

Great Schools New Jersey – The Association of High Need School Districts

Wednesday, September 13, 2023, via Zoom

I. Welcome: Kenyon Kummings, GSNJ President, Superintendent, Wildwood City School District

Superintendent Kummings welcomed participants to the meeting and gave a few shoutouts to members and staff who helped organize the first GSNJ meeting of the school year. He then introduced the guest speaker, Pablo Muñoz, a retired superintendent and previous member of GSNJ.

Superintendent Kummings said Mr. Muñoz is currently the Managing Director of Muñoz & Company, an educational leadership consulting firm. He earned his BA in Psychology from Yale University and his Master's degree from Columbia University. He has extensive experience as a teacher, administrator, and superintendent in both Elizabeth and Passaic.

II. Presentation: Pablo Muñoz – The Leader's Algorithm

Mr. Muñoz thanked GSNJ for allowing him the platform to present his book. He began his presentation with a brief introduction about his life. He said his family is from Aguada, Puerto Rico, and he was born and raised in Elizabeth, NJ. His parents moved to the mainland U.S. when they were teenagers. He said his parents did low-wage work. His father was a chef, and his mother was a seamstress. He added that he has 70 first cousins, and like other immigrant families, family was his whole world and is still extremely important to him.

Mr. Muñoz graduated from Elizabeth High School, where he played baseball. He received his undergraduate degree in psychology from Yale and then went on to pursue higher education at Columbia University. His master's is in education and administration, and he used his degree to propel him into the school system. Mr. Muñoz's career largely took place in Elizabeth, where he began as a bilingual social studies teacher and worked in special education and regular education and as a supervisor. In 2005, he became the Elizabeth superintendent and then later transferred to Passaic, where he was superintendent for seven and a half years.

Mr. Muñoz established a leadership consulting firm and is currently a consultant and author, an adjunct professor at Lehigh University, and the proud father of two daughters.

The Leader's Algorithm is a book that Mr. Muñoz wrote during his retirement. It was published on July 25 of this year. He wrote the book to help inspire new and current administrators by sharing what he learned on his 30-year journey in education. He hopes the book will be used to create an effective leadership framework and strategy for district leaders.

The book is divided into eight chapters: Defining the Leader's Algorithm, Leading Through Vision, Leading Through Expectations, Leading Through Teamwork, Leading with Skills, Leading in Your Community, Leading with Resilience, and Leading with Love.

The first chapter of *The Leader's Algorithm* defines what the leader's algorithm is. It details how an individual can write their own personal theory of action to implement in their work. Mr. Muñoz's algorithm is this: Personal Theory of Action (pTOA) + Execution + Accountability = Transformation. It is a hypothesis of what you can do personally to achieve your goals through your leadership framework and strategy. It is a statement of beliefs about the school system itself, and it is what Mr. Muñoz used to lead his districts.

He added that a theory of action is a hypothesis that if we do A, B and C, then we'll get X, Y and Z results. He said an organizational theory of action is a logical sequence of values and actions that will get you to a result. In an ideal situation, the school board will adopt it as policy.

Mr. Muñoz shared his personal Theory of Action that he utilized while in the Elizabeth and Passaic public schools. He led with a focus on three items: keeping the school system focused on its vision and mission to produce excellent results, selecting effective leaders to carry out the mission, and getting the resources that are needed into the classroom. He said he selected leaders who focus on six items: vision, mission, instructional core, teamwork, trust, and high expectations.

Mr. Muñoz said he was inspired by the biography of the former president of Coca-Cola and tried incorporating for-profit ideals into an educational setting. He said he followed three Ls in Elizabeth: love, laser-like focus on teaching and learning, and leadership. He added that the context in Passaic was very different. It was a broken system. He said the business office and purchasing were very strong, but every other part of the organization was broken, so he had to come up with different principles. There the goal was to prepare students for college and career.

The third chapter in *The Leader's Algorithm* is Leading Through Expectations. In this chapter, Mr. Muñoz discusses the instructional core and how to improve student learning. He described that as what happens between students and teachers in the classroom, or in other words the tasks that are put in front of the student. He said if you work on one of these elements, you have to work on the others, too. He added that the task predicts performance, and students must be given cognitively challenging tasks.

The fifth chapter in the book is Leading with Skills. This section emphasizes council and cohorts. Mr. Muñoz said the best way to lead a team in learning is by learning simultaneously with them. He read books with his team to build community, break down silos, learn about teamwork, and create a common language across the district. He said it is important to lead your community and create meaningful connections with a team. The politics of leadership are often tricky, but establishing a good relationship with your school board and team is important.

Mr. Muñoz candidly shared his personal experience with crisis and mental health. He said the later chapters in the book are very raw and include stories from his life, especially in the chapter *Leading with Resilience*. He said his goal is to end the shame and taboo around speaking about mental health, and this is the main reason why he discusses it in his book. He made it a point to note that if you're in crisis, don't wait to get help. In the book he shares the National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline and noted that there are professionals who can help you through turmoil.

He told the story of the conflict between the school board and local elected officials in Elizabeth. He said federal officials came into the city, and ultimately there were arrests. He said it was stressful enough to be a superintendent, but the political war added to that, leading to anxiety and depression. He said he got help, and it was the best experience he ever had. He added that he wanted to write about that to help anyone who might find themselves in crisis.

Mr. Muñoz said *Leading with Love* is the final chapter of *The Leader's Algorithm*. Love your students, your school district, and your team the way you love your family, he said, and it will make such a difference. He said he wanted the same things for the students in his district that he wanted for his daughters. He then summed up the book this way: write and share your theory of action and execute it with discipline and reflection.

He let meeting participants know they could get a free book chapter on his website, or they could email him for a free book. Information is available here:

<https://www.themunozcompany.com/the-leaders-algorithm>

Superintendent Sandra Montañez-Diodonet, who became the superintendent in Passaic after Mr. Muñoz retired, thanked him for all the work he had done in the school district and the structures he put in place to make the school system as amazing as it is. She said following Mr. Muñoz was the best thing she ever did.

Melanie Schulz was struck by Mr. Muñoz's honesty and candor in the book. She admired his ability to navigate through difficult situations. She said that having worked in the Legislature she knew that politics have an impact.

Superintendent Kummings asked if there were any other "leading with love" memories that Mr. Muñoz credits for being a pivotal point in supporting him to get where he is now. Mr. Muñoz shared the touching story of his high school baseball coach, who appears in the book, sitting down with him on his porch and just listening to him. It meant a lot because it showed that he cared, and it was a memory that constantly stuck with him.

Superintendent Kummings thanked Mr. Muñoz for his presentation. He said that he found the book to be very eye-opening and beneficial.

III. Legislative Update: Melanie Schulz, NJASA Director of Government Relations

Ms. Schulz explained that the Legislature is currently in recess until the November election, so there are not many updates to share.

She said the Legislature's Lame Duck session will run from November 8 through January 8, and there is expected to be a lot of activity during that time, especially since about fifteen percent of the Legislature is leaving.

She said JerseyCAN made a presentation on the "Science of Reading" at the Department of Education last week, and there has been some confusion regarding the presentation and a program of the same name offered by another vendor. Ms. Schulz is hosting a meeting at NJASA with JerseyCAN to talk through this.

There has also been some confusion regarding the College Board, and Ms. Schulz has been receiving emails from members about the College Board wanting to access district servers as they transition to the digital PSAT and SAT. She said there is more information to come on this, but please contact her if you're experiencing issues.

IV. ELC Update: Sharon Kregel, Director of Policy, Strategic Partnerships and Communications

Sharon Kregel informed the group that the next GSNJ meeting will take place in Atlantic City during Fall Workshop on Tuesday, October 24, at 9 a.m. ELC's Executive Director Bob Kim will be giving a presentation, so please come with questions and comments for him.

Superintendent Kummings added that anyone can attend this meeting even if they are not active GSNJ members.

V. Approval: May 18, 2023, Meeting Minutes

The minutes were moved and approved.

Superintendent Kummings thanked everyone for joining the meeting and encouraged members to share their ideas on possible speakers and topics for future GSNJ meetings.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:17 a.m.