

SPA Alumni Spotlight

Dr. Chelsea Matthews Franklin



Dr. Chelsea Matthews Franklin's journey into educational leadership is an inspiring story of resilience, transformation, and unwavering commitment to student success. She graciously agreed to sit down with us and recount her experiences as a student, educator, and principal, reflecting on how her time at the Summer Principals Academy (SPA) informs her work today.

Finding Purpose in Education

Dr. Franklin grew up in the public school system of Jacksonville, Florida. She remembers building a classroom in her childhood home, dreaming of becoming a teacher one day. When she entered high school, she learned about teachers' salaries and decided to pursue a more lucrative career as a news anchor. Earning a degree in journalism from Florida A&M University, she thought her career was set. But a chance encounter with Teach for America brought her back to that childhood dream.

In 2010, she began teaching sixth-grade reading at one of Florida's lowest-performing middle schools. The first year was a wake-up call. "I failed miserably at teaching," she admits. "I thought I would be doing myself and our students a disservice if I didn't get this right."

Despite wanting to leave every day, she chose to stay, and in her second year, she improved significantly. When she was shown the statistics of illiteracy, poverty, and educational disparities, she felt her calling. "My heart was stolen... There was no going back. Once I became an educator, I knew for certain this was what I was supposed to be doing."



That dedication caught the attention of Jacksonville's then-superintendent Nikolai Vitti, who selected her to apply to Teachers College through his partnership with the Summer Principals Academy. After her first application was denied, she refined her leadership experience, became a department head, and worked at an afterschool program. She reapplied, was accepted, and set off for New York in 2014.

The SPA Experience

Reminiscing on her time at SPA, Dr. Franklin highlights the phenomenal people she met, the connections she made, and the opportunities she was given for personal growth. Above all, SPA allowed her to reshape how she saw herself as a leader. "The journey at SPA allowed me to reintroduce myself to me," she explains. From meditations before class to introspective coursework on bias and ethics, she describes the program as "priceless."

One of her most transformative moments came in a course led by Professor Yolanda and Professor Suzanne focused on personal bias and moral leadership. She was forced to ask herself,

"When no one's watching, who's the leader in the room that's going to advocate for kids and make decisions that are going to impact their lives? Who's going to do it morally, soundly, justly?"

Dr. Franklin courageously shared her own growth, acknowledging unconscious biases she uncovered and learned to overcome—something she now uses to ensure fairness and compassion in her decision-making.



Dr. Franklin also reflects on her culminating New School Design project. "It stretched my thinking. It allows you to be innovative. It allows you to think of future solutions to problems we don't even know we have yet." She regards her teammates as "superhumans" with ingenious ideas, and she remembers finishing the project with an exciting sense that "I can go do anything."

Leading with Lessons from SPA

Armed with her SPA degree and internship experience, Dr. Franklin rose quickly in school leadership. She filled multiple assistant principal roles and earned her first principal position at Fletcher Middle School in Duval County, Florida. A subsequent opportunity brought her to Gadsden County High School, where she led the school from a D to a C grade in just one year. "We're bringing Gadsden County back to life," she says, through partnerships, professional development, and her deep belief in what's possible for underserved students.

Currently, Dr. Franklin continues to lead as an education advocate serving in Teach for America's Florida Regions.

At the heart of her leadership style is the innovative thinking and emotional grounding she honed at SPA. She reflects on how the New School Design project equipped her with a blueprint for problem-solving. Having built a network of colleagues, she feels confident that "if I don't know the answer, I promise you, I know somebody who does and we're going to find the answer together."

One of the biggest challenges Dr. Franklin has faced as an educational leader is the multitude of crises that arise on a daily basis. She responds to this challenge with a commitment to mental wellness.

"You have to be very centered in who you are. Your emotions have to be very grounded. You have to have maturity on a supernatural level to be able to balance being pulled in that many directions."



Dr. Franklin is proud of the many roles she plays as teacher, principal, custodian, counselor, and a mother for students, but she underscores the overwhelming nature of a career in education. Pulling from the meditative tools learned at SPA, she states that “knowing who you are and not losing yourself in the process” is one of the most valuable skills she brings to her schools and to her family.



A Final Reflection

Dr. Chelsea Matthews Franklin’s journey is one of perseverance, passion, and purpose. From a struggling first-year teacher to a respected education advocate, she embodies the belief that great educators are not born—they are developed through experience, self-reflection, and a dedication to one’s community.

“I wouldn’t be the educator that I am today if I did not have the experience from SPA,” she says. Dr. Franklin extends gratitude to the faculty who shaped her experience at SPA and the alumni who continue to support her throughout her career.

