Meet 2018 Ryan Award Winner:

Jody-Anne Jones

North Star Academy Clinton Hill Middle School
Newark, NJ
5-8

The Conductor

Jody-Anne Jones, principal of North Star Academy Clinton Hill Middle School, moves as a silent force through the classroom and halls, tending to any eyes not affixed on the speaker with a wave, smoothing any emotions from that morning with a pat on the arm (and likely a chat in the hall), acknowledging any teachers under the weather or stressed with a nod and a plan of support.

She keeps a desk in the hallway, where she continues to keep a close eye on the emotional landscape of the school so her students can focus.

It is a strict environment, but Jones sees joy in the intellectual curiosity of her students, and in their accomplishments. As she walks into one class, a boy is eager to show his computer screen to share that he aced a particular test. His face is all smile. She sees joy in the new teachers who arrive at 6:45 a.m. eager to improve their classroom management skills for the kids. She asks each new applicant what percentage of responsibility parents, the student and the teacher each have in a child’s education. “The answer should be 100 percent teacher,” Jones says. “If a parent works three jobs and can’t do homework with the child, that child is still deserving to learn.”

She lays the groundwork to get to know every student in fifth grade by teaching a course that lays out the core values for the school. “Students know that she means business but at the same time, they also know that she cares about them,” teacher Michelle De Sousa says. Hadley Roach, director of curriculum and instruction, agrees. “She balances an incredible push for rigor alongside the ability to see the full picture in a student, a family, a teacher and an experience. She is no excuses, but at the same time, she has a deep knowledge of the complexity of the community in which she is working and that she is serving,” Roach says.
When students enter the Clinton Hill campus as fifth-graders, they lag behind students from more affluent districts on state exams. But by eighth grade, they close that gap and reverse it, outperforming those students by almost 30 percentage points in math and 15 percentage points in English-language arts, as they did in 2017.

Clinton Hill pulls from the surrounding neighborhood, which has lacked quality educational opportunities for children. The high school that Jones herself attended is just down the street, and she reminds the kids and families that she’s from here. She attributes her success to the involvement of her parents, and lets her students know she is working hard to create amazing opportunities for them. After earning a bachelor’s degree in English and Africana Studies from Rutgers University and a master’s in professional studies from Cornell University’s Africana Studies and Research Center, Jones started as a teacher at North Star Academy in 2006. She served as an instructional leader and a dean of students and curriculum before being named principal of the Clinton Hill Middle School in August 2014.

Under Jones’ leadership, 72 percent of Clinton Hill Middle School students met or exceeded expectations on the 2017 PARCC exam in English-language arts, compared to 56 percent of students statewide and 68 percent for students who are non-economically disadvantaged. In math, 60 percent of Clinton Hill students met or exceeded expectations, compared to 45 percent statewide and 57 percent non-economically disadvantaged.

But perhaps the best measure of her tenure is how prepared her students are to compete once they leave the school. Michael Mann, a 2014 Ryan Award winner and head of school at North Star Academy College Preparatory High School, says the Clinton Hill graduates come in to his high school with a high level of energy and focus. A Clinton Hill alum was a recent valedictorian and accepted to all 10 universities where she applied, including Harvard and MIT. She chose Yale University, he says.

“Jody is very results oriented,” Mann says. “She conveys the sense of urgency and she doesn’t wait for problems to solve themselves or get worse or float away. She tackles problems she sees head on.” Jones also invests her staff fully in their mission. In a recent staff survey, 100 percent of the Clinton Hill staff rated Jones as “very inspiring.”

Student Vera Aimunmondion says Jones makes clear the reasoning for the firm structures. “She’s teaching us these things so that we can take her leadership and we can internalize that we need to be able to keep on doing this work so we can become better because she’s telling us that she wants us to be the best that we can be,” she says. “Ms. Jones said she knows that other schools don’t give us the amount of work that she’s giving us. But we are able to understand with maturity that we’re doing this for a reason and the future is only going to be harder if you don’t start right now.”
The ‘Why’ Matters

When Jones was tapped as principal for the Clinton Hill campus, she recognized that taking over a school and replacing someone else as principal required a different skillset than starting a school fresh.

‘Taking over a school means that you’re going to have to get some information from stakeholders who are currently existing in the school to make sure that they are in tune and invested in the changes that you’re going to be making, and at the same time, feel really bought into you as a leader,” Jones says. She completed a fellowship at another successful North Star campus, where she learned many of the systems. But she did have her own vision of what the school should look like and how to get there. “I needed to think about the particular teachers who were great cultural leaders within the school who others will follow, so I had to get them on my side, but also explain the purpose of why I was going to make changes,” Jones says. Once she set her vision, she gathered thoughts from those staff members. “If their thoughts were different than mine, I would explain the purpose and why it was important for them to get behind it.”

How to get them on board? “Data points and at the same time being very purposeful in explaining why, consistently following up and demonstrating when you do this, this is what the impact is going to be,” Jones says. When she first stepped in as principal, she wanted to restart “brain breakfast,” where all students start their day with a quiet breakfast over some silent work. Teachers would be distracted trying to finish up a task on their laptop, or checking homework folders, and students were off task and not engaged. That murmur, just a murmur, could be felt the rest of the day, and would ripple through to classrooms, she says, and lead to more students in the dean’s office. She determined that it messaged to students that the staff was not 100 percent working as a team, so she “reset it.” She illustrated the ‘why’ by focusing on one student’s reaction to a positive comment a teacher wrote on his paper, as all the teachers were supposed to do during the breakfast. That action inflated the student’s mood, a mood he took into the classroom that helped him pay better attention, which showed up in the data. “I think I would not have gotten the same response if I’m just saying 100 percent at brain breakfast and stop there,” Jones says.

Hadley Roach, dean of curriculum and instruction, says Jones communicated a clear vision. “She was very fierce about making that vision come to life, and was very clear that she was making some changes to make student culture look how she wanted it to look but in the same way she was very cognizant of the feeling of the entire building,” Roach says. “She framed things in the language of what’s best for students.”
Buddy check-in

Jones refers to the students as “buddies,” a term of endearment she uses to remind everyone that despite the high expectations, they are still kids. The students take part in many celebrations, which often come during the morning circle time that also involves lessons on values such as perseverance. Chanice Minott, a seventh-grader, says she appreciates that Jones tries to relate to students. “If she notices that you’re having a bad day, she will share a situation that she had to try and help you out,” Minott says.

Each morning, Jones uses her morning walkthrough to check on certain “buddies” who may need some extra support or attention that day. She runs into a boy in the stairway who is upset because his mom cut his hair too short the day before. She gives him a quick pep talk, and later helps him walk into the classroom, announcing loudly that all the students should focus on themselves. She corrects a student who was talking during “brain breakfast” by making the point that younger students were watching him and he needed to be a leader in that moment.

As a teacher herself, Jones was “a warm demander,” explains De Sousa who taught with Jones before she became dean, and then principal. “She had very high expectations for students and was strict, no-nonsense—but her students really excelled.” She also built in celebrations. When she became dean of students, Jones would focus on what she could do to keep all the kids in the classroom, solving problems.

“She’s very steadfast on ‘this is the way it needs to be—there’s a gap, we close it, done,’” says dean of students Nick Mele.

Practice. Practice. Practice.

Teachers use professional development time to make sure they can take the new skill directly into the classroom. “People know that PD is not a waste of time. It’s going to teach them a skill or a set of skills that they’re going to use the very next day and it will improve the work they do in their classroom,” Roach says. Teachers also know that they need to incorporate this skill in class immediately, film themselves in action and share it with instructional leaders.

At 6:45 a.m. one day, four new teachers are positioned around the room, all talking loudly to an invisible classroom, hoping to improve their command of student attention. They take turns role playing individually in front of the coaches and Jones, who takes in the performances and adds notes such as: “Don’t forget to compliment them when they’ve met your expectations.”

The teachers implement every piece of feedback immediately and run through it several times to stamp it in their brains. As they practice giving directions for a transition, Jones edits their words,
tightening the language to cut all excess words. They will need to film a video next week of a reset and submit it. This is how it goes for the first month or two of school.

New teacher Leandro Bloin welcomed the early-morning sessions, which he says help him be more intentional in his speaking. “When it gets too wordy, you may just lose the students or the class. So you want to be clear and concise to the point you get them going, because you want to make sure that we focus our time on learning,” he says.
"There are a lot of experts in the building. I can’t do everything. So I asked them. I asked the question of what actions I can take to be a better leader—what are some of the things that I need to do to get stronger? So they also know that Ms. Jones isn’t perfect. She also has areas of growth. You need to have that sense of vulnerability and feel comfortable with that."

- Jody-Anne Jones
A school leader must identify and develop leaders, then delegate and trust them with the mission.

Hadley Roach was in her third year as a teacher at North Star Academy Clinton Hill Middle School and at a career crossroads considering whether to pursue a graduate degree or a new role. She turned to principal Jody-Anne Jones. "We had that conversation, and she did encourage me to think about staying in a capacity that would be exciting and interesting to me and was happy to brainstorm what that might be at the time," Roach says.

Jones counselled her into a role as director of curriculum and instruction, which allows her to still teach every day, but has enabled her to grow as a leader.

Jones continues to support Roach as a leader, offering insight into some of the decisions and actions she takes as principal. "She's really good about modeling something and then unpacking it to make it evident what she has done—'here's how I structure my planning meetings, and here's why I do it this way,'" Roach says.

Nick Mele says that after some success in the classroom, he started thinking about future steps. "Jody would always ask: What's your passion? What do you come to school for every day?" Mele recalls. "That question was tough for me to answer, and eventually we landed on my passion is the kids." They determined a dean of students role would keep him where he truly wanted to be: working with kids.

Teacher Michelle De Sousa says that Jones relies on her instructional team to train the newer teachers. In meetings, Jones models for instructional leaders how to invest teachers, by showing them data points, but reminds them to remain flexible and recognize what is already on teachers’ plates.

Jones also has an instinct for when her teachers may need a boost or to hear from her. "Just the other night, she sent an email to us as team leads thanking us for what we're doing for the seventh-grade team. That was just at the right moment," De Sousa says. "She's incredible at reading people and knowing what to do next."

To keep the leadership team, and whole staff, rooted in the mission, Jones uses data to compare Clinton Hill students’ performance to white students and those from wealthy areas, and pose the questions: "Are we doing them justice? Are they learning? Will they be at the same starting point when they apply to colleges in just a few years?" She will share news of the success of former alum and the schools they are entering to help teachers and leaders see the impact of their work. In summer, she grounds everyone in the mission, then again after winter break. "We've been going and going at 100 percent, so sometimes we'll get a montage of video clips of little parts of the school year highlighting students’ best moments or teachers' best moments, but it comes as a reflection of 'look at all the good we've done, all that students have grown, and let's keep pushing,'" De Sousa says.
As she walks quickly through the North Star Academy Clinton Hill Middle School halls one day, Jody-Anne Jones notices a particularly strong teacher without a clipboard and stops in her tracks. As part of an initiative to aggressively monitor student understanding of the material, teachers have been instructed to carry the clipboard to keep data on who is mastering the particular lesson and who needs help. Jones steps in the class and whispers to the teacher that the No. 1 teacher in the whole network carries the clipboard always, and is seeing her gap closing. “You need to do it,” Jones says.

Staff members say Jones’ level of follow-up and attention to detail keeps every teacher on board with the strategy and is crucial to the overall success of the Clinton Hill campus. While Jones makes a mental note to recheck the teacher later, she is pre-empted by the teacher coming down and showing her an updated clipboard with all her student data on it.

Jones balances the high expectations with support and respect for the staff, and she communicates her rationale for these decisions, says teacher Michelle De Sousa. “If (breakfast) starts off loose, that trickles down to first period of instruction, and that can’t happen. There’s always a reason behind that,” De Sousa says.

But all know to expect a follow-up if an expectation is not met. “If it was, ‘please send me your actions step or your analysis by 6 p.m.,’ and it’s 6:01, she will say, ‘I didn’t receive this in my inbox. Is it that I overlooked it? If not, please send it to me,’” De Sousa says. That goes to the heart of Jones’ philosophy of sweating the small stuff and the urgency of their mission. “You can’t let small things go, because everything else starts falling apart,” De Sousa says.

Jones “resets” things often, when she’s not seeing tasks done as she requested, and teachers will reset if students don’t transition in and out of a classroom correctly, or if they are not following instructions.
Student Vera Aimunmondion says that Ms. Jones may make them do something over again until they get it right. “She’s only doing that because she wants us to understand that we can do everything to our best ability,” she says. To make sure students pay attention to teachers’ aggressive monitoring, posted signs explain what students should be seeing in class, including: “Your teacher always has a pen and a clipboard in hand while walking around the room.”

She focuses the staff on goals in the same way. After noticing during her frequent classroom walkthroughs that aggressive monitoring wasn’t as consistent as the leadership team wanted, she called an immediate meeting for the morning. “We don’t wait two weeks, because that opportunity is lost to collect data; fix instruction,” De Sousa says.

As Nick Mele transitioned into his role as dean of students, Jones was essential in helping him organize and set trackers to keep him accountable to the goals he had for himself and his students. They created the tracker together to make sure it covered all bases, and they set weekly meetings to review it. “We know exactly what needs to be done. And we know that it needs to be carried out for the course of the day, or Jody will follow up with us. And it’s just been that way since the day I walked in the door,” Mele says.
Q&A
with Jody-Anne Jones

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Tips for new principals

• Be visible in your building.

• Message urgency.

• Track everything. Don’t ask staff to do anything if you can’t track it.

• Send emails when staff do not respond to deadlines, otherwise it pulls away from overall accountability.

• Send weekly emails to the leadership team and have them personalize it to send out to their team. That extra step invests the leaders and adds a second layer of accountability.

• Maintain consistency in the daily schedule so people know you’re there. “Presence is important,” Jones says.

• Move emails to the appropriate folder right away so you can stay organized and find what you need.

• Build everything into the calendar so it happens.
What advice do you have for new principals?

Have a vision of exactly what you want your school to look like and map out what are the three targeted areas you’re going to focus on to improve in order to get there and you continuously do that. You continuously message that to your team.

Next is also making sure that you have a system for praise. After my first year, I recognized that I wanted to make these adjustments to try and make the school better, and I wasn’t actually praising my team like I should. And that was not good for staff culture. People are working hard, people are doing what they need to do—you need to praise them and let them feel good about what they’re doing and also inform them of the impact that they’re making. For a teacher, that’s very difficult to see because they’re just in the day-to-day.

Another important thing was to think about a system for them to praise each other. So we also have peer-to-peer praise that we send out.

Be very clear about how you are going to follow up with people and how you are going to give feedback to people. Let them know that when you give feedback, it is for their own professional development, it’s not personal. Leaders are afraid to give feedback and be direct because they’re thinking about the response the teacher is going to give...I am very clear from the beginning about who I am as a leader, what am I looking for and how I’m going to give feedback. I’m very open about my story. You have to be vulnerable and let people know what you’re working on.

How do you set your priorities every year?

I look at the data toward the end of the year to see what is it that I need to action plan from these three buckets—student culture, staff culture and data-driven culture. What are the things that need to be in place to help move the school. You ask yourself which is going to close a gap, which is going to inspire people, which is going to get kids more invested.

You have to ask yourself: What’s the highest leverage change that needs to be made to make sure you close the achievement gap for students?