



RELATIONSHIPS, RELATIONSHIPS, RELATIONSHIPS...

Building Relationships – The Ithaca Story with Luvelle Brown

By Pat Fontana



Dr. Luvelle Brown

Ithaca, New York, is known for its snowy winter weather, colorful fall scenery, and prestigious schools Cornell University and Ithaca College. Ithaca is also now known as a place where history is being made in the public school system.

Dr. Luvelle Brown arrived in Ithaca in January 2011, as the Ithaca City School District's new superintendent. In the six years since, in what he describes as "an amazing journey," he has brought a community together and **made it possible for students in the Ithaca school system to fulfill their potential as high achievers**. Luvelle was recently named New York State's Superintendent of the Year for his – and his students' – successes.

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The Ithaca City School District is thriving and getting noticed for great accomplishments today. Ithaca High School, in particular, has been included in *Newsweek* magazine’s top two percent of the best high schools in the country. When Luvelle was introduced to the system six years ago, though, it was garnering attention for very different reasons. The high school’s graduation rate hovered around 78 percent. Ithaca High School was on the list of New York State Schools in Need of Improvement. The prevailing culture was “us versus them.” Negativity, racial divides, and achievement gaps made for a challenging situation for the new superintendent.

Why leave the comfort of friends and family – not to mention the temperate weather in Virginia – to move to Upstate New York and take on these challenges? In fact, Luvelle says he “dropped everything” to make the transition, because the people of Ithaca were ready for a change. They wanted to improve their own situation, for their community and their students. They were ready and so was Luvelle.

He describes taking on the new position as a “fascinating process,” beginning with a phone call he received from a mentor who told him that Ithaca wanted to make a difference in education. He first visited Ithaca in October, one of the most picturesque times of year for an area in the midst of the Finger Lakes, farmland, and seemingly endless gorges and rolling hills. Luvelle and Ithaca “fell in love with one another,” making an instant connection that has grown and intensified over the past six years.

Luvette is hesitant to take much of the credit for the transformation that has occurred since his arrival. When asked about his first few months on the job and how he was able to start making such a difference,

he responds, “Relationships, relationships, relationships ... building relationships, relationships.” Community engagement was to him the first step in what has continued to be a successful relationship with city leaders, faith leaders, businesspeople, teachers, parents, and, of course, students.

He began the process of change with hundreds of community meetings. He asked the community what they wanted to see, what they were most proud of, and what challenges needed to be addressed. Many of the meetings were purposely interracial, to encourage discussions among diverse community members in an area with a history of racial discord.

Luvette and his team went door-to-door to talk to neighbors and concerned citizens. Discussions involved families with students as well as those residents who were not directly connected to the school system. He visited senior communities, asking the area’s retirees who did not have

children in school what they wanted to see in the young people who were their neighbors. His efforts paid off in what quickly became a two-way dialogue among community members.

Luvette and his team captured data from these meetings, to be reviewed and analyzed with an eye toward how to make positive changes. They used the feedback they gathered to come up with a plan and a mission to “engage, educate, and empower.”

These conversations have led to the amazing transformation seen in the school system over the past six years. The school community has been truly engaged in moving forward and making the necessary changes. They have accomplished a great deal in a short amount of time.

The changes have not all come about because of the information shared or even because of the content of the conversations. Rather, Luvelle cites a newly created “culture of love” that has truly been the difference.

Throughout his tenure, he has focused on building a loving culture among students, teachers, civic leaders, and the community as a whole. In Luvelle’s words, “Information can’t change hearts, only love can.”

He is convinced that Ithaca is home to the best and brightest – and most accomplished – young people in the world. He also understands how important nonacademics are to the overall development of those young people. While many school systems facing budget constraints look to arts, music, and athletics as the first programs to be cut, the Ithaca system continues to emphasize the arts and athletics, even under budget pressures and pressures to improve academic achievement. This decision was, at least in part, a result of community involvement.



The initial discussions in the community involved the question of which programs were most important and most appreciated by the students, their parents, their teachers, and the community as a whole. Arts and athletics were the answers. Students wanted to, needed to continue to be involved in music, drama, and other arts-related activities. They also wanted to and needed to focus on their athletic achievements.

Luvell Brown can definitely relate to those points. He admits that his own athletic involvement in high school contributed significantly to his success throughout school and into his career. He developed leadership skills in athletics that led to his ability to also do well in his studies. He believes – and indeed it has been proven – that students perform better academically, become better leaders, and develop better socially and emotionally when they are involved in outside activities such as arts and athletics.

One of the main reasons the Ithaca system is seeing such achievement shifts is because of the continued emphasis and support of these extra-curricular areas. Luvell asks, “How could you eliminate these programs, knowing how much they contribute to achievements?” He adds that “as leaders, we must challenge ourselves to find other ways to manage budgets in lieu of eliminating programs that contribute to achievements.”

Inspiring such achievements does not always have to be about facts and data. Sometimes it can be about T-shirts. Luvell and his team have created the 6,000+ Thinkers movement and put their vision on thousands of T-shirts. Since thinking is “at the heart of all we do,” the T-shirts are designed to speak to everyone in the community with the school system’s mission,

“Engage. Educate. Empower.”

With 6,000 students, plus the members of the community as a whole, 6000+ Thinkers essentially includes everyone in the Ithaca area – parents, teachers, students, civic leaders, faith leaders, and business leaders. The T-shirts also feature an image of that community, with red dots showing where the schools are located and a white outline representing the people in those communities.

Solving problems in the school system requires such creativity. It also requires thinking. To Luvell, solving problems is “only possible if we think.” He is focused on helping students and adults get to higher levels of thinking, to help them create new knowledge by multiplying thinking with new information. So, 6000+ Thinkers, T-shirts and all, carries that strong message throughout the Ithaca community.

Luvell sees as part of his challenge “getting folks to do things they can choose not to do.” He recognizes that there are protections in the state and in the culture that enable people to choose not to do things. They can accept mediocrity and choose not to be inspired. These people have to be motivated. He and his team are doing that through their community meetings, the 6000+ Thinkers movement (and the T-shirts), and sharing the data they’ve compiled as a result of their discussions.

He also recognizes that the culture has to change for the situation to change. Luvell has instilled a “culture of love” in the school system. He has been building that loving culture since day one on the job. When he arrived, he walked into a situation that was filled with achievement gaps, racial tension, and social divide. His goal was to bring the community

together, to create a consistency from classroom to classroom, from school to school. Even though there were “pockets of excellence” in the Ithaca schools, he has worked to move toward a more consistent achievement level throughout the Ithaca City School District.



In addition to challenges of culture, budget, and achievement gaps, Luvell was also met with a poor infrastructure of technology tools six years ago. The system’s technology required significant upgrading, again in the face of budget constraints. His job in this regard was to help the community understand more about “when” rather than “if” the technology would be upgraded and made more consistent across the school system. They moved very quickly to the “when and what” to ensure that technology was available to all students and teachers across the entire school system.

Even though there have been significant achievements in the Ithaca school system over the past six years, all has not gone smoothly. Luvell is open to admitting there were some missteps, particularly early on in his tenure. He believes it was in part due to his naiveté, and in part due to his intense passion, that he thought everything could be changed dramatically in a shorter amount of time. He realizes now that true change requires patience and dedication and quite often takes a little longer.

Of course, six years is in reality not that long, considering the improvements that have been made. With graduation rates increasing from 78 percent to over 90 percent, Luvell says they are now speaking in terms of numbers of students who are not graduating rather than percentages. They can now focus on those students, to determine how to help them.



He is convinced that the right conversations can eliminate achievement gaps. Not only is the graduation rate increasing, but the Ithaca school system has also seen a 64 percent reduction in discipline referrals and a 58 percent increase in enrollment in cocurricular programs during Luvelle's tenure. Throughout the past six years, he has stayed true to his vision and mission and to his focus on community involvement, his emphasis on

thinking, and his belief in a culture of love.

Luvelle Brown was firmly entrenched in Virginia when the call came from Ithaca. He was a teacher, an assistant principal, a principal, and the Albemarle Public Schools' first chief information officer. He had no idea what Upstate New York held for him. He says he had an image of New York and its skyscrapers when he planned his first visit to Ithaca. What he found

found a loving, concerned community ready to move forward for the sake of its students.

Luvelle Brown and his family now call Ithaca home. He looks forward to continuing his work, for the next six years and beyond. He is determined, focused, and passionate about his mission. He has no hesitation in making his bold statement that "we will be at 100 percent graduation rate." Given his successes so far, the students, teachers, and parents in Ithaca should have no doubt that will become a reality in the very near future.

was bitter winter weather that starts in the fall and lasts well into the spring. He found incredible fall foliage of brilliant oranges, yellows, and reds, as well as breathtaking lakes and gorges. He also

PAT FONTANA is a business writer and communications trainer, with a background in corporate training and community college instruction. Her business, WordsWorking, focuses on improving workplace communications, concentrating on the fundamentals of human interactions.

Hear more of the Ithaca Story from Brown & his team at the SAANYs Annual Conference on October 22.



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