
Case Study: Atlanta Heights Charter School

Atlanta, GA | 93% Free and Reduced Lunch | 94% African-American | 5% Hispanic | 1% Other

Profile: Melissa Jones Clarke, 2014 Ryan Award Winner

- | Founding Principal, Atlanta Heights Charter School, Atlanta, GA
- | Principal, Willow Charter Academy, Lafayette, LA

When Melissa Jones Clarke arrived to the Georgia elementary school she was charged with turning around, she remembers saying: *"I don't know what was going on before me, but I think we've done a lot of pitying of children. From housing authorities or trailer parks, we've pitied, we've not taught,"* she says. *"It's 'Oh, these babies.' No. These are scholars, and we're preparing them for Harvard or Howard or Spelman, Morehouse, Brown. Where do you want to go, and why, and how can I get you there?"*

It's that sort of "pig-headed optimism," as she calls it, that has driven her staff to excellence at all of the schools she has led, including Atlanta Heights Charter School in Georgia, for which Clarke earned the 2014 Ryan Award for transformational school leadership. During her tenure at Atlanta Heights, Clarke helped pull her students, who arrived years below grade level, up to new levels. Based on MAP/NWEA data for the 2013-14 school year, the school achieved an average growth rate of 170 percent for grades K-1 and 130 percent for grades 2-8. By her final year at Atlanta Heights, 91 percent of students were meeting state standards in reading. In 2014, she founded Willow Charter Academy in Lafayette, LA, importing the systems and structures that propelled Atlanta Heights to greatness.

"Any time we wanted to talk about school culture or how do you successfully open a new school in an urban environment, we visited Atlanta Heights Charter School to see the work that Melissa Jones Clarke was doing," says Tamika Draper, a director of school quality for National Heritage Academies,

which counts the school as part of its network. When visiting her schools, Draper knows not to find Clarke in her office. *"I had to get a radio so I could locate her,"* she says. *"She's in classrooms. She knows the scholars by name. She's doing lunch duty. She's observing."*

A college summer spent teaching English to 5th-graders in Africa hooked Clarke on teaching. After graduating from Ohio University with a bachelor's degree in elementary education, Clarke worked in Rockford and earned a master's in education leadership from National Louis University before deciding to move with her husband-to-be to Atlanta, where she started teaching in a large school. She was impressed with how smoothly the principal handled things, so she asked to interview him about safety and security—"all that stuff you don't learn from theory" in education programs, she says. He started onboarding her. *"At the same time, I started getting this itch, like 'I can do this.'"*

District officials in Rockford called to inform her of open principal positions, and to emphasize they were seeking new and fresh ideas. At 27, newly married with a 6-month-old baby, she took over her first school as principal, and her inexperience showed, she says. *"I was haughty. I was the youngest on staff, the only person of color, and I was the boss. I had my Macy's suit and my Coach briefcase—no shoes to change into for the first day—but I was in charge,"* Clarke recalls. The associate superintendent considered her outfit and asked where her tennis shoes or flats were. *"I was like 'Oh, I'm a principal, I'm just going to be in my office'...and he's like, 'Right, the magic happens in these classrooms, and I expect you to be in these classrooms,'"* she says.

She had no assistant principal and later learned she was the fifth principal in three years to lead

the school. *"I had to take that ego and throw that in the trash. I had to take that jacket off, throw on some flats and get to business,"* she says.

Her family returned to Georgia, where she became an assistant principal then took over a school where teachers had been found sleeping in their classrooms. Many staffers left through the transition, but she was able to bring in some "rock star" teachers, she says. The first year, the school outperformed seven of the nine nearby elementary schools. The staff earned a governor's award for making the most gains.

Under Clarke's direction, the school continued to make improvements, but she wanted to work in an urban school in Atlanta. She was selected to be founding principal of the Atlanta Heights Charter School operated by National Heritage Academies. *"I need to be where kids need me. I don't want to be somewhere where I'm just hanging out. Great! Everyone's on grade level. I want the child that's two, three, sometimes four years below grade level,"* she says.

The students coming in to Atlanta Heights were there: 91 percent of students in grades 2-5 were two to four years below grade level. Her mother questioned why she would leave the school she'd worked so hard to turnaround to start anew at another school. *"I said, 'if I don't, who will? Who will do it?' Because it's not easy, but it's possible,"* Clarke says.

Clear Priorities

The need at Atlanta Heights was overwhelming at first, Clarke says. *"The academics hit me in the face. Wow. I didn't know it was going to be this low,"* she says. In her attack plan, she set two goals: establishing a strong school culture and working toward academic excellence. *"If it didn't fit into one of those boxes, I didn't do it,"* she says. And that meant saying no to things or delegating them to others. Once, a health clinic partner that gave free physicals and immunizations to students offered to create a community garden at the school. *"I*

knew we could not take that on," she says, because it didn't fit into one of those two boxes. Clarke ultimately had a volunteer board member run it as an after-school venture that did not affect the focus of her leadership team.

High Expectations for All

In building support for her vision, she set expectations for the parents as well as the students. *"We would always say we want families here, but make sure you're here to be part of the solution, not part of the problem,"* she says. At dismissal, Clarke had parents walk into the building to pick up their children, connecting them to teachers and what was going on in school.

"The parents love her," says Draper. *"How do you get parents to love you right away? I don't know, but she has about 15 parents here daily, because she involves them with the process from day one."* It's not unusual to find Clarke out to dinner with parents, or staying involved with families in other ways, Draper says. *"Every leader doesn't do those things. It doesn't come in a book. It's not something you read. It's something you naturally have,"* she says.

It's Working

During Atlanta Heights' first year, the school ranked in the bottom 3 out of the charter network's 65 schools. *"I said this is insane. I did not come here to fail. We've got to revamp. We really dug into the data and turned it up,"* she says. By the winter of year two, out of an expanded group of the network's 71 schools, Atlanta Heights jumped to No. 34 for performance.

Clarke tried to keep all processes as transparent as possible, so her staff members could plainly see how they could excel. At both Willow and Atlanta Heights, she shared details early on about how everyone would be evaluated. The team provided specific examples of what good teaching looked like and how a teacher could score high in each category.

The leadership team also worked hard to create a culture where it was OK to have lessons videotaped, to focus on struggles, and to reflect on how to improve. She made sure teachers knew that *“you’re going to mess up. But we’re keeping a positive growth mindset. Expect that. That’s ok. That keeps me honest, and holds us accountable,”* she says. Exit tickets, surveys, and focus groups also contributed to that accountability.

What It Looks Like

Even before she opened her new school, Willow Charter Academy in a renovated Albertson’s grocery store building, Clarke could envision what the school would look like. Students would walk on the right side of the hallways, moving through without talking, facing forward, walking with purpose. There would be hallway learning going on, with interventionists working with small groups in hallway nooks. *“Every moment matters,”* she says.

To build the movement amongst the staff, Clarke enlisted three high-performing teachers from her previous school to take on leadership roles. *“They grow teachers like them. I can close my eyes and know they’ve got it,”* she says.

She also makes sure to recognize her team for outstanding work. Every week, she encourages staff members to fill out reward slips that spotlight colleagues for exhibiting teamwork, dedication or other positive qualities. Clarke organizes Halloween celebrations, crazy sweater days, and other team-oriented activities. She also jumps in to teach, leading her own small groups to work with lower-performing students. *“The heart of every leader is a teacher,”* Clarke says. *“The staff should view you as instructional leader, but not with too big of an ego that you can’t sub in or do small groups. I love that time of my day, when I have a group that I serve.”*

Looking for Magic

A teacher candidate’s years of experience are not as important to Clarke as *“magic is,”* she says. *“If you believe in kids, you can get on our bus,”* she says. A sense of urgency is also crucial; Clarke wants to see staff members *“teaching like your hair is on fire.”*

Mandy Fueston, who worked for Clarke as the media specialist at Atlanta Heights, says Clarke has a knack for recognizing the strengths of her staff. *“It didn’t matter whether you were a first-year teacher or teaching for five, six, seven years—if you had a strength, she wanted you to show it to help the other staff members grow. She believed in us teaching one another and helping other people and creating a family,”* Fueston says.

Clarke starts the day by playing upbeat music. The “connections” team (those teachers who are connected to every scholar in the building because they teach art, music, PE, library, etc.) are lined up on the curb. *“We’re valet-servicing, so we are opening car doors so we can greet that parent and that scholar,”* she says. Clarke is at the main door shaking hands and doling out her “good mornings.” Teachers follow the same routine at the classroom door, greeting the students by name, getting them started on the day by pointing to the ‘Do Now’ on the board. These routines start the day out pleasantly, and also provide a *“day-to-day reading of the parents and the staff,”* Clarke says.

“She is relentless about doing the things she feels are most important to make the education of our kids successful,” says Lybi Gittens, a director of school quality for National Heritage Academies. *“Melissa lays the path for her teachers to follow—she sets the direction for her school.”*

Teacher Michelle Olivier says Clarke set the high level of expectations at Willow immediately, during the initial staff training. Her vision was reflected in the staff interactions and trickled down to students and parents. *“The students had high expectations coming in. They knew we have to line up this way and be at a level 0. It was consistent*

across the board, not just in Ms. So and So's class. It was in every class," Olivier says. "The custodial staff, everyone, held students up to the same expectations."

To help teachers improve instruction, the leadership team observes each teacher weekly and provides detailed feedback and coaching. *"If I were a teacher at Willow, I'd expect my dean in my classroom daily and my principal in there daily. I'd expect an informal observation once a week from the dean, and if something was glaring, she may be back on a Monday, Wednesday, or Friday to make sure she's giving the right support."*

Clarke is also a principal who is not too busy to walk a young student to the nearby mall at the end of the day to meet a parent at work. *"I don't shake her hand like everybody else does,"* says student Raven Suire. *"I hug her every morning." Why? "Because she's very special to me."*

Assessment and Data Analysis

Clarke has built a solid assessment calendar to monitor student and staff progress toward the school goals, with a schedule that includes NWEA-MAP assessments, PARCC Performance Based Assessments, state exams and ACT Explore. On a more daily basis, teachers incorporate exit tickets, and all have adopted weekly common

assessments. Clarke relies heavily on data collected from teacher observations. She says the continual collection and analysis of the data helps put teachers in the right frame of mind to grow their students. *"If you do testing once a year, that's a snapshot,"* Clarke says. *"But if you take more of a portfolio, it's over time—you take away the fear."*

New teachers participate in data talk simulations where other teachers model what should be happening in these scripted meetings. A "Data Room" also helps center the staff on the importance of data collection and analysis. Yes, numbers are a big part of what they do, but *"we have to move those numbers away and talk about what's going on in the life of that child,"* Clarke adds. Sometimes that entails buying alarm clocks, toothpaste, or other things students might need to get to school. *"Whatever excuses there were, we eliminated them,"* she says.

One wall shows results for every teacher, every grade level, and every student, in reading, math, social studies, and science. Those student names marked in red are three years below grade level according to NWEA results. Those in yellow are two years behind, while green means students are on grade level, and blue indicates they are above. *"There's nothing to hide in that data room—for myself as the leader, the deans, the teachers,"* Clarke says. *"That grounds us."*