

Exclusive Interview With One of the Best Principals in the U.S.: Baruti Kafele

Written by Patricia Turner
Sunday, 18 March 2012 19:47



Mr. Baruti Kafele was born in Orange, New Jersey. He is the son of Mrs. Delores C. James and Mr. Norman G. Hopkins. He has been a Principal at Newark Tech for the last four years (grades 9 to 12). Newark Tech High School is a regional public high school located in Newark that offers occupational and academic instruction for students in Essex County, New Jersey, operating as part of the Essex County Vocational Technical Schools. Created in 1914, the Essex County Vocational Technical School District is one of New Jersey's oldest and grandest Vocational Technical School Systems. It provides both technical education and academic instruction for high school and adult students in the Essex County region.

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The district has four high schools: Bloomfield Tech, Newark Tech, North 13th Street Tech and West Caldwell Tech where about 2,200 students are enrolled. Newark Tech is the largest of the four schools in the Essex County Vocational Technical School District and is located on Market Street in Newark. It has over 700 students in its programs which include Health Careers, Dental Assistant and Music Production, among several others.

During the last two years, Essex County Newark Tech has been listed by U.S. News and World Report Magazine as one of the best high schools in the United States. Mr. Kafele previously was selected Teacher of the Year in the East Orange School District and Essex County Public Schools. In addition, he was listed for "Who's Who Among America's Teachers" six times. He is a summa cum laude graduate of Kean University where he earned his B.S. degree in Management Science/Marketing in 1986. Furthermore, he received in Master's degree from New Jersey City University in 1996.

A renowned educator, Principal Baruti Kafele, whose African first name means teacher, has excelled in his capacity as both teacher and principal. As a middle and high school principal, Mr. Kafele brought changes to four different New Jersey public schools, including *The Mighty Newark Tech* which was recognized by U.S. News and World Report Magazine as one of America's best high schools. As a principal, Kafele also led the transformation of three different middle schools and one high school, which included Sojourner Truth Middle School in East Orange. It emerged as one of the highest performing urban middle schools in the entire State of New Jersey. Hence, Principal Kafele is on a personal mission to motivate, educate and empower Black and Latino parents, children, their teachers, administrators and the world over. In these times of alarmingly low student achievement levels within the Black and Latino communities throughout the U.S., Principal Kafele brings a message of hope and empowerment. His message is uplifting, inspirational, energizing, thought-provoking and candid. He inspires administrators, teachers, parents and students to accept nothing less than academic excellence. In other words, as an educator, Mr. Kafele refuses to accept limitations on his students' potential.

Mr. Kafele is the author of five books which include: *A Handbook for Teachers of African American Children*, *A Black Parent's Handbook to Educating Your Children* (Outside of the Classroom) an Essence Magazine best-selling book and *Motivating Black Males to Achieve in School and in Life*

. His books are a clarion call to students, teachers and families for personal individual responsibility. He offers practical advice and a demanding set of standards. He balances an emphasis on self-esteem with self-discipline, knowing that the former will not be meaningful without the latter. He offers appendices which give practical lists for students, aspiring leaders, and teachers. Kafele believes with his long term experience in education that urban students in

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general and African-American males in particular will benefit not from well-intentioned sympathy, but from rigor, high expectations, intensive literacy support, and pride in who they are and who they can become.

Mr. Kafele has been motivating the youth for over twenty years. He conducts regular professional development workshops for educators at major national conferences and in school districts throughout the U.S. He is also in charge of parenting workshops, male empowerment seminars and student motivational assemblies in addition to his powerful keynote addresses. Principal Kafele has appeared on numerous radio and television programs/shows. He has been reviewed in the book *Who's Who Among African-Americans*.

Lowell Milken, Newark Mayor Cory Booker and State Commissioner of Education, Lucille Davy have commended Kafele for transforming Newark Tech from a poorly performing school into one of the best in the nation in only four years. Kafele's unwavering contributions have also been recognized and rewarded with the prestigious Milken Educator Award, which came with a prize of \$25 000. Co-founded by Lowell Milken, the Milken Family Foundation supports initiatives in education and medical research, including TAP: The System for Teacher and Student advancement. The Milken Educator Award is given to an outstanding educator who shows dedication and commitment to his or her school. There is no application process, the recipient is chosen and often considered an "unsung hero" who is not looking for accolades. In addition, Mr. Kafele is the recipient of over fifty educational, professional and community awards, among them the City of Dickinson, Texas, proclaiming February 8, 1998 as Baruti Kafele Day.

Baruti Kafele wears many hats. He is a motivator, educator, author, national speaker, parental involvement trainer and consultant. He knows what goal setting is all about. He is a proven authority on the subject of academic performance. He says that in order to achieve personal goals, one needs to organize a systematic plan. From substitute teacher to recipient of the prestigious Milken National Educator Award; from selling his first book from the trunk of his car to national best-selling author, Mr. Kafele's professional path is inspiring. On a more personal level, Principal Kafele is happily married to his wife Kimberley since 1989. They are the proud parents of children Baruti, Jabari and Kibriya.

Mega Diversities

had the pleasure to speak to Mr. Kafele last fall from Canada. Here he talked about his newest book

Motivating Black Males to Achieve in School and in Life
, among other issues related to education.

By Patricia Turnier, Editress-in-Chief and Jurist, LL.M (Master's degree in Law).

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P.T. Baruti is an African name which means teacher. Your other first name is Kwame. Were you named after Kwame Nkrumah? If so, what does this mean to you?

B.K. As you said, my first name means teacher in Tswana, which is primarily spoken in Botswana. What happened about my other first name is when I was in undergraduate school, I named myself Kwame. There is definitely a connection with Kwame Nkrumah that I discovered through his writings. Moreover, the exact translation of Kwame is “born on Saturday” which was my case. To go back to Kwame Nkrumah, this man means a lot to me because he was the president of the first African nation, Ghana, which was decolonized. Kwame Nkrumah, a Pan-Africanist, studied in America, at Lincoln, the first African-American university in the U.S. These associations mean a great deal to me.

P.T. What motivated you to become an educator?

B.K. Being in college and doing a lot of reading on African-American history definitely inspired me to teach young people the same information that I was learning independently. So, I decided to become a teacher with the purpose to focus on instructing youth about their story while giving them a broad view of the world. I aim to motivate and empower them. To summarize, I had three reasons to become an educator – wanting to instruct young people about their history, wanting to teach them about economic development in their community and wishing to teach them about manhood. This is my three-fold mission.

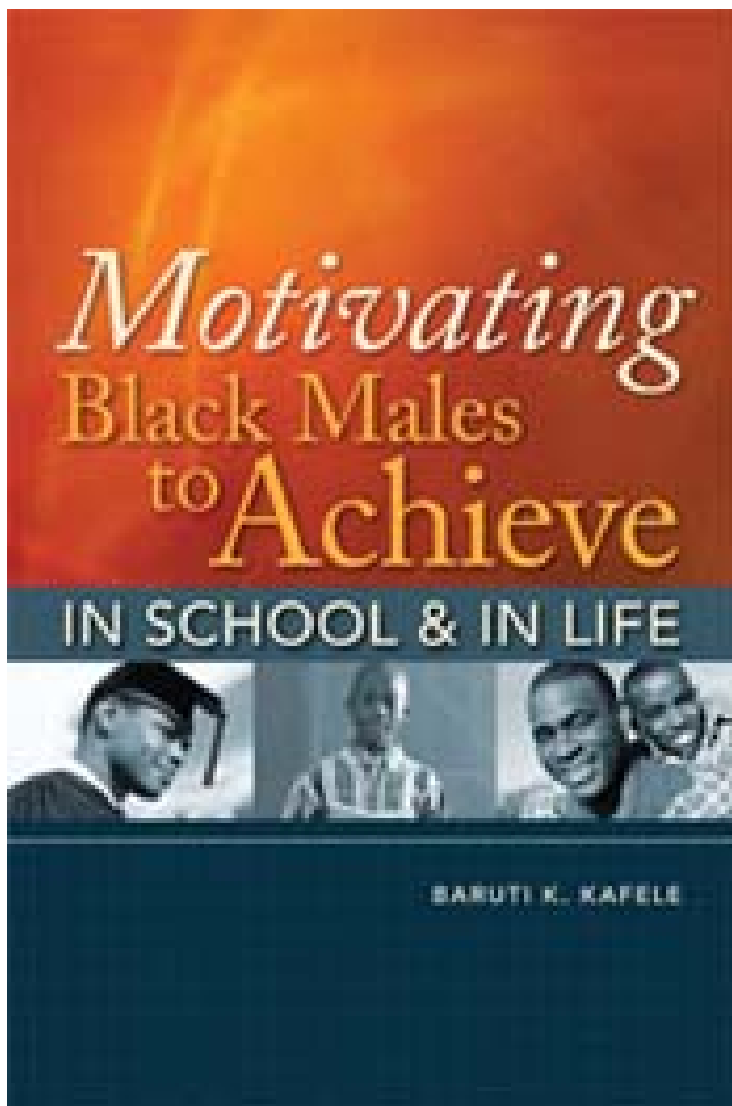
P.T. You are not an apathetic educator who accepts mediocrity as the status quo. In your latest book we learn that you used to say (before Obama’s presidential candidacy) to your students that they could achieve anything and could become the President of the United States if they wished. Share with us one of the moving stories where a former student embraced your encouragement and was able to pursue a successful career.

B.K. You are right. I accept from the students nothing less than academic excellence. There are several success stories that I can share. Our Juniors lead on the New Jersey Standardized Test. 93% of our students were proficient in Language Arts and 82% in math. It is really amazing! I have to say that the main motto of our school is: “Failure is not an option”. I want to add that some of our students ended up in Ivy League and right now, one is awaiting acceptance to Harvard University. Moreover, as a principal, I observed that many of my former students ended up in various universities across the country. They credit me partially for their achievement. That is my success story, to know that kids who come from disadvantaged backgrounds had the resilience and determination to do something constructive with their lives. They managed to have great careers in many fields. I can name one as an example; she is a senior at Georgetown University. Her major was in Political Science and in the same realm she’s pursuing studies at the Master’s degree level. She’s among the top students of her class. I was her principal from 8th grade until the 12th.

P.T. Can you talk about your training DVD entitled *Motivating Black Males to Achieve in School and in Life* (the same as your book)?

B.K. The DVD came out last August. It was produced by my publisher, ASCD. It is a professional development training DVD. The purpose is to give teachers and educators a visual dimension of the topic as opposed to the book. The DVD allows them to see what they can do with their students to broaden their perspective. The goal is to enhance their practice with their involvement with Black males. On the national level, the rate of Black males who graduate from high school is low, 47%, so there is a lot of work which needs to be done. My DVD is material and a blue print which can be used to motivate Black males to strive to attain higher objectives.

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P.T. What message do you want the public to take away from your latest book?

B.K. The primary message is this: As a student you are the captain of your path. The level of efforts you put in will determine the degree of academic achievement. For educators, they have to believe in the potential of their students to make it, whatever their circumstances. In other words, you have to be a firm believer in your students that they will be successful. Moreover, in my book I offer proven strategies for getting Black male students in middle school and high school to value education, improve their grades and maintain high standards for themselves. I expose how simple and powerful measures can instill self-worth in young Black males to become successful academically and in other spheres of their lives.

In my book, I explain:

- * Why the challenges of educating Black male students are frequently different from educating other student populations
- * What all Black male students need in their classroom experiences
- * How to assess your own attitudes and abilities as an educator to instruct Black males

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- * Which major problems outside of school could change the way you teach Black males
- * How to address the deep root causes of Black male self-identity as an educator
- * Why and how to develop young men's empowerment program

Motivating Black Males to Achieve in School and in Life will help educators to understand why lack of proficiency in reading, writing and math among Black males is a symptom of deeper problems that are generally ignored. It will provide educators with solutions which can be instantly employed in their daily practice right away to improve the performance of their Black male students.

P.T. In May 2011, the NAACP and the United Federation of Teachers filed a lawsuit in the New York State Supreme Court in an attempt to stop the City of New York from closing 22 public schools, and it also wants to stop the expansion of 20 charter schools. What is your position on the Charter schools?

B.K. I believe in charter schools if they speak specifically to the needs of the students that they serve. Charter schools which do not provide stability and do not speak to the needs of the population are problematic. I am very pro public schools and they have to implement programs which have a track record of success. In this context, I can work with it.

P.T. In the U.S. there are schools in inner-cities which do not have libraries and/or computers. What needs to be done in your country to make sure that every kid, whatever his/her social background, receives a first-class education?

B.K. Every student in my district has to be a top priority. In fact, it is unacceptable in this day and age that there are not computers and/or libraries in every school in America. This situation happens because it is not a priority on district or state levels. Kids need to have all the key resources to be successful. The youth has to be prepared to compete on a global level. American kids should have access to equitable education which is the best weapon to combat the cycle of poverty and deprivation. I believe that every child deserves an excellent education, if not, it is the society as a whole that will pay in the long term. Students are successful when their leaders and teachers believe they are successful by implementing all the right tools to make it happen.

P.T. Do you think that if all Black children were introduced to their history and culture beyond the enslaved context, their view of themselves would rise above the limited expectations themselves and others?

B.K. Absolutely! It is the number one problem. There is an achievement gap, especially in math and reading. If Black youth are rarely exposed to Black scientists such as Dr. Charles R. Drew (who developed improved techniques for blood storage which was greatly instrumental for American soldiers in WWII), and writers like Ralph Ellison (who penned political, social and critical essays among other things, like his classic novel *Invisible Man*), it doesn't help to improve the situation. They have to learn who they are by being exposed to their history. Young men will be interested in learning those things they can see themselves doing. They need to relate to what's being taught. Moreover, it will allow them to have a better vision for their future and a positive purpose. This will definitely eliminate the lack of motivation in school. It will give them the confidence in their intellectual capabilities to go forward academically. Black youth need to be educated about their own culture, identity and heritage. As a young man, I wasn't inspired until I read

the Autobiography of Malcolm X

by Alex Haley. Transformed by the book, I immediately became a straight-A student.

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P.T. There is a Black inferiority myth in the society we live in and several terms confirm this phenomenon, such as “literary negro” which refers to ghostwriters. There is also *The Bell Curve*

indoctrination out there. As you mentioned earlier, Black Kids are not exposed to black inventors, scientists and so forth in their text books. This subtle propaganda affects the mind of young Black people in education. How can this issue be corrected?

B.K. Continuing with what I said in my previous answer, Black kids need to be exposed to their history. They have to know the truth about who they are. As long as their real identity is hidden from them, they will continue to perpetuate a lot of stereotypes which do not serve them and the society as a whole. They need to learn who Lewis Latimer was, W.E.B. Du Bois, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, called Moses, the abolitionist John Brown and so on. This will give them a better sense of themselves and who they are. It has to start in kindergarten with books adapted for children. To give hope of dealing with the various challenges, Black youth definitely have to be informed and educated about successful people from their community in different realms. This will motivate them to go forward in life. In fact, all children and adults, whatever their “color”, need to know the accomplishment of Black people and their contribution to the U.S. Educators of African-American males must expose themselves to literature that addresses the learning, cultural and social-emotional needs of African-American learners. By being educated, it will dismantle prejudice and the myth of Black inferiority. To motivate the students in a more pragmatic way, in my school, powerful words are on the wall to inspire the kids. The first thing I did was paint the entire school white and decorate the halls with motivational quotes and objectives. Each morning our teachers make announcements containing powerful messages to set the tone of the day in the classrooms. It helps the students in the long run to get higher grades.

P.T. There is a disproportionate number of Black boys being suspended, expelled, labeled ADD or ADHD, and several Black kids are being put in special classes. Black children as young as six-years-old have been handcuffed and treated like criminals in some schools. According to the *2010 Schott 50 State Report on Black Males in Public Education*, Black male students are punished more severely for similar infractions than their White peers. What needs to be done to correct this situation?

B.K. It all goes down to the climate and culture of the school which are palpable in classrooms. We need to analyze what is happening in the environment which makes the kids behave disruptively. In my workshops for educators that I conduct on a regular basis across the country, my primary focus is to discuss about the ethos of the schools. I determine if it is a supportive environment for the students, if high achievements are valued or if there is peer

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pressure which creates a negative climate. These areas have to be assessed to change the culture of the school if necessary.

P.T. I think what happens can be very subtle and there are Black kids who feel it. For instance, many are put in the back of the class; that happened to me when I was a child. Kids feel it when some teachers don't pay attention to them, or they sense that some professors don't believe in their intellectual abilities.

B.K. As a principal, I knew things like that could go on in education. So, I always told my staff, and as a consultant (in my training sessions), to not allow the practice of putting Black kids in the back of the class. This practice has to be forbidden. They have to be up front, in the middle of the class or split out.

P.T. The society talks a lot about the unemployment rate among African-Americans, which reached almost 17% this year, but we don't hear enough about underemployment which is another serious problem in Black America. There is a labour gap between Black America and the mainstream, regardless of the level of education

1. There have been structural barriers to employment in the labour market affecting African-Americans for decades. What message of encouragement can you give to young African-Americans to pursue their studies in spite of these hurdles?

B.K. There is a correlation between the level of education and the success attained outside of school. We know that there are other factors involved (in the high employment rate) such as racism which are out of the control of Black America. The "first fired, last hired" phenomenon is one of the key structural obstacles facing African-Americans in the labor market. The data that you bring are very important, and the students need to know that to thoroughly analyse the situation. As an educator, I believe that they have to be informed and have an understanding of what is really going on. They need to be guided to go pass these obstacles. I want them to have the tools to overcome these hurdles. Many things can be implemented to help them, such as reaching out to people who experienced these difficulties and fought them by becoming successful. These people can be mentors to our youth.

In my school, we encourage the kids by letting them know that we have high expectations. We invite successful alumni to speak to them and inspire them. It is a concrete approach which teaches them that they can make it. They also have the possibility to exchange with our guests. Despite the hurdles, Black youth have to refuse to accept limitations being set on their potential. They cannot focus on the odds. The educators in my school want our kids to do their best. The key is for our teachers to set incremental and long-range goals for the students, to have high standards, to act in a professional manner in their capacity as role models and to conduct daily self-assessments.

Successful people are those who experience setbacks and recover from them. Success will also be determined by the passion and sense of purpose educators bring to their teaching. As an educator, I do believe that strength in leadership and character can change the lives of students and prepare them for bright futures. When we use this mindset in our leadership it is the key for the success of our youth.

P.T. In your book you talk about the old adage: « It takes a village to raise a child ». What needs to be done to bring back the "village" concept?

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B.K. The school has to create the village. A long time ago, I decided to insure the success of our kids. We need the involvement and the input of the parents, including the community. We reach out to them and we aim for a collaborative effort to increase concretely the achievement of our youth. The educator, the parents and the community need to have a positive attitude toward the children. This will help them to thrive and attain their goals. Pragmatically, I developed a “Young Men’s Empowerment” program in my school where men from the community come to share with the students what manhood is all about. Furthermore, our students meet with Black businessmen and political leaders. I also do one-on-one mentoring, I hold male retreats and father-son groups.

P.T. Do you believe in this quote: “Education begins at home and is the first classroom children have”?

B.K. I definitely do believe it. Parents should be the primary educators of their children. However, it is not every nuclear family who necessarily values education or has the skills to do so. In this regard, other members of the family (such as uncles, aunts...) have to step in. Children need to have libraries at home with books of substance appropriate to their age. Parents have to read to them on a regular basis even before their children learn how to read. The educators also have definitely a role to play in the intellectual growth of the children and have to expose them to many things: plays, museums and so on to broaden their horizon. It is a collective effort to help the youth to achieve academically. We have to believe in their fortitude regardless of their background. I’m thinking again about Black history which should be a part of every Black child’s education starting in the home and formally in kindergarten. We can’t leave it to the education system to do our job for us. Black History Month should be a period of celebration, but ongoing education is needed to instill real pride and self-worth in the next generation.

In my book *A Black Parent's Handbook to Educating Your Children*

(Outside of the Classroom), I maintain that parents with children of African descent must instill in them an understanding that there is a direct relationship between their academic success and the educational, cultural, social, economic, political growth and development of the Black community. In

A Black Parent's Handbook to Educating Your Children

, I impress on parents to maintain maximum involvement, to play a much more active and productive role towards our children's educational growth including development at home. The ideas and methods that I provide aim to encourage parents to nurture and encourage their child’s educational advancement.

P.T. America’s universities grant more than 12 000 PhDs per year. To find 2000 Blacks with doctorates per year, one would have to count all the way back to 1920 at a time when it was much more difficult for African-Americans to be educated. In 1993, 951 African-Americans earned doctorates at U.S. universities. It is only more recently in 2008, that the number of Black doctorates reached an all-time high of 2,030. As an educator how do you explain this phenomenon?

B.K. Once again, everything has to do with the expectations that the society has of these kids. There are structural barriers, but they are no excuse to lower expectations. The children have to maximize their abilities by working hard. The educators need to have the right attitude and encourage them. The families need to value education and expose their children to a variety of activities which will stimulate them intellectually. If the parents are not well-read, the relatives who have a strong educational

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background need to be involved. Everybody has to do their part.

P.T. In October of 1995, you were part of the Million Man March in Washington D.C. Can you tell us what this event meant to you and how your students responded when you shared this experience with them?

B.K. This experience was really fulfilling for me. I took this event to make it a learning experience via the “Young Men Empowerment” program (that I mentioned earlier) where the boys are taught about manhood. My students were very excited about the event. I let them know how I was inspired by the Million Man March. So, we brought men from the community to talk to the boys every week. They spoke about manhood with the responsibilities which come with it, while giving them a sense of purpose and encouraging them academically -- to go to math classes, etc. This is how I implemented my experience in the March throughout my career.

P.T. You received the prestigious Milken Educator Award, known as the “Oscars of teaching”, on December 1st 2009. What did it mean to you to receive this prize and not just on any day, but the 1st of December 1955, the date when Rosa Parks ignited the Bus Boycott which changed America forever?

B.K. That was tremendous to receive this honor on that day. Rosa Parks has shaken the course of American history. It means a lot to me to get this award on this critically important day in the U.S. One of the reasons that Lowell Milken created the Milken Family Foundation’s

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National Educator Awards is to encourage young people to become teachers. So, if my winning can inspire the youth, this would be the most rewarding thing for me. I am always bragging about this school and the dynamic teachers here. When I received the award, I also thanked the professors and staff who are doing their best to make sure that our students achieve success academically. I am grateful for the entire team of educators.

P.T. The City of Dickinson, Texas proclaimed February 8, 1998 as “Baruti Kafele Day”.

How do you feel about this honour?

B.K. This is one the biggest honors I ever received. It is amazing that people look at your work and want to proclaim a day for you. I was there speaking and they surprised me with this tremendous honor.

P.T. Here is my closing question. You said to the media last summer that you were retiring as Principal of Newark Tech to pursue your mission of full-time consulting and speaking. Can you elaborate on that?

B.K. Many schools are struggling. So, for at least a year I left my passion as a principal to embrace another one by pursuing my mission while getting on the road. I do full-time consulting and speaking. The main topics that I cover as a speaker are:

-Education

-Attitude

-Leadership

-Diversity

-Parenting

-Black History In addition, I started a LLC business called Principal Kafele Consulting, LLC. I work with schools and school districts all over the country. I am involved on an international level as well. Specifically, I am working with administrators and teachers primarily, but I also conduct student assemblies, empowerment workshops, and parenting seminars.

I give tools to teachers and principals to help them be more effective with Black children in particular, and their parents. In fact, I am on a personal mission to motivate, educate and empower Black and Latino students. I provide study techniques and test-taking strategies. Furthermore, I encourage students to study together, they can practice with old exams, etc.

With my experience, I observed that there are some mindsets which need to be eradicated, like thinking that being a bookworm or well-read is acting white. African-American children need to be exposed to great orators such as Frederick Douglass or Dr. Martin Luther King who were erudite Black men. As a spokesman, I work toward the elimination of the attitude gap, the world over. I also share my DVD (that I spoke about earlier) in my tour and I want it to have a significant impact on teacher - Black male student relations. Lastly, I am in the beginning phase of writing a new book for aspiring urban principals, whom I will also be training in every state.

To summarize, my
principalship

has no walls which keep me on the move to spread a strong message of attitude transformation across the U.S. and beyond through professional development workshops for educators, parental engagement seminars, student motivational assemblies and conference keynote

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addresses. My seminars such as the one entitled “Motivating, Educating and Empowering Black Males,” give the audience of teachers and educators the story of my first year at Newark Tech, a school that was then scoring 3-percent efficiency in math. From day one, I vowed to raise that score to 70 percent by year's end. The climate and culture have to be conducive for students to excel.

In this regard, I work with administrators, parents and teachers across the nation to have 100% proficiency, 500% honor roll and 0% failure. We help the youth to figure out in which field they are good, and help them to achieve their goals. I participate in the implementation of numerous strategies to improve the academic performance of students from various cultural backgrounds. This enables me to spread an empowering message of *attitude transformation* throughout the U.S. and beyond.

P.T. Thanks for this very interesting interview. It was a real pleasure to speak to you!

Education: Middlesex County College, AS, 1985

Kean College, BS, 1986

Additional degree:

Career:

NY City Board of Education, teacher 1988-89

Baruti Publishing, owner, president and publisher since 1990

East Orange Board of Education, teacher since 1992

Principal of Sojourner Truth Middle School, 1997-00

Principal of Newark Tech since 2007

For more info, visit www.PrincipalKafele.com

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