



Photo provided by Luis Torres

Fighting the Good Fight

Inspirational Mercy Alumnus Stands Up for Children in the Bronx

Luis Torres, M.S. '00, is a veritable celebrity wherever he goes in New York City. Both current and former students recognize him as the beloved principal of PS. 55, a public elementary school in the Morrisania section of the Bronx.

One of his former students now plays for the G League affiliate of the Los Angeles Clippers professional basketball team. Torres recalls the lessons he tried to instill in him: "When he went to PS. 55, he was always in my office and destined to fail. But I kept him close and taught him as much as I could. When it was time for him to decide whether to go into the NBA draft or finish his college degree, he asked for my advice and ended up finishing his degree at Seton Hall University, like I suggested. I strongly feel that if I had not kept him close to me, he would not have been as successful." Torres also reflects on another successful former student who is now an information technology specialist: "Hearing about the great things my students are doing in the community is what keeps me going in this job. We want students to grow into successful, productive citizens."

Like his students, Torres attended New York City public schools in the Bronx. He loved art but says that no one took the time to notice or foster his passion. In high school, his guidance counselor advised him to join the military because she thought he would not succeed in college. So, he joined the United States Navy and served during Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm. After 10 years of service, he returned to school, ultimately earning four degrees, including

a master's degree in education from Mercy. Upon graduating from the New York City Leadership Academy — a school principal training program — he assumed the principalship of PS. 55 in 2005.

PS. 55 was once one of the lowest performing schools in New York City. Located at the center of a public housing complex in the Bronx, it currently educates just over 500 students, 98% of whom are from families facing economic hardship.



Students use technology for literacy, math, and science support.

Photo by Luis Torres

Now, the school has turned around and is famous for its many programs, support and partnerships. State test scores are on an upward trajectory. Students and families can visit a full-service health clinic and take home extra vegetables from the school's garden. The school now has a large new playground, new computers, and extracurricular activities such as dance groups, basketball teams and tennis. Torres even recently developed a partnership with luxury watchmaker Bulova and nonprofit Windows of Hip-Hop to build a brand-new recording studio — the first ever in a New York City public school — where students will learn about music production and hip-hop.

How did Torres achieve such a

dramatic transformation for PS. 55? He began with something he calls community matching: he took stock of the resources in the school and the needs of the community, and he began to match them up. Wherever there were gaps, he looked for resources to fill those gaps. "For a long time, our school served mostly Hispanic families," he explained. "Over the last eight years, the neighborhood has started to transition to an African community. A lot of the resources in the school building were geared towards Spanish-speaking students and families. I had to make a shift and create an environment that was geared toward the changing demographics in the neighborhood." His thinking led to changes in the after-school programming and in the school's resource allocations.

The inspiration for community matching came from his master's in education program at Mercy College. "One of my professors told us about a theory of how instruction, technology, and relationships between families and the school all work together to increase student outcomes and achievement. That was the basis for my thinking around community matching, which ended up being foundational in turning around my school."

Torres believes that education is one in a hierarchy of needs: "People have five basic needs: food, shelter, safety, health and then education is the fifth priority. Now with this COVID-19 pandemic, education becomes the sixth priority because technology access is the fifth." These other needs must be met before students and families can focus on education.

In addition to improving the quality of the education at PS. 55, Torres is focused on his families'

other needs, including their health and wellness. First, he expanded the school nurse's office into a full-service clinic for students and their families, which is run by Montefiore Health System and staffed by a doctor, a nurse, a dentist, an ophthalmologist and a psychologist. "The clinic helped our attendance rate rise from 87% to closer to 92 or 93%," Torres said.

Noting the existence of a food desert in the community — an area where it is difficult to buy affordable or good-quality fresh foods — Torres partnered with nonprofit Green Bronx Machine to create a health and wellness center in the school. Now, the school produces vegetables all year long in towers using aeroponic technology, which means that the plants require less water than in traditional gardening methods. Students grow and eat the vegetables, and the school also donates organic produce every week to cancer patients who live in the neighborhood.

Beyond his work in his school and the surrounding community, Torres has spearheaded other initiatives as well such as providing free, televised educational programming to Bronx families and students during the COVID-19 pandemic via BronxNet's television channels and organizing remote learning for Puerto Rican students who were affected when Hurricane Maria devastated the country. His leadership is legendary, and he has received many awards and accolades. In February 2020, he was honored with a Mercy College Alumni Achievement Award for his outstanding accomplishments and was also inducted into the Mercy College Alumni Hall of Fame. Previously, he was named 2017 Educator of the Year by the New York League of Puerto Rican Women, NAACP's Outstanding Educator 2014, Daily News Hometown Hero 2013 and ASCD's Outstanding Young Educator 2011.

As he looks ahead, Torres is as optimistic as always about P.S. 55 but aware of new challenges to come with the financial crisis sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic. Officials in the New York City Department of Education are proposing widespread school budget cuts. Torres stresses that schools cannot afford to go backwards, so he calls on everyone — all government agencies, partners, communities, businesses, colleges and their alumni, citizens — to think about better ways to fund schools so pandemics and financial crises do not affect the quality of instruction. "The purpose of our lives is always to make the world better than how we left it," he said. "And if that's why we're here on this planet, we cannot afford for these inequities to exist and to persist. But the only way that's going to change is if everybody says enough is enough. I will use every ounce of energy and all the air in my lungs to fight for our children."

