

The Good Principal

Three years ago, Otis Hackney was asked to turn around a school notorious for tensions among students. The key, he says, is simple, but elusive: Teaching people to respect each other.

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South Philadelphia High School is known throughout the world for the talent it has produced. Its alumni include Jack Klugman, the stage, TV and film actor; Marian Anderson, a contralto and one of the most celebrated musicians of the 20th century; and Israel Goldstein, the founder of Brandeis University.

Three years ago, the venerable school's reputation was tarnished. After racial tensions escalated into violence, an investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice found that the school had been "deliberately indifferent to the severe and pervasive harassment" of Asian students.

Fifteen miles away, at Springfield Township High School, an upscale suburban school ranked 16th among *Philadelphia* magazine's top public high schools in 2009, Principal Otis Hackney followed the news coverage. Hackney had completed his master's in educational leadership at Lehigh in 2006 and served two years as assistant principal at South Philly before taking the reins at Springfield.

At a faculty meeting, someone asked Hackney if he was glad that he was no longer at South Philly.

"I said, 'If I had gotten what I wanted, I'd be principal of South Philly right now,'" Hackney recalls.

Not long afterward, a friend from South Philly called. The conversation turned into a job interview, and almost before Hackney knew it, South Philadelphia had asked him to return—as principal.

"I got the phone call during a night lacrosse game, and at first I was, like, 'No way, no how,'" Hackney said. "I'm going to give up my nice stadium and my lacrosse team to take on this challenge? I went home and talked it over with my wife, and she thought I had hit my head to even consider it."

But at 38, Hackney was a relatively new principal and eager to make a mark.

"I looked at it as risk and reward. Am I young enough in my career as an administrator to take a risk?" The upside of turning around a school with a history of violence and harassment, Hackney knew, could be huge. "But if it didn't work, it could be career-ending."

The following July, Hackney was appointed principal of South Philadelphia High School.



On any given day, 19 languages are spoken at South Philadelphia High. Taking his cue from the UN, Hackney strives to mix students of different cultures together and "make them get along."



“We’ve worked really hard to get the word out to students about how we treat each other and the school,” Hackney said. To new employees—teachers, support staff or cops—he stresses that building positive relationships with students is priority number one.

There was a time in his life when no one would have seen Otis Hackney as a school principal. “I grew up on 56th Street in West Philadelphia with parents who wanted something more for me, and I rejected it for a long time,” Hackney recalls. “Nothing in my school records says, ‘This kid is something great.’” Kicked out of Central High School for not being “engaged,” Hackney ended up working with his father, an HVAC contractor.

Hackney soon learned how cold it could get on a Philadelphia rooftop at 7 o’clock on a January morning waiting for a crane to arrive, but it took a near-crisis for him to transform disengagement into achievement. He allows that he had a “bad night” in Hampton, Virginia, got into trouble and ended up before a judge.

“This person sitting high in a chair would get to determine if I walked out of the courtroom or not,” he says. “I realized that one of the most important things was to be able to make decisions for myself.”

After working construction for a while, Hackney enrolled as a secondary math education major at Temple University. “I had a lot of gaps in my knowledge. I was trying to solve differential equations but struggling to remember trigonometric identities that I should

have learned when I wasn’t paying attention. It’s like studying algebra without knowing your multiplication tables.”

He bridged his gaps and became a high school math teacher, where his recovery from missed opportunities gave him insight into reaching students.

“I had a young lady who didn’t know her times tables. I’d make her stand up in the middle of a lesson and say the seven times table,” Hackney said. “I told her I wouldn’t do this if she was embarrassed, but she said she wasn’t, because she knew I just wanted her to learn.

“When you’re a high school teacher, you teach in an area that is purely your strength. You have to remember that for some students, it’s not easy.”

South Philly High’s challenges seem tailor-made for Otis Hackney’s blend of confidence, self-awareness and systems thinking. But they were daunting. On Dec. 3, 2009, the school had made national headlines when 13 Asian students were sent to the emergency room after they were attacked by black classmates. The following week, Asian students boycotted classes.

“I did not take this job to fail, or to be

embarrassed by the media or in my profession,” he says. “I knew it was going to take a lot of groundwork and diligence.

“What happened on Dec. 3, 2009—who started it, who called who names, who threw the first punch—doesn’t really matter to me. What’s important is what role did the school play? What were the systems that contributed to that environment? Those are the only things I can affect.”

Hackney arrived at South Philly High as the school district was negotiating a settlement agreement with the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department.

“Lehigh prepared me for a lot of things,” he says, “but not for reporting explicitly to the Justice Department.”

But the educational leadership program’s emphasis on administrative systems proved useful.

“On any given day we have 19 languages spoken in the building,” he says. “It is in many ways a social experiment. What a school like South Philadelphia High is trying to do is not so different from what the United Nations does. We take people from different cultures, throw them in a room and make them get along.”

South Philadelphia, Hackney notes, has been home to a mixture of ethnic and racial groups for two centuries. Indeed, Klugman, the actor, was the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, and Anderson, the singer, was an

By walking the halls of his school, Hackney defuses the occasional confrontation and gets to know students. He gives the same message to everyone: He wants the best for them.



African-American who broke color barriers.

“Jewish, Italian, Polish, Irish....you go through different pockets of South Philly and you see the remnants of those communities.” Today, a large black population shares the neighborhood with waves of new immigrants from China, Vietnam and other Asian countries.

“There has always been a tinge of tension among different groups,” Hackney says. “It didn’t always come to a head like it did in 2009.”

Seemingly minor misunderstandings can cause friction. A Vietnamese girl recently approached a group of African-American girls and said, matter-of-factly, “I need to get to my locker.” One black girl said sarcastically, “Can’t you say excuse me?” The Vietnamese student said she felt harassed, because the other students laughed and snickered, Hackney said.

“As we were trying to figure this out, we had a Vietnamese counselor helping us, and we found that the Vietnamese word that roughly translates ‘excuse me’ is only used in extremely formal settings.” In short, the two girls did not comprehend the nuances of each other’s comments.

When Hackney arrived at South Philly, the English Language Learner classes for students with other primary languages were held on the second floor of the school, and other students were not permitted to go there.

“I blew this up,” Hackney says. “These students are part of the school community, so why would we segregate them? Now I have ELL classes throughout the building, so students have to move with the general population, which breaks down barriers.”

In 2009, the school required students to report intimidation in writing—in English. “Students would think, ‘I don’t feel confident writing in English, so I am not going to report,’” Hackney says. “Now if a student has an issue, they can write it in their own language, and we’ll get it translated.”

Hackney now faces a bigger challenge: Creating a culture of respect among faculty, staff, school police and students. To new employees, he stresses that building positive relationships with students is priority number one.

“You can avoid a lot of confrontations when you walk up to students and they know you. All of this comes back to how you teach people to respect each other. If I could put that in a book or a bottle I’d be a millionaire...and probably donate a lot more to Lehigh.”

The students do know Hackney, and he tells them at every turn—even in rare cases

when a student is suspended or arrested—that he wants the best for them. When he comes upon an altercation, he gives the student a chance to calm down by visiting a counselor or by walking the halls with him.

“If students see that [support] on a regular, consistent and meaningful basis, you can gain traction in transforming the culture of a building,” he says.

Above all, Hackney strives to remain calm amid even chaotic circumstances. “You have to give students the example. If they don’t see it, it’s hard to be it.”

No one expected us to turn this around overnight,” Hackney said in November. “But we’re making progress.” Violent incidents are

down in Hackney’s two-plus years as principal, and while South Philadelphia High has not achieved overall “adequate yearly progress” based on standardized tests, the school did achieve “AYP” in mathematics, and black students made the grade in reading last year.

“We still have our struggles. We’ve only had three or four fights this year, which for us is excellent,” Hackney said. And some parents are having second thoughts about enrolling their kids in one of the neighborhood’s several public, parochial or charter schools. “They say they’ve heard the other schools are bad. They may not hear that South Philly is a good school, but we’re not one of the bad schools anymore.”

Hackney acknowledges that there is a vast gulf between multilingual, impoverished South Philly and affluent, mostly white Springfield Township. Beneath the surface, though, the work of an educator remains the same.

“Kids are still kids. They can lack focus and motivation, and sometimes you have to get them to rally around something,” he said. “So whether it’s a kid in Springfield who rallies around athletics, or a boy in the city who wants to protect his kid sister, whatever that individual needs to want to do better and be better, that’s what you tap into.”

“I’m passionate about doing this, because the opportunity that education provides is generational change. For students in low-income areas—black, white, immigrant—if you can provide them with an education and help them become the first something in their family, and really change their mindset, that’s how families achieve generational change.” 