



Sekou Robertson, Principal, LEARN Excel, Greg White, President & CEO, LEARN Charter School Network, Neal Sales Griffin, CEO, CodeNow

A New Voice For JPA

by Derrick Buckingham, Chief Development Officer

Recently, I had the pleasure of meeting with Neal Sales Griffin. Neal grew up on 49th & Drexel, in the Kenwood community on the South Side of Chicago. He comes from a very low-income background and knows what it's like to work through life's challenges. As a youth, Neal witnessed the effects of violence and trauma in his neighborhood. In spite of those challenges, Neal persevered.

He went on to graduate from Mount Carmel High School and continued his education at Northwestern University. It was during this time that he realized a passion for helping people.

As an adult, Neal has maintained that passion, particularly around technology and entrepreneurship. He is a graduate of Northwestern University's School of Education and Social Policy. He is now a successful entrepreneur, having started businesses small and large: two barber shops and two other enterprises, including a digital media business.

Neal realized that technology and computer programming were going to be important. So, he studied on his own and learned all he could about software engineering and computer

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science. Subsequently, Neal launched one of the very first coding schools about seven years ago and worked to help open 1871, an incubator for ideas located here in the city. Neal now runs CodeNow, a non-profit that helps high-schoolers, particularly those from under-represented or underserved backgrounds, get their start in software development.

Neal is an achiever. He is what JPA is all about. Neal is also laser-focused on making a meaningful contribution in helping as many kids as possible. Given his commitment to serve, I knew he'd appreciate learning more about our work at JPA. To that end, Neal accepted my invitation to meet with me, Selma Walker, our Senior Director of School Partnerships, and Sekou Robertson, Principal of LEARN Excel, one of JPA's partner schools.

Sekou is an exceptional principal who knows how to get the most from his staff and students. Due to his leadership, LEARN Excel has a 92% teacher retention rate, a rare statistic. He graciously took time from his jam-packed schedule to talk about the value JPA has provided to the children and the school.

He told us that JPA works with some of their most severely impacted students and that our therapists are skilled at “peeling back the layers” to discover the deep trauma many students have. Sekou said, “I know the importance of the work they do, so I make JPA a priority. When it's time to bring them back every year, I say yes without a doubt.”

During our conversation, we covered a range of topics, from the importance of having JPA therapists at LEARN Excel, to the significance of having a great principal to set the right tone and climate at the school in order for interventions to work.

Later, Sekou took us on a tour of the school. We had a chance to speak with Greg White, President and CEO of Learn Charter School Network. He said, “I love JPA,” and was very complimentary of our work and the service we provide their children.

It was great visiting LEARN Excel and introducing Neal Sales Griffin to Sekou and to our work. Neal has offered to support JPA and help us get the message out about what we do. He said during our meeting, “We've got work to do.” I couldn't agree more.

Thank you, Sekou Robertson and Greg White, for opening your doors to us. [JPA](#)