

A Profile of Reginald Strouh:
New York State 2008 High School Principal of the Year

The first time Reggie Strouh worked as an administrator at Hempstead High School, in 1994, trouble found him the moment he entered the building. “This is no lie,” Reggie admitted, “The first day of school, I walked in and I told a kid to take his hat off and he said, ‘Who the f___ you talking to?’ I said, ‘What did you say?’ Because I wasn’t used to that. I had taught for eighteen years at Freeport, at their junior high school, where kids respected me. So I took his hat, and he started fighting me.”

It got worse after that. Even though Reggie was an Assistant Principal in charge of Discipline, he couldn’t suspend any students. In a primarily African-American school district, putting kids out of school meant they would be roaming the streets and loose in the community, so the Central Office didn’t allow suspension. Hempstead High School, at that time, had a couple of hundred kids who were 19, 20, 21 years old, most of them proud to wear their gang colors or quick to flash their signs. But most had also earned less than five credits, and graduation seemed a remote possibility. For them, high school was a hangout, a recruiting ground, and a convenient place to move drugs or do whatever else they felt like doing. Every lunch period exploded into a pitched battle, even with all available administrators monitoring the cafeteria. An average of ten serious fights a day disrupted lunch for the entire school and filled the administrative offices with shouting, unrepentant gangbangers.

“For about five months, it was horrible,” Reggie remembered. “I’d go home and tell my wife, ‘Listen, I’m going to quit and you’re going back to school and we’re going on welfare, because I’m about to kill one of those kids.’ They were swinging at me, and it was dangerous; I went through three or four suits. Then, finally, a kid – I don’t know what he had done – but he was sent into my office and he kicked me in the wrong place. We went through a plate glass window and that was it. I got on the PA system and I said, ‘The next kid who puts his hands on me, you need to call 911 before you do it, because I’m going to hurt you.’ That’s when I got called to the Central Office, and I said to them, ‘Listen, these kids are crazy up here.’”

Now, Reggie Strouhn was no stranger to craziness: he had grown up with five brothers and sisters in the South Bronx. But he felt like an easy target. “I was always big, so I was teased and picked on,” Reggie explained. “Elementary school was kind of rough. Even as big as I was, I wasn’t a fighter, so I was bullied. The word we used was ‘doofus.’ I was considered a doofus, and a bookworm. I was always a reader; I read a lot. I guess you would say I was introverted. Basically, I stayed to myself, in my room, in the library at school, reading a book rather than going out. I was in honor classes all the way through elementary school and on into junior high school, so I wasn’t with groups of kids who were out in the street doing all kinds of stuff. I spent a lot of time studying.”

All of his studying paid off, though, because Reggie got into Aviation High School in Long Island City, Queens. At Aviation, they specialized in the training of aircraft mechanics and technicians. For Reggie, it meant a tedious commute, an academically rigorous curriculum that included engineering and aerodynamics, a predominantly white student body and, for the first time, immersion in sports. But he found out immediately that his South Bronx schools had not prepared him well enough. Often, he was up until three or four in the morning, trying to finish homework. His mother wanted him to quit and go to school closer to home. But Reggie wanted to prove he could compete with his new classmates, and he was especially grateful for one teacher’s strategy that made it easier for the African-American students.

“We were assigned to groups of six students, working on projects for airframes or wing sections or whatever we had for shop, and a lot of the kids didn’t want to work with us. But Mr. Lahecka made it clear that whatever grade one of us got – all of us got – for the group. So if I got a 50, the whole group got a 50. That really turned it around. There was some resistance, but by the time we reached the second half of our freshman year, I didn’t feel it anymore. Once they realized that we could do the work and hold our own in the group, we worked well together. I ended up being shop foreman all four years. So when I talk about somebody who changed my life, he was definitely one of them.”

Another teacher, Mr. Goldsmith, couldn’t help but notice a 6-foot, 210-pound 9th Grader who seemed effortless when he tossed the 12-pound shot, and he badgered Reggie about joining the track team. Playing sports would mean staying after school and catching a later train home, on top of all his homework, and Reggie resisted. But Mr. Goldsmith hammered away until Reggie gave in, and that opened up another new world for him. He

competed in track all four years, even winning the city championship in the shot put in 1969. Reggie also learned to swim, joined the swim team, took a lifeguard training course, and worked as a lifeguard for twenty-five summers.

Maybe Reggie chose to make life hard for himself; maybe he understood that new challenges sparked his intensity. In any case, he certainly found out that the staff at Aviation would be there to help him. “I got married my junior year of high school,” Reggie revealed. “The teachers, once they found out, I was able to come to school, and there was a lot of support. There was a cafeteria aide who always made sure that I had lunch. I was just blessed. People did a lot to help me to be able to continue, and to not have to drop out of high school, and I was able to graduate and be the valedictorian.”

Applying his skills as an aircraft mechanic after high school, though, landed Reggie in an environment that he just couldn't take. He tried it for one long summer after he graduated, but the incessant noise gave him severe headaches. So he became the first one in his family to try college, and he let his new love for sports guide him. He walked on as a football player at C. W. Post on Long Island, won a financial aid package, and earned his B.S. in Health and Physical Education in 1975. He went on to get his Master's Degree in Recreation Therapy at Lehman College, back in the Bronx and, by 1979, had secured a second M. S. in Administration and Supervision from City University of New York.

From 1976 until 1994, Reggie taught Health and Physical Education in Freeport, and eased his way into administration by serving as Coordinator of In-school Suspension from 1983 on. He was well-versed in disciplinary problems before becoming Assistant Principal at Hempstead High School, but Freeport was a very different district. Hempstead was about 60% African-American and 40% Hispanic, and the two ethnic groups didn't care much for each other. Reggie remembered that, “It was rough, especially coming there from Freeport. There was a lot of fighting, a lot of disorganization, a lot of apathy. Freeport, at that time, was still about 75% white. It wasn't a school where we had a lot of fights. It was academically successful, so it was a totally different community. Hempstead, on the other hand, was predominantly African-American. It was a failing school. It was on all the different failing-school lists when I got there. Hempstead was a very violent school. Not a lot of weapons – nothing with guns. Just a lot of fistfights. You had different sections of town that went against other sections of town, which created problems for us. There was a big gang presence.”

So Reggie tried to convince the Central Office that they had to weed out the most disruptive students. He wrote a proposal for a Night School, which would run between 5 and 9 p.m.. Any student who was at least sixteen, had fewer than five credits, and who was having discipline problems, or any type of problem that kept him from engaging properly with academics, would be moved. The District finally bought into his plan, and about 200 of the most violent students were transferred to Night School. “That single move changed the whole complexion of Hempstead High School,” Reggie recalled. “The building changed overnight. We were able to get kids going to class. We were able to do some suspending. The Night School became a place where most people did not want to go.”

However, few good deeds shall go unpunished. When a new, Harvard-trained principal was brought into Hempstead at the end of that school year, Reggie’s ideas lost all currency, and the Central Office extended an offer he couldn’t refuse: “We’re moving you,” they told him. “Turn your keys in; you can’t go back; we will move your office to the Middle School.” He had a son in college, a daughter in private school, and a mortgage on a new house. It wasn’t the right time to make a major statement and end up job-hunting.

From 1997 until 2003, Reggie worked as Assistant Principal at the Middle School under Diane Brown, who was a powerful person in the District and who had a reputation for getting rid of administrators. Reggie figured his number was up. “Turned out it was the best thing that could have happened to me,” Reggie revealed. “My first lesson was that she gave me 21 things that she wanted done – she was going on vacation – before she got back. Now, mind you, the only thing I had done in administration up until then had been discipline. There was nothing on the list of 21 things that she gave me that had to do with discipline. That was the beginning, and I went through the process with her for six years. I developed the skills necessary to deal more effectively with personnel issues. I learned how to run a building, how to organize and handle staff, how to handle parents, and how to de-escalate a situation. It was probably the best training grounds I could have had.” But when Diane Brown was made Deputy Superintendent and moved to the Central Office in 2003, Reggie was temporarily put in charge of the Middle School. He was hoping that appointment would become permanent, but then the bad news arrived: Hempstead High School had just lost its 11th principal in six years – three of them had come and gone in the 2002-03 school year alone – and Reggie had been chosen to become number 12.

The good news was that Reggie was finally going to be a Principal somewhere, and he could select his own administrative team. He knew one essential pick right away – Hank Williams, a basketball player who had been a Dean at the Middle School and who Reggie thought of as the Pied Piper, because all the kids loved him. Another was Chy Davidson, who was a retired New York Jets football player and a technology whiz. A third was a curriculum expert named Francine DeKranes, who was white, so Reggie had to finesse her by the Board of Education. There were also a number of other veteran administrators at Hempstead, and Reggie knew from prior experience that he could count on them to do an excellent job of fixing the school’s problems and establishing a new culture there.

Reggie and his team attacked the problems all at once, and on all fronts. Hempstead High School had not been accredited since 1984, so that was Reggie’s first order of business. The team worked eighteen hours a day, seven days a week, from July to December of 2003 so they could be ready for Middle States Accreditation, and they earned four accreditations, with a couple of recommendations, but no stipulations. Skepticism shifted to awe, even on Hempstead’s Board of Education.

After that, Reggie confronted the gang dilemma head-on. He and Hank Williams knew all the kids, because they had been Middle School Assistant Principals for six years and watched those kids grow up. “They weren’t strangers; they were just a year or two older,” Reggie explained. “We knew who the leaders of the gangs were, and we met with them. They were used to the type of discipline that we demanded of them. We met with the entire student body and said, ‘We know all of you. All of you guys are just a little bit older, maybe a little bigger, but we expect you to respect us just the same way you did at the Middle School. This is a place of education and we’re not going to have it. If you want to go here, then you need to control yourselves.’ We had zero tolerance for fighting, violence, drugs, and weapons, and we stuck to that. ‘You come in with a weapon, you fight, you get suspended. If you disrespect a teacher, there is a penalty.’ We enforced the penalties. Once we were consistent with that, it worked.”

Before 2003, Hempstead High School had been an open campus: many students walked to a local strip-mall to eat fast-food lunches, and fights often broke out as they returned to school. After a student was stabbed to death, Reggie asked for help from the State Education Department and closed the 32-acre campus. No students could leave before dismissal without

authorization, and no outsiders could enter at any time. Students had to carry their ID cards with them and present them to enter the school, the cafeteria, and the media center, or show them whenever a staff member asked. Within a year, more than 90% complied.

In addition, Reggie instituted peer mediation programs, and he issued almost eight hundred overnight suspensions the first year he was Principal. Suspended students had to bring in a parent for a conference to regain admission to the school. “Parents really respected that,” Reggie advised. “They didn’t want the kids home with them for five days. So the conferences gave me the opportunity to let them know that if we worked together, maybe we could get them to do what they were supposed to do while they were in school, and get that taken care of.”

But the true sea change began in 2005 when Reggie and his team established small learning communities at Hempstead High School. To restructure a large, impersonal, low-performing high school into a dynamic, caring, and highly-personalized one has been no easy task. Four separate academies were set up -- Law & Government; Entrepreneurship; Science and Health-related Services; and Wall Street – and each academy was given its own principal, its own teachers, and its own PTSA (Parents, Teachers, and Students Association). Most PTSA meetings have now grown from an average of 10 parents in attendance to almost 90.

Incoming 9th graders are housed exclusively on the 3rd Floor of the school, and are afforded extensive personal attention: both factors help them make the difficult transition to high school. The confidence that freshmen gain from a more protected experience has increased their commitment to learning as they move through the later grades: student attendance has increased to 89%; the Regents passing rate is up by 40%; and the graduation rate has more than doubled – from 30% to 65% -- in the last four years. Reggie has also been working with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, as well as with the Institute for Student Achievement, to establish partnerships with local colleges and businesses, and to promote future internships that relate to particular learning academy subjects.

And apart from the major initiatives he has launched, Reggie has angered a lot of people and sparked his share of controversy, both mundane and profound. He takes hats. Hats aren’t allowed in school. He scoops up MP3 players and holds onto them until the end of the year. He confiscates cell phones. With large, inter-related families and gang loyalties, the flames of any fight that starts are fanned by cell phone calls to members in other parts of the

building. Reggie and Hank videotaped a major brawl at the school that made the national news last October, identified fifteen ringleaders from the tape, and directed the police to remove them from the school in handcuffs. Several of the older boys – a Board Member’s son among them – ended up in a Nassau County adult jail, so the District tried, but ultimately failed, to fire him for that.

He gives his cell phone number to parents, and encourages them to call him in the morning if their kids are having a problem. He calls in NYSED if he thinks his Board is acting improperly. Reggie learned at Aviation to be a team player, and he relies on his team to run his school for him -- each principal of each small learning community has complete autonomy, for instance – and that leadership style is one the Central Office hates. Reggie suspends troublemakers, and the local blogs are full of their disgruntled parents, as well as other community members inflamed for various reasons – all calling for Reggie’s head on a platter. So are his demanding methods working?

Well, if the improving test scores and other positive statistics aren’t proof enough, the President of the Nassau Principals Association asked Reggie to represent their association to SAANYS for the Principal of the Year Award last year, and Reggie won, so some people certainly like what he’s accomplished. And Governor David Patterson, a 1972 graduate of Hempstead High School, visited the school shortly after the award was announced and delivered an inspiring talk. Afterwards, directing his security detail to stand aside, the Governor let himself be thronged by admiring students and told them, “I’m African-American, and I’m legally blind, and look what I’ve done.”

In many ways, Reggie Stroughn exemplifies that same proud spirit. “When failure is not an option, greatness can happen.” That has been his message to Hempstead High School, and to the Central Office, and to the community, and he has been equally determined to apply it to himself, and to his leadership team, and to all the students he has served for the last 35 years. “But I hope you believe me when I say we’ve changed the culture in our building,” Reggie emphasized. “When I walk in the building, sometimes I actually get tears in my eyes when I see the kids come down the halls and I can see they’re hurrying to get to class.” For anyone who values learning, it’s hard to argue with that kind of success.