



GUILFORD EDUCATION ALLIANCE



Lift Every Voice: Afi Johnson-Parris

This eighth edition of GEA's Lift Every Voice series is written by GEA board member, Afi Johnson-Parris. A native of Newport News, VA, Afi graduated from college and served her country as an officer in the US Air Force before moving on to earn a law degree from the University of Virginia's School of Law. She is a NC Board certified family law specialist practicing in Greensboro. Afi is the past president of the Greensboro Bar Association and immediate past chair of NC Bar Association Family Law Section.

In November, Afi participated in GEA's annual Principal for a Day event and toured Brooks Global Elementary School. Although she and her husband Steven are the parents of two GCS students, getting a first-hand look at how educators were

handling the pandemic left her in awe. "I realized I was in the presence of greatness in the most ordinary setting - an elementary school," Afi writes. Take a minute to read her observations and learn why her essay is entitled "'More.'"

-- Winston

More

By: Afi Johnson-Parris

Overwhelmed, humbled, and guilty. I felt all those feelings wash over me as I toured Brooks Global for Guilford Education Alliance's *Principal for a Day* program. The challenges facing the principal, Dr. Darcy Kemp, were great, and the resources were limited. I wondered how she was going to make it all happen for the students that would soon enter her doors when they returned to in-person instruction.

Dr. Kemp walked me through the library and cafeteria, now converted into classroom space, as she explained the social distancing requirements, staffing shifts, and student mixes that were considered for forming each classroom. There were so many details to consider from how the students would flow in and out of the school to how and when cleaning would take place throughout the day.

Everyone, from janitors to students, would have some role in keeping the school clean and safe.

No one degree, course, or experience could have provided Dr. Kemp all she needed to know to make the decisions she faced in preparation for in-person instruction. She was relying on the health department, the brain trust of her colleagues, GCS administration, the generosity of parents, and more to pull it all together. At this point, my overwhelm shifted to awe.

I realized I was in the presence of greatness in the most ordinary setting - an elementary school.

To hear of all that she and her staff were doing to prepare and to watch the teachers multitasking between kindergartners in the room and a few students online was beyond impressive. It was amazing. I had not seen educators called upon to adapt and innovate in so many ways, all while pushing through any concerns they had about their own personal safety and possible COVID-19 exposure. The positive spirit you could feel in the midst of such adversity left me humbled to witness it.

Toward the end of my tour, Dr. Kemp showed me the isolation room, where a student who fell ill with symptoms that could be COVID-related would be held and watched by an adult. The room was no bigger than a walk-in closet and the adult's protective gear was kept in a plastic container not much larger than a shoebox.

Here, a child and an adult would stay until a parent came to retrieve the child. I was struck by sacrifice that duty would require.

**We, the community, are asking a lot of these educators.
In the moment, it felt as if we were asking too much.**

The care and thought the Brooks staff were putting into their job was immeasurable, yet I knew that educators were being asked repeatedly for more. More protections for students, more answers to questions about return to normal operations, more instruction in more engaging ways, more help for parents homeschooling. More, more, more.

Suddenly, every grumble that crossed my lips about the schools' COVID-19 response convicted me. The hours I spent with Dr. Kemp felt precious. I was in the way and she had much to do, so I thanked her for her time and exited quickly.

A frequent question I heard and saw on social media was, "private and charter schools are all learning in person, why isn't Guilford County Schools?" I know that in large part the reason is because those private and charter schools have more. More resources provides extra space for social distancing, staff to instruct smaller student groups, cleaning supplies and protective gear, and just plain more to work with to address these challenging times.

**What would happen if, instead of asking for more
from our educators, we gave more?**

My *Principal for a Day* experience left me with that question. It also left me with a greater resolve to extend some grace wherever I could to these educators and to ask that the community does the same.

**We may not have all the resources that are needed,
but we can certainly give educators our support and a little grace.
They deserve more.**

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