



Summer Principals Academy

Teachers College, Columbia University

February, 2025

Dear SPA Students, Alumni, and Friends,

This past month, we had the pleasure of welcoming back our students for Callback Weekend! It was an exciting time as they met their new faculty for the upcoming summer and connected with their teams for the New School Design Culmination Project. This semester and into the summer, students will take on the challenge of designing a new school from the ground up—an opportunity to apply their leadership skills in a dynamic, hands-on way.

As we celebrate Black History Month, we are proud to honor the contributions of Black leaders in education by featuring the inspiring work of our current students and graduates who are making an impact in schools and communities. Check out the article in this newsletter to read more about their achievements!

Best,
The SPA Team

Upcoming SPA Events



IN FEBRUARY



2025

**THUS
13**

BOOK LAUNCH: COACHING EDUCATIONAL LEADERS

Nancy Gutiérrez, Adjunct Faculty for SPA and President and CEO of The Leadership Academy, will be joined by her co-authors to discuss how effective coaching can drive lasting change in schools and educational systems.

⌵ 6:00 PM EST
525 West 120th Street | New York, New York 10027
Russel Hall 306



**WED
19**

INSIDE SPA WITH DR. GALINDO

Dive into the dynamic world of conflict resolution with our Inside SPA Series, featuring ORLA 5340: Conflict Resolution. Participants will gain an engaging preview of this essential course, designed to build leadership skills.

⌵ 6:30 PM EST | Virtual



**THUS
20**

VIRTUAL PERSONAL STATEMENT WORKSHOP

Join us to learn more about the SPA Program and get started on your application! Staff will be present to assist with crafting the perfect personal statement!

⌵ 5:00 PM EST | Virtual



**SAT
22**

BRUNCH LEADERSHIP PANEL & RECEPTION

Join us for an engaging leadership panel featuring accomplished graduates of the SPA program. They will share their experiences navigating challenges and opportunities in today's educational landscape

⌵ 11:30 CST
41034 N. Wells Street | Chicago, Illinois 60610
School Library



**MON
24**

PERSONAL STATEMENT WORKSHOP

Join us to learn more about the SPA Program and get started on your application! Staff will be present to assist with crafting the perfect personal statement!

⌵ 5:00 PM EST
525 West 120th Street | New York, New York
Russel Hall 17



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

COME & JOIN US FOR

BOOK LAUNCH EVENT

*with SPA Adjunct Assistant
Professor and her associates*

● *Nancy Gutiérrez, Michelle
Jarney, and Michael Kim*

*for
Their New
Released
Title:*

*" Coaching
Education
Leaders "*

Thursday, February 13, 6:00pm

at Teachers College, Columbia University - Russell Hall 306
525 West 120th Street | New York, NY 10027

Dr. Colette Young
Assistant Director|NYC
spa@tc.columbia.edu
212-870-8605

SCAN ME



**COACHING
EDUCATION
LEADERS**



**A CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE APPROACH
TO TRANSFORMING SCHOOLS AND SYSTEMS**

Nancy B. Gutiérrez,
Michelle Jarney,
and Michael Kim

An Eye On Education Book

ROUTLEDGE

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



Professional Development

TC Academy

Teachers College, Columbia University

[Learn More >](#)



SCHOOL TURNAROUND PROGRAM

July 28 – August 1, 2025



WHO IS IT FOR?

STP is designed for K-12 state, district, school, and teacher leaders directly responsible for leading ambitious school turnaround initiatives.

WHAT IS THE STP?

The School Turnaround Program (STP)* is an innovative and comprehensive professional development program designed to equip education leaders with the tools, strategies, and insights needed to transform underperforming schools into thriving learning environments.



*This program does not lead to a degree or recommendation for leadership licensure in any state.

JOIN NOW!



+212-678-4142



Email: tcacademy@tc.columbia.edu

TO REQUEST DISABILITY-RELATED ACCOMMODATIONS, CONTACT OASID AT OASID@TC.EDU, OR (212) 678-3689, (646) 755-3144 VIDEO PHONE, AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE.

FEBRUARY 2025

BLACK HISTORY MONTH: STUDENT & ALUMNI SPOTLIGHTS

UPLIFTING EDUCATION: THE JOURNEY OF A BLACK EDUCATOR



WRITTEN BY: KIARA HAUGHTON
EDITED BY: SHELBY JARVIS

Black History Month offers an opportunity to celebrate diverse voices and stories within the community. This year, we spotlight the journeys of five dedicated Black educators whose work bridges education, mental health, and community engagement. Their stories reflect resilience, cultural pride, and a commitment to transformative change.

KERVENS THOMAS

From Finance to the Classroom

Kervens Thomas graduated with a double degree in Mathematics and Finance, uncertain of his career path. “I knew I enjoyed helping people learn math, so I decided to move to Oklahoma and start teaching math with an emergency license,” he shared. Initially, it was a one-year experiment, but it quickly became clear to him that students who looked like him were not receiving the education they deserved. “That realization didn’t sit well with me, and it became the driving force behind why I’m still educating today,” he explained.

Bridging Cultures in the Classroom

Born and raised in Haiti, Kervens early life taught him to embrace challenges and view himself as part of a larger world. He credits the strong community involvement and high standards in Haitian education for shaping his approach as an educator in the U.S. “I can’t predict what life will bring for my students, but I can make a difference in the type of education they receive,” he said. At Charlestown High School (CHS), where he now works, Kervens focuses on creating a supportive, high-expectations environment. “We ensure staff understand restorative practices and apply them to everything we do, so students feel valued and respected in every interaction,” he shared.

“I can’t predict what life will bring for my students, but I can make a difference in the type of education they receive”

Navigating Challenges and Embracing Identity

As a Black male school administrator, Kervens has faced challenges navigating spaces where few people look like him. “At times, this can feel isolating,” he admitted. However, with the support of mentors, professional networks, and his classmates from Teachers College, he remains focused on providing students with the education they deserve.



KERVENS THOMAS

Supporting Black Students

Kervens believes in holding Black students to high expectations while reflecting their educational identities. “At CHS, we use culturally relevant materials and create safe spaces for students to discuss their challenges and dreams,” he said. “Teaching the whole student with belief, representation, and accountability is key to their success.” He is also involved in initiatives like Becoming A Man (BAM), a program that provides school-based group counseling and mentoring services to young men of color. Thomas recognized the importance of inclusivity and extended the initiative to create a cohort for Spanish-speaking students.

Staying Connected to Cultural Heritage

Working in Boston, Kervens draws strength from the city’s large Haitian community. “You’ll often find me sharing stories or food with colleagues and students,” he shared. “Growing up in Haiti made me resilient, and I carry that resilience in everything I do.” Outside school, he participates in cultural events to ensure his child understands and values their traditions.

Advice for Fellow Black Educators

Kervens encourages Black educators to build strong networks of like-minded individuals. “These don’t have to be people you work with or even live in the same state, but having that support system is key,” he advised. “Always advocate for yourself and your students, and know your ‘why.’”



For Kervens, his “why” is ensuring Black and Brown students receive the education they deserve without losing their identities. “We have a unique opportunity to shape the narrative for future generations,” he said.

Looking Ahead

Kervens hopes for a future where Black educators feel fully supported and can reach their full potential without sacrificing their identities. “I aspire to see more Black individuals in leadership roles, shaping policies and practices that reflect the diversity of our students,” he said. At Charlestown High School, Black History Month is celebrated daily. However, It Also offers a chance to engage in deeper discussions that challenge stereotypes, amplify diverse voices, and inspire pride. Thomas’s story reminds us of the power of representation and advocacy in transforming education for future generations.

STARR BUTLER

Empowering Students Through Representation: Starr Butler's Journey as an Educator

For Starr Butler, the path to becoming an educator was anything but linear. Initially dreaming of becoming a chef, Starr realized that cooking wasn't her true calling. After earning a degree in nutrition and finding it unsatisfying, she had a pivotal conversation with her parents. Encouraged by her mother's unwavering belief in her potential, Starr pivoted to education, enrolling at Lehman College. It wasn't long before she discovered her passion while teaching history, where her animated style and deep engagement captivated students. Her commitment to education became undeniable, particularly during her tenure at a Bronx school, where her students' test scores improved by 20%, and many were inspired to become activists. Today, Starr is a dedicated educator and a co-author of **Black Studies as the Study of the World: A PK-12 Black Studies Curriculum for New York City Public Schools**, a groundbreaking curriculum aimed at bringing Black voices and perspectives into the classroom.

A Culturally Responsive Approach to Teaching

Starr credits her teaching philosophy to Gloria Ladson-Billings' culturally responsive framework. This approach has been her compass throughout her nine-year career.

As a humanities teacher, Starr views her role as an opportunity to expose students to diverse perspectives, supplementing Eurocentric curricula with stories and philosophies from African and Indigenous communities. For Starr, culturally responsive teaching goes beyond textbooks—it's about understanding the needs of her students and creating spaces where they feel seen and valued. In Starr's classroom, students don't just learn history; they connect with it. When teaching slavery, for example, she starts with Africa, discussing its rich histories and empires before addressing the transatlantic slave trade. This approach challenges stereotypes and helps students develop a sense of pride in their heritage. "My goal is to empower students, not leave them feeling ashamed," she explains.



STARR BUTLER

Navigating Challenges as a Black Educator

Starr’s commitment to teaching often places her at odds with people unfamiliar with culturally responsive practices. She recalls instances when the validity of her materials is questioned and that she’s “learned to use primary source documents as my shield.” These documents are irrefutable evidence, allowing her to navigate pushback and stay true to her educational philosophy. Despite these challenges, Starr remains steadfast. “As Black educators, we often go the extra mile because we see our students as family—as our siblings, cousins, or even our younger selves,” she shares. This deep connection fuels her dedication to providing students with an education that uplifts and empowers them.

Building Pride and Empowering Students

For Starr, one of the most effective ways to support Black students is by debunking myths and exposing them to history beyond slavery. She uses diverse resources, like the book **The Delectable Negro**, to spark critical discussions and encourage students to see themselves in a broader historical context. “When students learn about African kingdoms like the Ashanti or the kingdom of Benin, they walk away with pride,” she notes. Starr emphasizes the importance of going beyond the prescribed curriculum to create challenging and empowering lessons.

Advocating for Black Voices in Education

Starr’s work extends beyond her classroom. As a co-author of the Black Studies Curriculum for New York City Public Schools, she’s helping to reshape how history is taught. She shares her insights and resources through her Instagram account, @the_conscious_pedagogue, and on platforms like Teachers Pay Teachers. These initiatives allow Starr to amplify her impact, providing tools for educators seeking to make their classrooms more inclusive and representative.

Looking Ahead: Starr’s Vision for Black Education

Starr envisions a future where Black educators are fully supported and celebrated. She hopes to see more initiatives that recruit Black teachers and create spaces for them to thrive. “Representation matters, not just for students but for the educators who inspire them,” she says. She also emphasizes the importance of inclusive curricula that reflect the diversity of students’ experiences. “Every story deserves to be told,” she asserts. As Black History Month prompts deeper conversations about representation, Starr highlights the importance of year-round initiatives. “It’s not enough to celebrate for 28 days. We need to amplify Black voices and contributions daily,” she insists. Through her work, Starr ensures that the legacy of Black history—and its power to inspire and transform—is carried forward into the future.

ABBY BRAITHWAITE

From Counseling to the Classroom

Before entering the classroom, Abby Braithwaite spent years counseling in a juvenile detention center. Witnessing the systemic barriers that often led young people into the justice system, she realized the importance of early intervention.

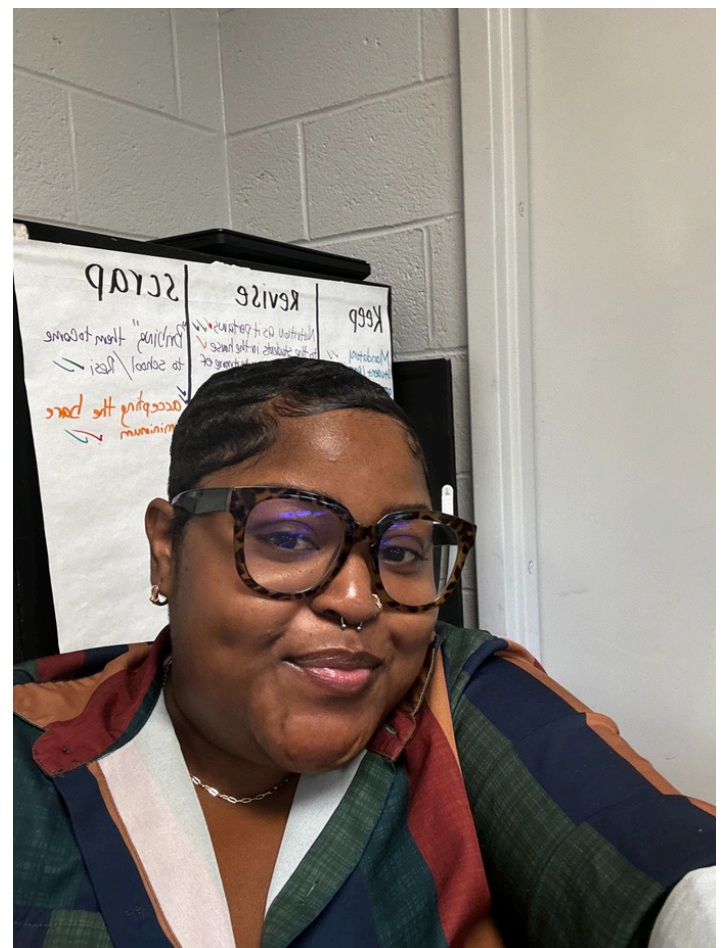
“If I wanted to create change for students and help prevent the barriers that often lead to the detention center cycle, I needed to intervene earlier—within the schools,” she shared.

Joining Maya Angelou Schools, an organization focused on justice-involved youth, provided her a platform to make a meaningful impact. “Educating students who look like me fuels my drive to ensure they understand the importance of education, especially since so many systems—educational and judicial—are often stacked against them,” she explained.

Bridging Cultures in the Classroom

As a Caribbean American, she incorporates her heritage into her teaching, exposing students to the richness of diverse cultures. “Sharing what my home looks like outside their immediate bubble enhances their development,” she said. From introducing cultural traditions to exploring global perspectives, she encourages students to dream beyond their surroundings. Her background in psychology also informs her approach.

By integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) techniques, she fosters meaningful connections between students and their studies. For instance, while teaching *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers, she initiated an SEL journaling activity that opened conversations about community, violence, and stereotypes. These discussions turned the content into a personal and transformative experience for her students.



ABBY BRAITHWAITE

Navigating Challenges and Embracing Identity

Working as a young Black woman in education brings unique challenges. She emphasized the emotional toll of navigating a system where education often comes with a ‘color tag.’ Despite this, she remains committed to pushing boundaries and redefining norms.

“My goal is for Black educators to be seen as primary, essential contributors to the field of education rather than being identified solely by their racial identity,” she said. Her dedication extends to advocating for equitable opportunities for Black students, recognizing their individuality, and ensuring their needs are met without falling into stereotypes.

Empowering Students Through Representation

Her involvement in initiatives like the Minority Scholars Program reflects her passion for advocacy. This program addresses disparities in predominantly non-Black spaces and empowers Black students to find their voices. “It’s inspiring to see how this program continues to create pathways for change,” she remarked.

She also draws strength from her roots in Guyana, where education is viewed as a privilege. “Back home, students respect their education and its potential. I want my students here to find that same respect and purpose in learning,” she shared.

“I aspire Black education to hold weight that isn’t always rooted in disparities or sorrow”

Looking Ahead

When asked about her aspirations for the future of Black education, she envisions a system rich in culture and empowerment. “I aspire for Black education to hold a weight that isn’t always rooted in disparities or sorrow. Instead, it should celebrate our history, leaders, and boundless potential,” she said.

Her advice to other Black educators? “Find your group. Connection sharpens motivation and fuels purpose. Education doesn’t stop in the classroom—it’s about finding those students who resonate with your story and fighting for them.”

This Black History Month, her story reminds us of the transformative power of representation, advocacy, and cultural pride in education. Her work exemplifies what it means to uplift and inspire the next generation.



KASSIDY MAXIE

Bringing a Multifaceted Perspective to the Classroom

Kassidy Maxie's journey as a Black educator is deeply rooted in her experiences and heritage. Growing up as the daughter of a Detroit Public Schools teacher, Kassidy saw firsthand the transformative power of education. "I come from a family of Black women educators and have witnessed the value education holds in providing mobility and opportunity," she shares. Inspired by the legacy of those who came before her, Kassidy pursued a career in education to give back in a way that transcends herself, creating opportunities for future generations.

As a Black woman who has lived in Detroit, New York City, and abroad, Kassidy brings a unique and evolving perspective to her role as an educator. Her diverse experiences have shaped her approach to teaching, emphasizing a multi-faceted understanding of culture, identity, and history.

Her time at Hunter College was pivotal in developing her sense of self and a deep appreciation for the historical significance of being a Black woman. Mentored by Black Panther members and leaders like Korey Wise, Kassidy learned the importance of investing in herself and nurturing the dreams of her ancestors.



She explains, "I strive to challenge the status quo, not just in my teaching practices but even in my appearance, embracing my identity fully. It's vital to embody the resilience and strength of those who came before us."

Balancing Cultural Differences in the Classroom

According to Kassidy, navigating cultural differences in the U.S. educational system requires intentionality and adaptability. She uses her cultural identity as both a strength and a responsibility, creating spaces for diverse narratives in her classroom. By integrating materials and discussions that reflect her students' identities and experiences, Kassidy ensures her curriculum celebrates cultural differences as assets rather than challenges.

"It's about planting seeds of understanding and representation," she explains. "I want my students to see themselves in what they learn and to embrace the value of diverse perspectives."

KASSIDY MAXIE

Overcoming Challenges as a Black Educator

Like many Black educators, Kassidy has faced the pressure to conform and silence parts of her identity in environments that weren't designed with her in mind. However, she draws strength from her community and the legacy of educators who have broken barriers before her. "Knowing I'm part of a lineage of trailblazers gives me the strength to stay committed to my purpose: creating equitable and inclusive student spaces," Kassidy reflects. Self-advocacy has also been key. By leaning into her authenticity and purpose, Kassidy has successfully navigated challenges and remained true to her mission of empowering students.

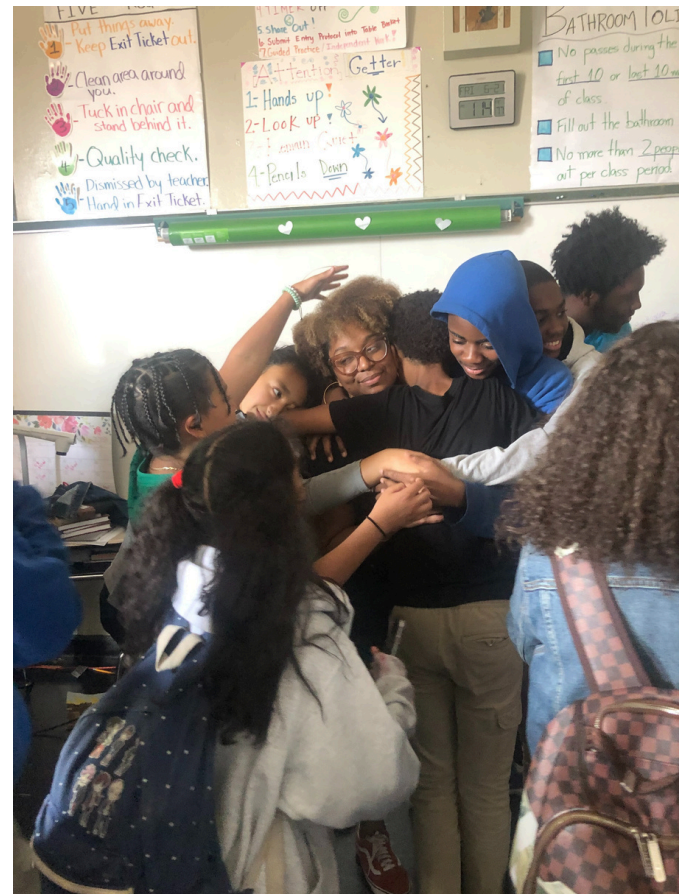
Strategies for Supporting Black Students

Kassidy emphasizes that listening, representation, and empowerment are the most effective strategies for supporting Black students. She believes in creating spaces where students feel seen, valued, and celebrated. By integrating diverse materials and celebrating Black excellence year-round, Kassidy fosters an environment of pride and empowerment.

Mentorship is another critical component. Kassidy explains, "Building trust and guiding students to recognize their potential helps them develop confidence and pride in their heritage."

Advancing Black Representation in Education

Kassidy envisions a future where Black education is synonymous with empowerment, innovation, and equity. She aspires to create schools where Black students feel seen, heard, and equipped to succeed without systemic barriers.



Equally important to her vision is celebrating Black educators as leaders shaping the future of education.

"My hope is to contribute to a legacy where Black excellence is the norm, not the exception," she shares.

The Importance of Black History Month

For Kassidy, Black History Month is a vital opportunity to amplify the stories and voices that have shaped history while fostering critical conversations about systemic inequities. "It's about moving beyond performative gestures," she emphasizes. "We must commit to year-round inclusion and equity, ensuring that Black representation is an integral part of our educational narrative."

Kassidy Maxie's journey as an educator exemplifies the power of representation, resilience, and commitment. Through her work, she is empowering the next generation and honoring the legacy of those who paved the way for her.

JALEN SAUNDERS

Leading with Purpose and Passion in Education

For Jalen Saunders, education is more than a career—it's a calling. As a middle school principal in Brooklyn, New York, Jalen is dedicated to ensuring that Black and Brown students receive the education and support they deserve. His journey began as a third-grade teacher before transitioning to teaching eighth-grade algebra. However, the leadership and mentorship he received from principals, assistant principals, and coaches inspired him to step into an administrative role. "I want to be the kind of leader who truly supports teachers, has their back, and provides a vision that's easy to follow," Jalen shares. "When educators feel empowered, they can do transformative work for students."

The Path to Leadership and Educational Equity

Jalen's decision to pursue a master's degree in educational leadership at Teachers College, Columbia University, was rooted in his commitment to student achievement and school transformation. "Teachers College is the number one school of education in the country, and SPA (Summer Principals Academy) is one of the nation's top two principal preparation programs," he explains. As a leader within a charter school network, Jalen was already familiar with goal-setting, coaching, and development.

However, he sought deeper knowledge and the tools necessary to push student achievement forward in a way that would close equity gaps. "SPA is tailored to public education leadership. It's given me access to a network of principals, superintendents, and school leaders who face the same challenges and victories I do," he reflects. "That sense of camaraderie has been essential to my growth."

Developing Self-Awareness as a Leader & The Power of Community

One of the most transformative aspects of Jalen's experience at SPA has been developing self-awareness. "Being a principal means constantly putting out fires and solving problems, but SPA reminded me to stay connected to my 'why,'" he says. The program has helped him center himself amid the chaos of school leadership, ensuring that he remains grounded in his purpose.



JALEN SAUNDERS

“The tools I’ve gained here allow me to step back, reflect, and lead with clarity—even in high-stress moments,” he adds. “That’s been invaluable.”

When asked what stands out most about his experience at SPA, Jalen emphasizes two key elements: community and high-quality instruction. “My cohort is amazing. Being in a school building can sometimes make you forget how many people care as deeply as you do,” he explains. “But here at SPA, we’re surrounded by passionate, like-minded educators committed to growth.”

Additionally, Jalen values learning from skilled practitioners—professors with extensive experience in education research and leadership. “They’re not just teaching what they think works; they’re presenting evidence-based strategies that have been tested in real schools,” he shares. “It’s empowering to learn from experts who have worked with thousands of educators and can help us determine what will work best for our students and communities.”



**“Here at SPA, we’re
surrounded by
passionate, like-
minded educators
committed to growth”**

Looking Ahead: A Vision for Transformational Leadership

For Jalen, being a school leader isn’t just about managing day-to-day operations—it’s about creating a vision that uplifts students and educators. He believes transformational leadership means equipping teachers with the tools, resources, and confidence to succeed. “It’s not just about data or quotas; it’s about where our kids are now and where they need to be in the next few years,” he states. As he continues his journey, Jalen remains committed to fostering an educational environment where teachers feel supported, and students feel seen. “Education isn’t easy, but when you’re surrounded by people who share your passion, the road becomes much clearer,” he reflects. With his leadership, Jalen is ensuring that Brooklyn’s students receive a high-quality education and the support, representation, and opportunities they need to thrive.

JOB OPPORTUNITIES / RESOURCES

Fishtank Learning

ELA Curriculum Director, 6-8

- Remote, northeast preferred
- More information about Fishtank Learning [HERE](#)
- More information about the job [HERE](#)

Contact: Cristina Howery, SPA | NYC 2012 Cohort
cristina.howery@fishtanklearning.org

Brilla Public Charter Schools

Multiple Leadership Opportunities

- Job Opportunities [HERE](#)

Contact: Ruby Amezcua ruby.amezcua@setonpartners.org

American International School of Jeddah

Multiple Leadership Opportunities

- Job Opportunities [HERE](#)

Contact: Kelsey Bull, SPA | NOLA Cohort 2019
keb2231@tc.columbia.edu

American International School of Chennai

Multiple Leadership Opportunities

- Job Opportunities [HERE](#)

Contact: Kelsey Bull, SPA | NOLA Cohort 2019
keb2231@tc.columbia.edu

Uncommon Schools

Multiple Leadership Opportunities including *Dean of Curriculum and Instruction, Director of Operations, Associate Director of Operations, and Principal Fellow* [HERE](#)

Locations: Camden, Newark, New York, and Rochester

Additional Opportunities

Instructional Partners

Leading a school is never easy—but it doesn't have to be lonely or overwhelming. At [Instruction Partners](#), we specialize in helping school leaders like you navigate the complexities of instructional improvement and leadership.

We offer **three core services** that can make a measurable difference in your school:

Clarity on leading instructional improvement:

Teaching and leading will always be hard jobs. Whether you're an experienced leader or new to your role, we make the work easier by 1) Identifying areas of focus that have the most impact on student outcome and 2) Providing the kind of shoulder-to-shoulder support that leaders need but rarely receive.

Shoulder-to-shoulder guidance for strengthening high-quality instructional materials implementation:

Selecting and implementing a new curriculum can be an arduous process for all involved. We help teams translate great materials into great instruction with a strategic approach that avoids common pitfalls and maximizes teacher investment and student learning.

Support for leading effective professional learning systems for teachers:

We know that aligned, ongoing structures for planning, coaching, and feedback drive the biggest gains in teacher practice and student learning. Meaningful change starts with creating actionable plans for effective professional learning. We help teams build capacity and make the most of their limited time.

If you're looking for a partner to help you lead more effectively and support your staff, we're here to help. Let's work together to improve your school's outcomes and make your leadership journey a little easier.

Contact: Jorge Alvarado, SPA | NYC Cohort 2021
jorge.alvarado@instructionpartners.org

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

