



Glean Education's Ed Leaders in Literacy Podcast Episode #5 - Dr. Nakia Hardy (Durham Public Schools)

- Speaker 1: The results, they've been immediate and we had one of the biggest shifts in the state.
- Speaker 2: It's almost magical when it all comes together and I think to myself, "This is what education is about."
- Speaker 3: There were inequities everywhere. My students in South Texas ultimately taught me more than I taught them.
- Speaker 4: Over 40% of our students were leaving 3rd grade with less than proficient reading skills and that was just something we had to stop.
- Speaker 5: The bottom line is that we can prevent reading failure. We can change the trajectory of these students' lives. And I just want to shout from the roof it can be done.

Jessica Hamman: From Glean Education, this is Ed Leaders In Literacy, a podcast series that features educators and administrators who have made hard decisions about instruction, curriculum, intervention, and school systems to close the achievement gap and build equity by improving literacy.

Jessica Hamman: I'm Jessica Hamman, founder of Glean Education and on the show today is Dr. Nakia Hardy. Dr. Hardy is the Deputy Superintendent at Durham Public Schools, a role she began in January 2018. Previously, she served as the Chief Academic Officer of Guilford County Schools, the third largest district in North Carolina. Dr. Hardy is an award-winning administrator who has served as Assistant Superintendent for K12 Curriculum and Instruction at Rockingham County Schools from 2009 to 2013. An executive director for teaching and learning at Baltimore City Schools from 2014 to 2015. Dr. Hardy, welcome to the show.

Nakia Hardy: Thank you.

Jessica Hamman: In researching your accomplishments for this interview, I came upon an announcement in which you were named deputy superintendent and at the bottom is a list of bullet points of some of your accomplishments. And if you don't mind, I'd like to read a little of them to just start off our chat.



Jessica Hamman: You implemented a core literacy program in grades four through nine. You increased grade level proficiency in only two years. You increased the number of state schools of character from seven to 17. You implemented restorative practices at 16 middle schools. You developed first-generation college students ambassadors program and implemented district-wide professional development on understanding implicit bias, equitable practices, and culturally responsive pedagogy.

Jessica Hamman: It's clear that you've made a huge impact. So tell us a little bit about your path to administration and what led you into education and in the first place.

Nakia Hardy: Well, I just want to say thank you so much. When I hear some of those things, it is amazing. I would say that nothing happens without a great team and I've just had the great pleasure to be amongst so many other great educators to make a difference in the lives of children in districts in North Carolina and in Maryland. I think everyone always knew I was going to be a teacher even though I did not know it.

Nakia Hardy: In high school, I wanted to major in science, but I wanted to be an obstetrician-gynecologist and find a cure for ovarian cancer. And my mother actually made me take the North Carolina Teaching Fellows Scholarship. And at my high school graduation folks said I was taking the Teaching Fellows Scholarship because I talked so much if I was going to become a teacher, people would have to



listen. And people always know sometimes a little bit more about you than you know about yourself.

Nakia Hardy: And so I majored in chemistry with the double concentration in physics and secondary education and was a North Carolina teaching fellow at Appalachian. And really that's all she wrote. I can't imagine doing anything else. I often say that this is truly my life's work and my dream. I taught high school chemistry for five year years. I was a college board reader for the advanced placement chemistry exam. And then when I transitioned into administration, I had the great opportunity to work in a very high needs middle school where I ultimately became principal.

Nakia Hardy: But prior to becoming principal, I also spent time at a small high school as an assistant principal. And one of the things that has been critical to my success and the success of the teams that I work with is the relationships. And I think that when you ask how have you been able to make a huge impact, it's really about leveraging and building capacity with the relationships of the people you work with. And making sure that there is a true cohesive team approach.

Jessica Hamman: I first came across your name I believe in a blog post or an op-ed on curriculum. And I've taught for a long time and I consider it my life's work to talk to teachers about literacy and language and school improvement. And that op-ed really shifted my entire view about curriculum. Can you talk to us a little bit about that piece, how it came about and a little bit more about your kind of belief system surrounding curriculum?



Nakia Hardy: I graduated from college in 1998 and so there was high stakes assessment and accountability, but we were not laser-like focused on making sure that each and every child was successful. We really were able to in that time almost hide behind the aggregate. So if you had 90% of your kids achieving, it was okay. You didn't necessarily focus as much on that 10%. And there was not near as much conversation about who that 10% represented. Was it students of color? Was it students impacted by free and reduced lunch? Was it students impacted by trauma? Were they're more males than females?

Nakia Hardy: And so one of the things as I have grown as a leader, the tools that we provide teachers are clearly the key. The teachers create the opportunity in that classroom for each and every child to be successful. They don't do that alone. And even if you have through a pre-service program, it is very, very difficult for you to make sure each and every child is successful without the right resources. And oftentimes people make the assumption that the right resources or a set of materials or a curriculum is going to be something that hinders your opportunity for innovative thinking and creativity.

Nakia Hardy: So they'll say that it's a script and they don't want to be tied to a script, they want to be able to be flexible. And what's so important is we have to understand that whether it's ed reports or other groups that look at curriculum resources, they are taking all of those resources and looking at those resources aligned to the standard is to just make sure that you're meeting the mark with what you're putting in front of children every day.



Nakia Hardy: As I have grown what I've recognized is when you provide teachers with high-quality resources, a curriculum and when you make sure that they have the tools to make sure the culture and the classroom and the school is successful, such as positive behavior, intervention supports or restorative practice, then you have created a synergy where children not only feel comfortable, but you've created the conditions for kids to be successful at a high level.

Nakia Hardy: The Curriculum Matters blog, there's a group of us that are district level leaders that are charged with making sure that students have different outcomes. And all of us that are part of this Curriculum Matters Professional Learning Network have a strong passion around making sure that teachers have the resources that they need to be successful, and that we complement that with the appropriate professional learning so that teachers grow in their craft and they're able to make sure each and every out is successful.

Nakia Hardy: So no matter what your background is, no matter if you have a learning disability, no matter issues of systemic racism, that we are able to make sure that if we provide those conditions that kids can be successful.

Jessica Hamman: And one of those conditions are curriculum that's aligned to standards and supports all learners' needs. What's suggestion. Do you have for administrators who are just starting out or educators



who are eyeing administrative roles with an eye to progress with kind of big dreams? What suggestions do you have to get started?

Nakia Hardy: So I think the first thing is listen to the groups of folks that you're working with. Once the law kind of went out there, there were a handful of folks that also reached out to me directly. And I remember talking to someone who was in a very small district less than 5,000 children. And she was in charge of literacy and she had been an excellent literacy teacher, had never been an administrator. And I said, "Have some round table conversations with teacher leaders in your district, but also administrators in your district and understand their perspective, understand what motivates them, understand why they want to see success."

Nakia Hardy: I have never met a teacher or a principal or a district leader that doesn't want students to be successful, but you have to understand the why behind it. And once you start to make those connections, then you can really build a strategy that will work in your particular context.

Nakia Hardy: The other thing that I often share with early administrators is recognizing that context probably matters as much as the relationships. The strategies that I was able to use to be successful in Rockingham County, North Carolina which is a smaller, more rural school district is different than the strategy that I'm using here in Durham. It is really important that you understand the context that you're in. My analogy to that it is you can pick a plant, but it has to grow in the right soil, in the right conditions. You plant it in



the wrong soil, the wrong conditions it won't grow and you'll think something's wrong with the plant.

Nakia Hardy: The reality is is that I have to understand, I had to get to know the context in Durham and understand the perspective of our principals and our teachers, our school board members, our account commissioners understand our schools before I could build a strategy that would allow us to work. And I'm so pleased with the team that we have. In a very short amount of time we have been able to adopt core curriculum in elementary math and secondary literacy all with unanimous votes.

Nakia Hardy: And so it really says a lot when you can get the confidence of the board to adopt contracts that are millions of dollars for our children, but it speaks to their ability to support the work of our superintendent, of our strategic plan, but we did so in a collaborative way. And so, although I may have been the voice of the recommendation, it really came from our teachers and our leaders because they made the selection. They were involved as part of the process. They were co-partners with me in making sure that we could have resources for the children in Durham.

Jessica Hamman: And you were listening to the unique needs of your organization, which probably made it even more successful.

Nakia Hardy: Absolutely.



Jessica Hamman: Do You maintain equity focus in terms of your district in particular?

Nakia Hardy: So I think that there are a couple of pieces. The first piece is I think we have to recognize and acknowledge where we are. Not only in the context of where you are, whether it's a school or a school district in the state, but where we are as a country. They're quite few things. If we think about the experiences, I've been very fortunate. I was in Baltimore City when our city experienced the Freddie Gray uprising. And so recognizing how that impacted a city and the children, and I have always had a passion for working in urban schools.

Nakia Hardy: My first and only principalship was at a middle school that was mostly African American and Hispanic. We were about 85, 90% students of color. I've had the great fortune of having those experiences. Also, I am an African American female. I went to Appalachian State University in North Carolina, which is a predominantly white institution. And both my masters and doctorate are from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. And my degree is in chemistry and so I've had many experiences where I was the only or one of very few students of color in that particular field.

Nakia Hardy: So I personally have connection to making sure that we are being very thoughtful around not only our students of color, but also



other equity issues whether it speaks to sexual orientation or it speaks to gender. So one of the things that's critically important is that you make sure that you're asking the questions. And so when you think about whether it's selecting a curriculum, looking at any programmatic change whether it's restorative practices or positive behavior intervention support, is that you're asking questions about how this is going to impact each and every child.

Nakia Hardy: I think we also have to be mindful of and one of the things that we often talk about in Durham in addition to race are our students with disabilities. It is critical when you think about most often that is the group of children that is performing at the bottom. The gap is the biggest probably from your all group and your students who identify with disabilities. So as you're thinking through adopting curriculum making sure that, so for example, on issues of equity and race when you're looking at literacy, how many of the main characters will you see in the text that are of color? What are the questions and the connections that they're making with the literature? What are the authors that they're using?

Nakia Hardy: Making sure that if I think about my students with disabilities, do I have options to make sure it's shown in multiple domains? Whether that's making sure that the fauna bigger or making sure that I have auditory materials to support the children. We have dual language programs. And we have a lot of our children that join us where English is not their first language. So many of our literacy curriculums now are actually available 100% in Spanish and even other languages.



Nakia Hardy: So really being thoughtful and asking those questions as you're making a decision so it's part of the process. Often what happens is people feel like it's an afterthought because you've made a decision and then you're trying to figure out how to make it work. So you've made a decision, yet none of the literature is available on audio. So you've already got children that are at a disadvantage or you've made a decision, but you recognize that there's not a single text that children will see within the main character that is not of white descent. So all of these things, they can be afterthoughts, but if you do them as part of the process, then you are allowing yourself to make sure you're being thoughtful around issues of equity.

Nakia Hardy: I always challenge folks to make sure that they have more of an open mind. One of the things that's important to us in Durham is really making sure that we're being thoughtful around all of these issues. So making sure that when we think about equity, we think about religious backgrounds, we think about race, we think about sexuality, we think about gender, we think about students with disabilities. All of those are issues of equity not just the narrow focus on equity, but being inclusive as we think about that. So that we're making decisions that are inclusive of all of our students and families.

Jessica Hamman: What would you say are some of the things that you're most proud of?

Nakia Hardy: So I think that you mentioned the [inaudible 00:15:49] growth from Guilford and year in Durham after completing our first full



academic year because both the superintendent and I joined midyear '17-'18 school year. I think that I'm most proud of my work and ability to build a cohesive team. I think that when you are able to build a team of folks, then they are able to help you improve culture and raise the level of expectations that we have for each and every child.

Nakia Hardy: I'm always proud to look at outcomes. I think that outcomes do matter. And so improving graduation rates, improving proficiency, improving growth, those things are exciting and I'm proud of that. But I think the strategy that I try to use to build a team that has the same philosophical background around making sure that we are being thoughtful to creating a culture and creating the conditions for teachers and leaders to have high expectations. When you do that, every child thrives. That relationship and team I think is what I'm most proud of. And that's that often doesn't show up in a bio, but I just think you have to acknowledge in the absence of that, none of the outcomes ever come to fruition.

Jessica Hamman: Mm-hmm (affirmative). One of the achievements that's listed on that bulleted list I mentioned before is implementing district-wide professional development in a number of things. And some of it has to do with equity, implicit bias, equitable practices, culturally responsive pedagogy. But I imagine the emphasis on professional development that you provide shows the people that you're working with that you believe in them, and you're hoping to nurture them and nurture the culture that you're building as well.



Nakia Hardy: Absolutely. Professional learning is a key lever to any kind of success. And actually later this week I'll be attending the Learning Forward Conference and we actually have a presentation there, and we're part of one of their communities of practice. And Learning Forward really talks about how we think about this in terms of doctors. If we happen to get sick and have cancer, you want to go to the best oncologist in the world, and want to make sure that they have had continuous training and they have the best innovative practices.

Nakia Hardy: Well, the four-year-old who's sitting in a pre-K classroom here in North Carolina right here in Durham deserves the same. They deserve a highly qualified teacher that has had the most up-to-date professional learning, has innovative thinking. And you deserve that when you begin with us, whether you're four-years-old or whether you're 18-years-old. And professional learning ensures that you are able to get better at your craft. And that there's an expectation that you get better at your craft and that we're going to support you all along the way.

Nakia Hardy: Our teachers and leaders deserve that kind of input and that kind of work. They do thrive when they have the opportunity to participate in professional learning that makes sense. And it's not that one time sit in a room with 500 people. This is professional learning that is personally designed that really matches the needs that you have that allows you to have coaching experiences, so you are a part of the learning process and really speaks to making sure that you're growing as a professional no matter where you are in your career. So whether you're a first-year teacher or a 30-year veteran or brand new



principal or a 15-year principal, that's the kind of professional learning that our teachers and our educators deserve.

Jessica Hamman: Well, Dr. Hardy, I can't thank you enough for chatting with us today and for your amazing commitment to excellence. And for all you do for the teachers that you work with and the students that work under them. And I just want to say, I'm glad you didn't become a doctor because it is clear that you're meant to be in education. Thank you again for your time today.

Nakia Hardy: Thank you very much and I just want to say thank you to the work that you're doing and the podcast that you put out. It's so important for us to listen to others and to learn from one another. And I just feel blessed to have the opportunity to share a little bit with you today.

Jessica Hamman: Did you like hearing from Dr. Nakia Hardy about her work at Durham Public Schools? Learn more about her district by visiting Durham Public Schools at www.dpsnc.net. Learn more about Dr. Nakia Hardy's work by visiting curriculummatters.org/nakia-hardy or find her on Twitter @nakiahardy. Thank you for listening to our Ed Leaders in Literacy Podcast. To find links to the articles and resources mentioned in this podcast, go to gleaneducation.com/edleaderspodcast and access them in the show notes. Bye for now.

