

Turning the Tables

The “hip-hop principalship” grounds itself in authenticity to remix the role

By André Benito Mountain



In spring 2017, I accepted my first principalship at a school in metropolitan Atlanta. The community had undergone a significant demographic shift in the last decade, with poverty levels and family dynamics changing due to downtown Atlanta’s sprawl and gentrification. I approached my new role as a “hip-hop principalship,” in which the voice of a new generation would lead the school with an intimate connection to the cultural, musical, and social dynamics shaping area families’ lives.

Like many of my students, I spent a portion of my upbringing in a single-parent home; my mother

worked full-time to support my brother and me. While my father was involved during my early years and continued to play an active role as I grew up, his later absence opened the door to peer influences and the culture we now refer to as hip-hop.

The music was bold, the ideas were grounded in African-American history and self-determination, and the aesthetics captured the frustrations and creativity of a generation that refused to be muted.

Class Divided

As an assistant principal, I worked at an ethnically diverse elementary

school in the Pacific Northwest. The school was led by a baby boomer who, as an upper-middle-class, white female, sometimes struggled to build authentic relationships with students of color, parents dealing with poverty, or people with religious or cultural differences. Those generational and class divides caused a strategic disconnect from the community she served.

Hip-hop has become a global phenomenon because of its broad-reaching, multicultural roots, which emerged out of the poverty-ridden Bronx of the 1970s. Since then, educators have

leveraged the culture to highlight innovative approaches in public schools and promote the evolution of a “hip-hop principalship.”

This new crop of leaders is bringing a different perspective to the role of school principal. They embrace a hands-on approach to leading a school, with stronger ties to the community and to a culture that has become the voice of urban youth. With urban schools hanging in the balance, these new leaders are, in effect, “remixing” the role of principal.

The hip-hop principalship is grounded in five tenets:

1. Authenticity. Hip-hop culture has always valued the real over the contrived, and this new breed of school principals seeks out ways to establish authenticity in their interactions. Given parents’ work schedules, dependence on public transportation, and other factors, how do you ensure they can connect with you? Parent conferences, visibility in and around the school, the integration of technology, and other strategies will help solidify the authenticity of the hip-hop principal.

2. Speaking truth to power. Leaders must be willing to confront challenges to their principalship in a way that justifies their ability and adds credibility to their expertise as instructional leaders. The hip-hop principal addresses problems tactfully and courageously. He or she defends teachers while holding them accountable for high-quality instruction and professionalism.

Moving the school forward means challenging people to be reflective and flexible enough to leave their comfort zones. This might mean moving a child to a different classroom or moving a teacher to a new grade level. It also requires the courage to challenge the district when decisions impact the school’s operation.


3. Challenging the status quo. Setting clear goals about the school’s trajectory, challenges, and changes

that need to be made is imperative—confronting ineffective practices with research and insight. The hip-hop principal asks teachers, “What are the students actually doing in class, and will that result in deeper learning and critical thinking? Is the curriculum being augmented with a social justice component to empower students to effect change in their own community?”

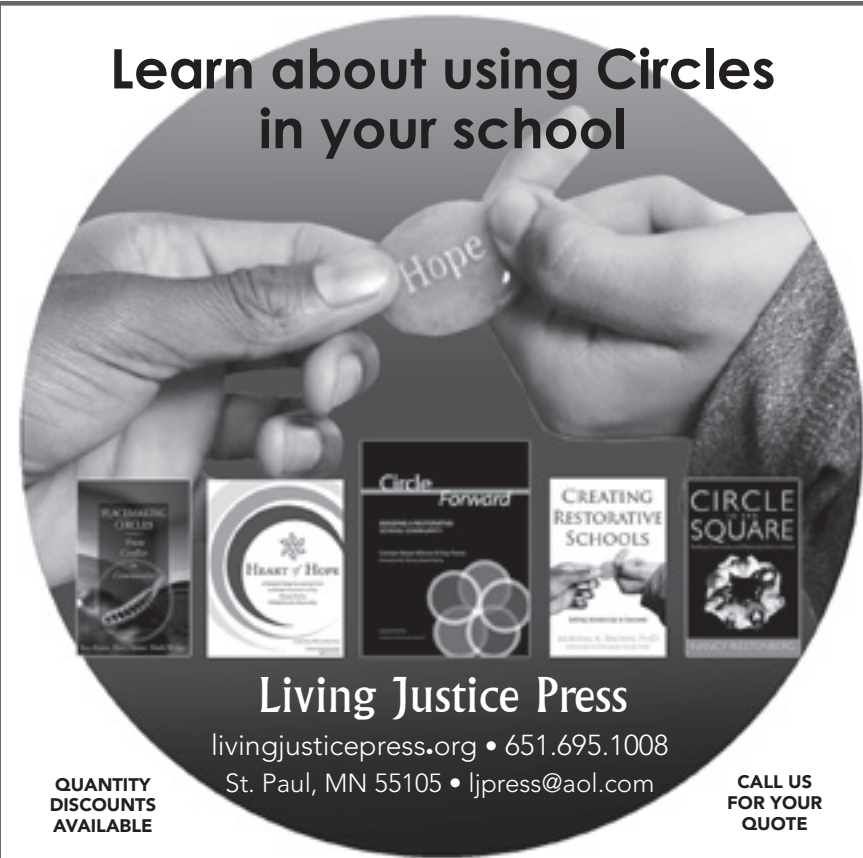
4. Community accountability. Our school requires all parents to complete 16 volunteer hours with the school each year. This might entail working with students in class, teaching chess, painting a hallway, or working in our community garden. The investment of time allows them to form a deeper connection to the school community by spending time in a service capacity, and their involvement helps expose students to

a variety of careers and pathways to higher education.

5. Creativity and autonomy. The hip-hop principalship is one that values the power of creative expression. Creating spaces where students write, speak, and perform in ways that empower them and confront social justice issues is a critical component. The hip-hop principal is also careful to honor teacher autonomy to promote greater levels of creativity among faculty and staff.

With a more connected, culturally responsive, and expressive approach to leading urban schools, the hip-hop principalship is remixing the role. And it might resonate in your school, too. 

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