

Show & Tell



A Quick Glance @ Howard E. Fields III, assistant superintendent of human resources, Kirkwood (Missouri) School District

Years served as principal: 6

Education: B.A., M.Ed., Ph.D., Education, University of Missouri–St. Louis

Awards and recognitions: Exemplary New Principal, Missouri Association of Elementary School Principals, 2016; North (St. Louis) County Inc.'s 30 Leaders in Their 30s, 2016; Innovative ESD Award; Networked Digital Library of Theses and Dissertations, 2017; NAESP National Distinguished Principal from Missouri, 2020; BMESTL Moonshot Award for Courageous Conversations, 2020

Twitter handle: @HeFields3

Howard E. Fields III

Missouri principal supports black educators in a new position

Howard E. Fields III started his tenure as principal at his childhood alma mater, Koch Elementary School in St. Louis, in 2014, just as protests were erupting over the killing of Michael Brown in nearby Ferguson, Missouri. Fields was determined to make a difference, and his leadership helped improve the school's performance more than 200 percent in one year.

Koch's comeback was pivotal in helping the Riverview Gardens School District regain accreditation after it lost more than 1,000 students to a Missouri law that forces unaccredited districts to pay for students who transfer to an accredited school nearby. Fields

completed his Ph.D. dissertation and a documentary film (bit.ly/3iF2h02) focusing on the law's effect, winning international recognition.

Fields co-founded Black Males in Education St. Louis (BMESTL), a group designed to support, develop, connect, mentor, and empower educators of color. Named NAESP's 2020 National Distinguished Principal from Missouri, Fields has moved on to be the new assistant superintendent of human resources in the suburban Kirkwood School District.

Principal magazine recently asked Fields about his experiences turning around an inner-city school and supporting African Americans in education. Here's what he said:

How did the “Ferguson unrest” affect your approach to equity in education?

Michael Brown was shot and killed two days before school started, and that changed everything. At ground zero, it offered an opportunity to galvanize our staff. We were unaccredited, so there was a lot of pressure to produce academic outcomes. We would do whatever was needed to access high-quality learning for the kids, regardless of what was going on outside.

What do you think was pivotal in getting Koch Elementary’s performance up?

We had some spectacular kids and some spectacular families; we would see some of them on TV protesting, and hours later they would be dropping their kids off at school. These were supportive parents who still believed in the promise of education in spite of all the things that happened.

What’s the concept behind “Passion Days,” and how do they help students learn?

Part of the Webster Groves vision was to allow passion to drive learning. In the fall, teachers got the chance to teach a class unrelated to any class they would contractually be obligated to teach. You had teachers [doing] archery, DJing, painting, making rocket ships, you name it. I did videography one time, rapping another.

The second term, we invited community members to teach, and the third, students had the opportunity to sponsor a passion class for other students. We didn’t have any issues with attendance on those days, because students were so excited to come to school.

Why do you feel it’s important to mentor and support fellow Black educators?

I like to help my brothers and sisters do well; their success is my success. Black men make up only 2 percent of the national teaching force, so it can be a lonely place. You need an opportunity to engage with folks who share your experiences to be your best. I connected with Darryl Diggs Jr. [now principal of Hardin Middle School in Florissant, Missouri] and, with BMESTL, we talked people into coming into education or staying in education.

Is there anything you miss now that you have transitioned to district leadership?

I miss the kids—as a middle school principal, you deal with kids all day, every day. But I’m excited about the journey I’m on now and looking forward to supporting teachers and principals. I’m big on getting staff to engage in self-care; you have to give people permission. Webster Groves had a calming room with yoga, aromatherapy, and a massage chair.

What made you focus on the Missouri Student Transfer Law for your dissertation?

It was a controversial thing: Riverview Gardens was unaccredited, and more than 1,000 students transferred. Seeing how the system doesn’t do justice for urban and poor districts, I focused on three families: One decided to leave, one decided to stay, and the third left and came back. What I found was that there are so many nuanced differences in family dynamics that we couldn’t say whether staying or leaving was better.