New TCCS Principal: Building the School of Her Dreams

In leading the new Teachers College Community School, Jeanene Worrell-Breeden sees an opportunity to “make a qualitative difference.”

Last year, when Jeanene Worrell-Breeden arrived as the principal assigned to PS 30 in the South Bronx, she sent around a survey asking faculty and staff to identify their strengths and needs.

“I believe in distributive leadership – I want everyone to have a voice in building their school community,” says Worrell-Breeden, who begins this fall as Founding Principal of the new pre-K—8 Teachers College Community School. “But the team members at PS 30 were never a part of a collaborative effort like that, and they didn’t know what to make of it. At first, their attitude was, ‘There’s nothing I need to improve.’ Or, ‘Everything’s just fine, thank you.’”

Some new leaders might have been rattled, but Worrell-Breeden, a 20-year veteran of the New York City school system, was able draw on a lengthy track record of success.

“We conducted a year-long search for the ideal candidate to establish this unique school. Jeanene was the perfect choice,” says Nancy Streim, Associate Vice President for School and Community Partnerships. “She’s a strong leader, a great collaborator and has a creative vision of what a partnership with TC can bring to public education.”

During her first two years as assistant principal at PS 18 (the John Peter Zenger School, also in the South Bronx), an institution where nearly 90 percent of the students are eligible for free and reduced lunch, and 25 percent live in homeless shelters, the percentage of students at the school who met state standards in reading rose by 11 percent, and in math by 22 percent – gains for which the principal publicly accorded Worrell-Breeden much of the credit. She recruited high-quality teachers and procured
funds for extra teacher training, including a federal grant under the Comprehensive School Reform program of the U.S. Department of Education. The school began looping kindergarten teachers up to the first grade to ensure that children had the same teacher for two years, and it also recruited two standing substitute teachers to ensure better continuity when regular teachers were out sick.

“You have to build a culture of trust, win people over to your leadership style and get the school community to buy into your overall vision and goals,” says Worrell-Breeden, a Penn State graduate who worked as an assistant portfolio manager on Wall Street before switching careers to become a licensed K-12 reading specialist. “It’s not easy. It takes a long time before people feel sure enough of themselves and their ideas, and to be comfortable to put themselves out there. They have to genuinely believe they’re not going to be subjected to ridicule for mistakes made during the learning process or told, ‘No, we don’t do things that way.’”

At TCCS, a partnership between TC and the New York City Department of Education that was spearheaded by TC’s Office of School and Community Partnerships, Worrell-Breeden believes she’ll have the opportunity to start with such a culture in place.

“Rather than going into a school where I have to turn things around, this is a chance to build the school of my dreams,” she says. “We have the freedom to shape the curriculum, the scheduling, selection of staff, even the way we handle evaluations. Working with Teachers College, we’ll have an abundant pipeline of human capital -- teachers, educational psychologists, nutritionists, coaches and other people who are really qualified to connect with students. We’ll be able to draw on the expertise of the College to shape what we teach and how we teach it. Ultimately, we’ll be a demonstration site for best practices, and also a place where TC faculty and students can do cutting-edge research.”

As befits the leader of a self-proclaimed “community school,” Worrell-Breeden has made community relations a top priority. TCCS plans to offer adult education and health and mental health services and will ultimately provide other services to families and the surrounding community.

“We want to see what families want and need rather than simply announce that we’re going to offer, say, computer technology courses or ESL for parents,” she says.

To that end, both the school and TC’s Office of School and Community Partnerships continue to work closely with Community Board 9, which will have representation on TCCS’ soon-to-be chosen school leadership team. The school has also formed partnerships with community-based organizations such as Turnaround for Children.

“The community has been very accepting of me. I’ve been a Harlem resident for the last 17 years, I’m a product of the New York City public school system, and I believe I understand their needs and concerns,” Worrell-Breeden says.

“I come from a family of educators -- the women in my family either went into nursing, or, if you couldn’t stand the sight of blood, teaching,” she adds with a laugh. “I swore I was going to do something else, but here I am, come full circle, and I’m very excited about the opportunity to work closely with kids again in a small setting. That’s what I love to do.”

Read about Principal Worrell-Breeden's team at TCCS.