



Principal Residency Program creates model for development of school leaders

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Growing up in Rockford, Amber Lee-Black found a home – and a life’s direction – on the basketball courts.

“I didn’t want to go to work every day dreading going to work,” said Lee-Black, who played hoops for Auburn High School, Highland Community College and the then-Rockford College. “I wanted to do something I was interested in, something that I felt was important – to keep moving, to keep learning, those lifelong activities – and so I chose P.E.”



Amber Lee-Black



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After teaching physical education for six years at [Jefferson High School](#) and Ellis and Jackson elementary schools, however, she felt another calling: the principalship.

“I just got to the point where I wanted to make a bigger impact,” says Lee-Black, now in her first semester as dean of Jefferson’s [Freshman Academy](#). “I was meeting a lot of kids, and I felt like was making a good impact, but I said, ‘I want to reach more kids.’ ”

For Talvi Bandele, who had spent his career teaching history at the high school level, the lure of administration offers an intellectual challenge.

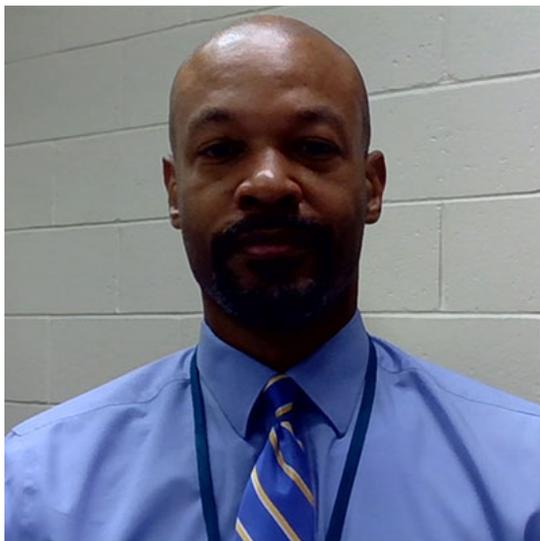
“Even as a teacher, I’ve always been the type of person who always wants to be learning, to always be evolving, to seeing what works best,” says Bandele, dean of the [Production](#) and [Service](#) academies at [Auburn High School](#).

“As a principal, I see it as a puzzle,” Bandele adds, “not in a sense that everything can be solved, per se, but that you have these things that come your way, and I think that I have the creative side to work with others to figure things out: ‘What can I do? How can I help?’ ”

Bandele and Lee-Black are now among the 20 participants in the inaugural year of [the NIU Principal Residency Program](#).

Launched this fall in collaboration between the NIU College of Education and the [Rockford Public Schools](#), the innovative partnership will develop school leaders to improve academic and social-emotional learning outcomes and post-secondary success in every District 205 school led by a partnership-prepared principal.

During the [two-year M.S.Ed. program](#), students will complete master’s degrees grounded in exceptional curriculum, professional practice and strong mentoring, which includes coaching from the Illinois Principals Association.



Talvi Bandele

Principal Residency Program creates model for development of school leaders – NIU College of Education
RPS 205 Superintendent **Ehren Jarrett**

believes that combination, which draws on “traditional elements that all the entities have done well for years,” will produce unparalleled results.

“School leadership is such a powerful force in school achievement,” Jarrett said during an Aug. 19 virtual kick-off meeting.

“By having people actively in practice as assistant principals while they are doing their coursework, and being mentored by outstanding principals, this is going to be the best way to develop our leadership talent and

to drive student outcomes,” he added. “It’s so important to do all of those things individually, but it’s so powerful when you do all three at once.”

Laurie Elish-Piper, dean of the NIU College of Education, told participants on that Zoom-hosted ceremony this summer that the new program is a “fabulous way” to extend the concept of homegrown teachers into the next realm of homegrown principals.

“I started my career as a middle school teacher, and I know firsthand the difference an amazing, effective principal makes,” Elish-Piper said. “Principals are truly the core of their schools. They’re the ones who create the context and the climate. They’re the ones who create the support teachers need to support their students.”

Steve Tozer, Professor Emeritus of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Illinois Chicago, assisted the team in designing a program that he believes will “make a strong footprint on how we do school leadership programs in Illinois” and attract national



Laurie Elish-Piper, Ehren Jarrett and Steve Tozer

attention.

“How can NIU produce the principals that are really going to make a difference in student learning outcomes in Rockford?” Tozer asked on the Zoom call.

“The answer is that Northern can’t do it by itself. Rockford can’t do it by itself. I’m excited we have a partnership here that’s really breaking new ground.”

On that ground stand Bandele, Lee-Black and 18 other pioneers nominated and selected to enroll with their tuition paid by RPS 205.

Bandele, who grew up in south-suburban Kankakee “observant of the world around me” and wondering why things were the way they were, regards the support and professional development offered by his employer as “definitely an honor.”

“I look forward to it. I try to hold myself to a very high standard, even higher than what people might expect of me,” says Bandele, new to Rockford this year after a long career

teaching at high schools in DeKalb and Sycamore.



“It’s going to be challenging,” adds the three-time NIU alum with bachelor’s (’98) and master’s (’00) degrees in history and

a law degree earned in 2004. “I’ve attended a couple courses thus far, and it seems a bit labor-intensive, but I expect that. It’s preparing us, and it’s bringing something out of us that we didn’t know was there – in a positive sense.”

Lee-Black, meanwhile, is enjoying the “rigorous curriculum” and its emphasis on continuous reflection.

She’s also eager for upcoming chances to share her personal story of triumph to motivate younger generations following in her footsteps – and grateful for the district’s confidence of her ambition, qualification and talent.

“I feel like I have something to prove. I was a teen mom. I made mistakes. I can still be successful despite those challenges,” she says.

“I’m looking forward to showing the students who are in the district that I’m from that, ‘Hey, I was you not too long ago. Whatever you decide you want to put your mind to, you’re capable because I was capable. You’re in the same environment. You have the same opportunities I had. You can be successful.’ ”

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