen or read the transcript here.

Why Inclusive Leaders are Good for Organizations, and How to Become One
by Juliet Bourke and Andrea Titus

Inclusiveness isn’t just nice to have on teams. Our research shows that it directly enhances performance. Teams with inclusive leaders are 17% more likely to report that they are high performing, 20% more likely to say they make high-quality decisions, and 29% more likely to report behaving collaboratively. What’s more, we found that a 10% improvement in perceptions of inclusion increases work attendance by almost 1 day a year per employee, reducing the cost of absenteeism. Learn more here.

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Office of Leadership, Professional Learning, and Continuous Improvement

Rahesha Amon, Senior Executive Director of The Office of Leadership, Professional Learning, and Continuous Improvement

Sean L. Davenport, Ed.D, Senior Executive Director, Leadership

Sharon Rencher, Senior Executive Director, Continuous Improvement

Una-Kariim A. Cross, LEAD Communications Director, Editor