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.

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"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."

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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.