



Summer Principals Academy

Teachers College, Columbia University

June, 2024

Dear SPA Students, Alumni, and Friends,

This past month, at the historic United Palace Theatre, we celebrated the New Orleans and New York Summer Principals Academy (SPA) Cohort Class of 2022 at the Teachers College Convocation! The festivities started at the SPA reception held in Everett Lounge where graduates mingled about their current work and future plans. We are excited as some of them are moving directly into administrative positions and putting their SPA knowledge into practice! During the month of May we also visited, interviewed, and celebrated the achievements of our Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) educators. We are excited to share their educational journey stories and the amazing changes they are making among their communities in this month's newsletter! Happy Reading!

Best,

Dr. Colette Young (SPA Cohort 2021)

Assistant Director, Summer Principals Academy | New York

Upcoming Events



IN JUNE



2024

**THU
13**

SPA INFO SESSION

4:00 PM EST

Virtual

**WED
26**

TOUR OF TC CAMPUS

LEARN WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE A STUDENT AND SEE THE CAMPUS!



4:00 PM EST

Teachers College, 525 W 120th St, New York, NY 10027

**FRI
28**

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT LEADERSHIP AND DECISION-MAKING

10:00 AM EST

Virtual

**CLICK HERE TO
REGISTER ON EVENBRITE!**



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Assistant Director | NYC
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212-870-8605

To request disability-related accommodations, contact OASID at oasid@tc.edu, or 212-678-3689, (646) 755-3144 video phone, as soon as possible.

Congratulations SPA COHORT 2022!

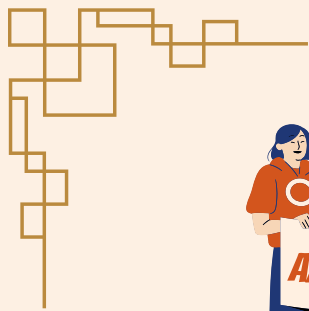


Congrats
— SPA Cohort —
2022



SPA STUDENT & ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

In this edition of our newsletter, we had the privilege of interviewing several Asian American/Pacific Islander (AAPI) leaders and educators from Summer Principals Academy (SPA) to gain insight into how their heritage and culture have shaped their experiences in the field of education. Through their stories, we explore the crucial role of raising awareness about AAPI issues and the importance of including these voices in broader conversations. Their perspectives highlight the rich diversity within our educational community and underscore the need for greater representation and understanding. These articles highlight these educator's experiences, and discuss the work they have done to be great leaders!



SUMMER PRINCIPALS ACADEMY AAPI LEADERS

BY: CLAUDIA MENDEZ
EDITED BY: JUNG-YEUN KIM

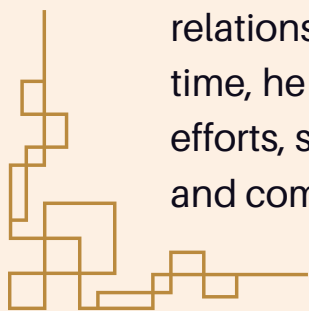
“As a former high school global history teacher— I weaved in my Korean-American identity and experiences whenever appropriate to connect with students and expanded their understanding of life and the world— I fully shared myself without shame and embraced my students with genuine love and adoration.”



Hoek Choi

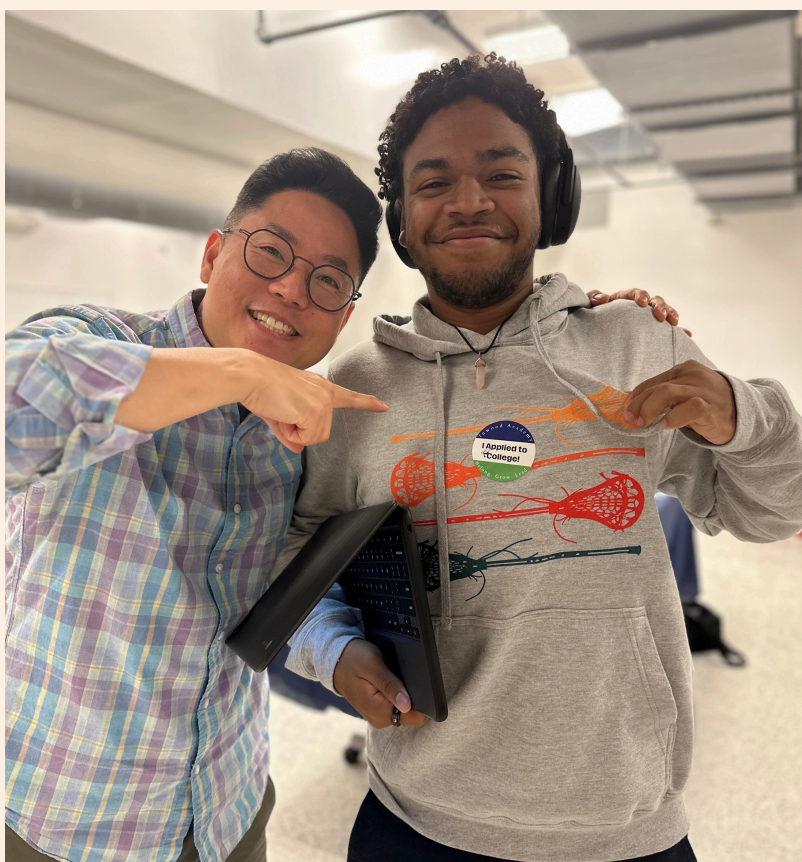
Mr. Hoek Choi’s journey as an educator in New York City (NYC) was not easy by any means, but through all the challenges, he found a love for teaching and being there for his students. Hoek is currently the principal of Inwood Academy for Leadership Charter School. Inspired by Teach For America’s mission and vision, he was driven by a deep desire to ensure that all children, regardless of their background, received the love and opportunities necessary for a hopeful future. During his senior year of college, he was drawn to the teaching profession, resonating with the goal of uplifting the most marginalized communities. Hoek’s journey began in the Hunts Point neighborhood of the South Bronx, where the initial challenges of teaching were immense. However, these challenges were met with determination and support from experienced colleagues, which allowed him to hone his teaching skills and develop strong relationships with students and families. Over time, he witnessed the tangible impact of his efforts, solidifying his passion for education and commitment to making a difference.

This experience underscored his dedication to aligning his professional endeavors with his Christian faith and personal values, emphasizing the importance of love, hope, and equality in education. As an Asian American educator, Hoek has discussed some challenges he has faced over the course of his career so far. He has noticed that in the conversations surrounding DEI, Asian Americans are almost always left out. Hoek also shared that, “As an Asian male educator and leader, it has taken a lot of personal reflection, heartache and resilience to endure ignorance, push through racism and bigotry, and learn to stand confidently in my identity so I can be at my best for the sake of my students, staff, and families I continue to serve every day.” It is important to raise awareness surrounding this issue, and initiatives such as AAPI Heritage Month is one that can amplify the voices of Asian Americans. However, despite these challenges, Hoek has been able to be proud and speak out against the barriers that Asian American educators often face.



This is shown through Hoek's experiences, such as having sat on various educational leadership panels throughout the years and having spoken directly about his experience as an Asian American educator to encourage and inspire others, as well as also being a part of New Visions BIPOC Educators Network. Hoek brings a unique set of cultural perspectives to his role, enriching the educational experience for his students in profound ways. Drawing upon his Korean-American heritage, he strives to provide students with "mirrors" and "windows" into different cultures, fostering a deep understanding and appreciation for diversity.

This approach involves integrating his cultural background into the curriculum and everyday interactions, with some examples he cited as being through teaching entire lessons in Korean, sharing personal stories like his grandparents' love story during the Korean War, or engaging students in cultural exchanges such as visiting Korean restaurants and exploring K-pop and K-dramas.



Hoek also discussed how he also learned about his students' cultural background as well, such as learning how to dance Bachata, and even learning Dominican slang. These efforts not only broaden students' horizons, but also create a genuine connection, making learning more relatable and engaging. As a school principal, he continues to embrace and celebrate diversity, navigating cultural differences by being authentic and committed to student success.

His journey illustrates the vital role that diverse educators play in fostering inclusive and supportive learning environments, where students from all backgrounds can thrive and feel valued. Through Hoek's experiences as a teacher, he has been able to see the impact that fostering a connection with one's students has on their success and their love for learning!





Viola Liu-Johnson

Ms. Viola Liu-Johnson is currently a science teacher at her Teach for America (TFA) placement school in New Haven, Connecticut. She teaches science to a population of multilingual learners, and is certified in chemistry, biology, Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), and music. In regards to the unique cultural perspectives that Viola brings to her role as an educator, she highlights that as both an Asian-American educator, as well as a trans educator, she is able to see things from different perspectives. Growing up in an Asian-American household, and having been born and raised in the United States, she has been able to navigate her Asian upbringing while also having to deal with western expectations.



"For any Asian educator, think about what brought you here to this space and think about what is your purpose in education and realize that while there are discussions about opportunities for People of Color, this is also an opportunity for Asian people to be a part of those discussions and to not be afraid to be a part of these discussions."

Not only this, but as a trans woman and educator, she has also had to navigate understanding societal expectations of gender. Through these experiences, Viola has been able to implement her knowledge and unique life experiences in her role as an educator and see that there is no one-side to the story, but that there are always different perspectives and how important it is to listen to every side.

Teaching has always been something that she was passionate about, with one of her earliest memories of wanting to become a band teacher. However, despite her love for education, she was encouraged to follow a different path.

Initially, Ms. Liu-Johnson found herself pursuing a career in the medical field, applying to medical schools; however, she realized that she did not want to let go of her dream of becoming a teacher. She ultimately transitioned away from that pursuit and instead applied to the Teach For America (TFA) Program, a pathway to train and support individuals in the teaching profession. To her delight, she was accepted into TFA in 2019 and from there, her teaching journey began. As an educator, Viola has been able to work with multilingual learners, a vast majority of them being recent immigrants and refugees.

Through her work as a TESOL educator, Viola has implemented strategies to ensure accessible education across language barriers, greatly enhancing her students' learning experiences.

Viola is also a former member of the Leadership Academy. During this fellowship, she and the other facilitators noted that she was the only Asian educator present. This realization prompted a moment of reflection not only for Viola but for other educators as well. Viola highlighted the importance of addressing the experiences of many Asian-Americans, such as the Model Minority Myth, and emphasized the need for Asian educators to speak out and challenge these pervasive assumptions.

Viola shared, "Never be afraid to be the only one speaking for Asians, because, when it comes to education, that often is just how it is." She underscored the significance of AAPI Heritage Month in amplifying voices and creating spaces to discuss AAPI representation in education. These initiatives are crucial for broadening perspectives, raising awareness, and providing Asian-Americans access to opportunities that can help integrate them into the broader conversation.

Viola's story is truly inspiring in her relentless pursuit of her passions. Her unique perspective and experiences as an Asian-American and trans educator not only inspire her students, but also enhance her teaching. She seamlessly blends her background with innovative teaching methods, fostering a more inclusive and enriching learning environment.



Melanie Lee

Ms. Melanie Lee is currently the Deputy Superintendent for New York City Public School (NYCPS) CUNY/Urban Assembly District, which houses 43 secondary schools! Teaching language and leading has always been a passion of Melanie's, and her extensive experience proves that! Melanie began her career as a Fulbright Fellow, teaching English in Taiwan. This experience sparked her journey as an educator, leading her to become an English as a Second Language (ESL) and Social Studies teacher in schools across the Bronx, the Lower East Side, and Chinatown. In 2013, she founded Queens High School for Language Studies and served as its principal for nine years. Despite not majoring in Education, and also pursuing a career in the Legal field, Melanie was always active and involved in the education sector and knew that deep down, this is what she wanted to do. Melanie cites her drive to become a teacher and make an impact as a result of reading Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* as a student.

Something that Melanie discusses that is important in regards to not only being an Asian educator, but also an educator that is a Person of Color (POC),

is being able to think about identity, cultural relevance, and cultural responsiveness as a teacher and how to connect with students, despite being from different backgrounds. She highlights the importance of understanding that being Asian does not mean one specific cultural background, but that it encompasses so many different countries and cultures, and truly how important it is to not to see it as a “monolithic” identity. For Melanie, it is important to understand that there are two sides when celebrating diversity, and it’s important to find a balance between representing your community, but also not tokenizing an educator that may be the only one from that community within their school. Being culturally responsive as an educator goes way beyond representation in the classroom. Although representation is extremely important, ultimately, being able to create spaces for your students to thrive and feel seen and heard is equally as important.

“As an educator, you should be thinking about how you can ensure that you’re making space for your students’ voices—and how do you make space for students to make connections with what they’re learning and share their experiences.”

Through her own experience as an English as a New Language (ENL) learner, Ms. Lee emphasizes the importance of students sharing their cultural experiences as a way to enhance their language learning. Drawing from her own life growing up with parents who immigrated from Taiwan, Ms. Lee understands the challenges faced not only by students but also by their parents.

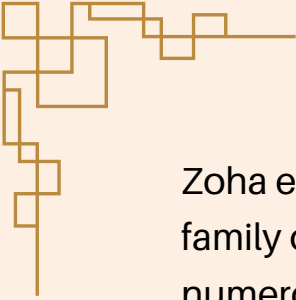
At Queens High School for Language Studies, she prioritized involving parents in their children's education and partnering with them to create a supportive environment for students who need academic assistance.

The impact that Ms. Lee has had in the field of education is truly inspiring. Her unique perspective as both an educator and former ENL student has enabled her to empathize deeply with the experiences of her students and their families. We wish her the best of luck and congratulations on her new position as Deputy Superintendent, where she will undoubtedly continue to make a significant difference in the lives of many.



Zoha Nadeem

Ms. Zoha Nadeem is the school counselor at Croton-Harmon High School in Westchester County, where she dedicates herself to helping children and adolescents overcome various challenges. Despite facing numerous obstacles throughout her life, Zoha has relentlessly pursued her mission to leave a lasting impact on society.

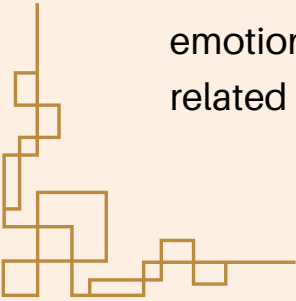


Zoha emigrated from Pakistan with her family over 20 years ago and faced numerous challenges growing up in the United States as an immigrant. It wasn't until 2020 that she received her United States passport. Throughout her life, she endured being labeled an “alien” and encountered racist remarks and judgment. Despite these barriers, Zoha's resilience allowed her to overcome them and become an inspiring figure in the educational system.

Initially, as an undergraduate student, Zoha believed that to make a difference, she needed to work within the criminal justice system. She spent years studying criminal justice, learning about concepts such as the school-to-prison pipeline and the barriers disadvantaged students face within the educational system. This realization led her to conclude that making an impact required proactive efforts early in children's lives. In her words, “it needs to be proactive, not reactive.” Consequently, Zoha decided to pursue a master's degree in Behavioral Sciences, which paved the way for her current position as a school counselor.

“There were so many barriers that could have told me not to pursue my goals, and to just settle— but, I think that if I can explain and lay out a roadmap for kids who look like me, they can do anything they want in life.”

As a school counselor, Zoha supports students in various ways, addressing their emotional, academic, and even home-related needs.

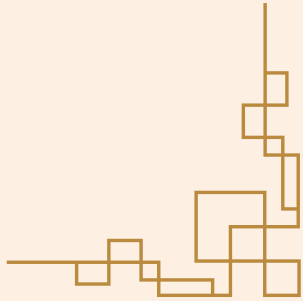


She emphasizes cultural responsiveness and integrates DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) principles in her work with students.

Her culture, as a Muslim Pakistani woman, plays a crucial role in how she advocates for other Muslim students. By proudly wearing hijabs and displaying henna on her hands, Zoha encourages her students to feel proud of their backgrounds. She aims to be an ally and advocate for students facing similar obstacles, offering them someone they can trust and rely on.

Within Zoha's school, she has initiated and participated in several incredible initiatives that raise awareness and provide a space for Muslim students to express their religious beliefs freely. One example is a reading project/book series in collaboration with a nearby elementary school to raise awareness about Ramadan. Additionally, she has organized other reading series that celebrate AAPI Heritage Month. Zoha also serves as the club advisor for the Students Together Against Racism club at her school. Her participation in the Strategic Planning Committee allowed her to share her own experiences and highlight the struggles her parents faced, addressing issues that the county may be missing when it comes to disadvantaged students.

“I hope that we as a society can start to normalize different things and Asian American things in particular, and just reduce the stigma when it comes to Asian American populations—



My hope and my aspirations are that we as a community and we as a country can educate ourselves and be more mindful that everybody deserves a seat at the table.”

Zoha’s remarkable journey proves that anything is possible with determination and resilience, serving as an inspiring testament to others who may have experienced similar obstacles in their lives. She consistently shares her culture throughout her role as a leader, showing that it’s important to be authentically oneself, no matter what others might say.

Zoha's dedication to her students ignites hope and motivation in those who see themselves reflected in her struggles and triumphs. Through her work, she continues to make a significant difference in the lives of many students.



Erika Sun


Erika Sun is the current Assistant Principal of Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School. However, her path to becoming an educator in the United States was anything but conventional.

As an Asian-American, she navigated a journey filled with cultural expectations, personal discovery, and a deep-seated passion for making a difference.

Born to immigrant parents who had overcome significant challenges in post-Communist China, Erika grew up under immense pressure to excel academically. Like many Asian children, she initially wanted to become a physician, a dream that was partially inspired by her older sister, who was deeply passionate about the medical field. Erika’s fascination with medicine was evident even in her childhood. She recalls creating human shapes from playground bark and pretending to perform surgery. This unique blend of creativity and curiosity drove her to excel academically. She took an impressive 12 Advanced Placement (AP) classes and completed the full International Baccalaureate (IB) program, achieving top scores across the board. Her efforts paid off when she was accepted into several Ivy League universities and prestigious BS/MD programs, eventually choosing Northwestern University's Honors Program in Medical Education (HPME). Despite her academic success, Erika’s journey through college and medical school was fraught with challenges.

“When you work in service oriented professions— be that education or medicine— at the end of the day, who suffers? It’s the students or the patients who have no say in really what's happening to them.”

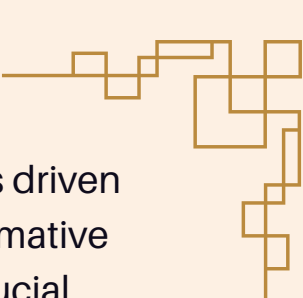
After completing her undergraduate degree in just three years, Erika began to question whether medicine was truly her calling. Influenced by her sister's advice to explore the world beyond academics,



Erika decided to take a gap year and interned with Deloitte Consulting . During that time, she felt a bit of guilt about abandoning her dream of helping others. Seeking a way to give back, Erika applied to Teach For America (TFA) and the New York City Teaching Fellows program, ultimately choosing the latter because it offered a paid master's degree.

For a summer placement, Erika was placed at East Bronx Academy for the Future, where her eyes were opened to the harsh realities of education in underfunded schools. Erika witnessed firsthand the systemic issues plaguing urban schools, from dysfunctional facilities to a lack of qualified teachers. Her first teaching assignment was at Clinton School, where she encountered a deeply flawed educational environment. Erika's initial shock at the chaotic classrooms and apathetic colleagues only strengthened her resolve to make a difference. Despite her lack of experience and formal training, she was determined to provide her students with the education they deserved.

Over time, Erika became a crucial part of the effort to turn Clinton School around. She and a group of dedicated staff members worked tirelessly to improve graduation rates and transform the school's culture. Although the process was long and challenging, their efforts began to bear fruit. Erika's dedication to her students and her belief in the power of education kept her rooted in the field, even as she grappled with the ethical complexities and limited career advancement opportunities within the school.





Erika's commitment to education was driven by a fundamental belief in its transformative power. She viewed education as a crucial platform for ensuring that every child, regardless of their background, had a fighting chance to succeed. This conviction was deeply rooted in her own family's history and the understanding that education could break the cycle of poverty and provide opportunities that might otherwise be out of reach. When faced with the decision to return to medical school or continue teaching, Erika chose to stay in education. She realized that her impact in the classroom could be just as significant, if not more so, than in a medical practice. Her experiences in New York City schools had revealed the profound inequities in the education system and fueled her desire to be part of the solution.

Today, Erika is a passionate advocate for educational equity. She continues to work on innovative projects aimed at improving student outcomes and supporting teachers. Her journey, marked by resilience and a deep commitment to service, exemplifies the profound impact that one dedicated educator can have on countless lives. Through her work, Erika remains a beacon of hope and inspiration, proving that the path to making a difference is often found in the most unexpected places.

Note from the author

Listening to the stories of these incredible AAPI leaders in education was truly inspiring. Their journeys, marked by resilience, dedication, and an unwavering commitment to making a difference, underscore the profound impact that Asian American and Pacific Islander voices have in shaping the educational landscape.



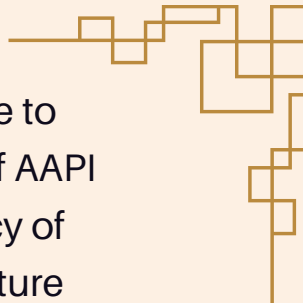



These leaders have navigated significant challenges, both personal and systemic, to advocate for and implement positive changes in their communities.

AAPJ Heritage Month is a crucial time to celebrate and amplify these voices. It provides an opportunity to acknowledge their contributions, reflect on their experiences, and recognize the unique perspectives they bring to the field of education. Including AAPJ voices in discussions about education is not only important for ensuring representation but also for enriching the dialogue with diverse viewpoints that can lead to more equitable and inclusive practices.

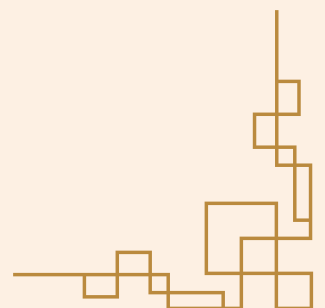
The stories of AAPJ educators remind us of the importance of diversity in fostering an educational system that truly serves all students. Their experiences highlight the need for continued efforts to support and uplift underrepresented voices in education. By celebrating and learning from these leaders during AAPJ Heritage Month and beyond, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and just educational environment for everyone.

In honoring the contributions of AAPJ leaders like Zoha Nadeem, Hoek Choi, Viola Liu-Johnson, Melanie Lee and Erika Sun, we not only recognize their individual achievements but also emphasize the collective power of diverse voices in education. Their dedication to cultural responsiveness and equity enriches our schools and communities, providing all students with role models who reflect the diverse world in which we live.



As we move forward, let us continue to elevate and learn from the stories of AAPJ educators, ensuring that their legacy of resilience and advocacy inspires future generations to create lasting positive change in education.

By celebrating and learning from these leaders during AAPJ Heritage Month and beyond, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and just educational environment for everyone. Their stories, filled with perseverance and hope, are a testament to the strength found in diversity and the profound impact that inclusive education can have on all students, regardless of their background.



JOB OPPORTUNITIES



Explore the latest job opportunities in education and leadership roles to advance your career.

[Educational leader to lead in school culture and discipline system Dayton, OH](#)

The Dean of Students is responsible for assisting with aspects of running a school with a specific focus on school culture. The Dean of Students supports the principal in the cultivation of a positive school climate, including but not limited to character development, positive behavior intervention systems, response to intervention, extracurricular activities, and restorative practices. The Dean of Students ensures the safety and welfare of both students and staff and fosters a positive learning environment. To learn more about the position, click the link [HERE](#)

Bronx STEM & Arts Academy (10X051)

Bronx, New York

- Special Education (Opening available now)
- Special Education (for 2024-2025 School Year)
- Physical Education (Opening available now)

For more information about these positions, please contact Bronx STEM & Arts Academy principal Min Hong, at MHong@schools.nyc.gov

Ethical Culture Fieldston School

Bronx, New York

- Middle School Science Teacher
- Schoolwide Assistant- Ethical Culture
- Science Teacher- Upper School
- P.E. Associate Teacher (one year position- Ethical Culture)
- Music Teacher- Ethical Culture
- Third Grade Science Teacher- Ethical Culture
- Associate Teacher- Ethical Culture
- Psychologist & Health Teacher- Middle/Upper

- Second Grade Head Teacher- Ethical Culture
- Associate Teacher- Fieldston Lower
- Substitute- Upper School
- Coach
- Substitute- Fieldston Lower
- Substitute- Ethical Culture
- Substitute- Middle School
- For more information about these positions, please click the link [HERE](#)

The Summer Principals Academy (SPA) at Teachers College, Columbia University is a transformative graduate program that is committed to promoting equity and excellence in education and overcoming the gap in educational access and achievement between the most and least advantaged groups in this country



tc.edu/SPA