

Mercy Alumna Leads the Nation's Largest Public School System

Q&A with **Meisha Porter, M.S. '03, H.D. '20** Chancellor of New York City Public Schools

Mercy College was fortunate to speak with alumna **Meisha Porter, M.S. '03, H.D. '20** about her March 15, 2021 appointment to the position of New York City Public Schools Chancellor. Porter is the first Black woman to lead the education of the system's one million students in more than 1,800 schools.

Porter inherited a school system amid the COVID-19 pandemic and approached the challenging situation as an opportunity to build a system that students deserve.

The Q&A below sheds light on how Porter's experience as an educator and administrator, and Mercy student, has informed her decision making as leader of the nation's largest school system.

This spring you were named the New York City Schools Chancellor. How did that feel? Absolutely amazing. I was a student in the New York City Department of Education, then a teacher, then a principal, so this role brings together all my previous experience. This year's reopening was the most important for a school system. So, while it is really exciting — and I'm excited to do this for our community, families, teachers and leaders — it is also overwhelming. We are getting it done, though!

What has been the biggest challenge of the job so far? The biggest challenge is that we are still in a pandemic, and we are tasked with interpreting and making sense of ever-changing policies and guidance. This has been the priority of our work so that our school system opened safely.

I think it is also why my experience in the system is important in this moment. I really try to make sure that I am leaning into all the roles that I've

had in the past. As we are making decisions and interpreting policy, I understand how it lands for students, teachers and administrators.

You've been an educator and an administrator in the public school system. Which position is more fun?

I thought being a principal was the most fun ever. As a principal I was part of a school community — part of a family of teachers, assistant principals, students and families. Being the principal of a six to 12 school, I saw children go from 12 to 18, then go off to college. On social media I see them doing so many amazing things.

I really enjoyed being a principal because there are so many ways to really impact from that seat. From the experiences teachers have in the classroom, to the experiences students have in the classroom, to the way you interact with families, there are so many ways to touch the community from that seat.

There is a lot of worry about public school children falling behind because of the pandemic. What is being done to ensure that doesn't happen? We are making significant investments in our academic recovery plan and putting a laser focus on literacy. However, I like to push us away from that worry. The pandemic has affected everyone. Not just public-school children. Every person has been affected by the pandemic differently, but we've all been affected.

And I think we've also learned a lot of things. Our students learned to be independent learners. They learned to manage their own learning spaces, ask questions and get help when needed. And I also think it's important in this moment that we lean into not only what we're worried about, but also what we've gained and what we've learned, like the way that we've used new technologies to engage families and students. I think all those things are super important to realize to address that worry.



Photo provided by Meisha Porter

Is your family so proud of you?

Yes! They are — and I come from a family of educators, so I've done a great thing for them. My mom is a teacher — she currently coaches teachers and works for the UFT Teacher Center Office of Community Schools. She does a lot of professional development and was a UFT Teacher Center Coach. That's one of the reasons I always had a Teacher Center in my school — because you always listen to your mother.

My aunt is a retired principal, assistant principal and early childhood educator. I have another aunt who is a social worker, as well as a cousin who is a guidance counselor. We are educators through and through. They definitely inspired my path — my aunt was my first teacher in pre-school. I remember being a little kid watching my mother and my aunt grade papers and thinking, "That looks like fun."

What the activity are you most looking forward to doing now that we're back to some semblance of normalcy?

Every year my aunt has an annual family BBQ — it was smaller this year, but at least we were able to have it. It felt like getting back to our new normal of what it means to gather as a family. Everybody couldn't be there so we Zoomed and Facetimed people in so everyone could be connected. It was good to be together — it was good to see my aunties who I haven't seen in over a year and to just bring our family back together.

Is there a high point in your educational career so far?

This is pretty much a high point. This is a pretty cool high point. It's an amazing opportunity — at the hardest, craziest time — but taking on this role is definitely a high point.

Any words of advice for your fellow Mercy alumni?

Really stay connected to your cohort — the folks you're in this learning space with. Also be flexible and adaptable to this moment. The pandemic shall pass and we will come out different and better. Be okay with the discomfort of the moment and really push our system forward. Really think about the school system that we need to build that our students deserve — build that and be adaptable to that.

If we focus too much on young people falling behind, then we will not see the brilliance that's in each and every one of them in this moment.

How are you making sure all students are getting what they need to be successful?

I really believe that this moment is about seeing who our students are, acknowledging their experiences from the pandemic, affirming their identities and bringing them back into classrooms where we are acknowledging not only their academic needs, but their social-emotional needs. This has been critically important as we reopened our school system. But for that to happen, my team must wrap itself around schools, teachers and leaders so that they feel supported and can support students similarly.

You are a graduate of Mercy College. How did Mercy prepare you for your rise in the public school system?

Mercy started me on my journey to become an administrator. I started as a student thinking, "Maybe one day I'll be an administrator." I made so many connections at Mercy and have

networked with so many people — and I've watched those individuals, now my colleagues, grow. From the first class that I took with with Adjunct Professor Dr. Andrew Peiser at Mercy in the Bronx to receiving an honorary doctorate, Mercy has been a huge part of my path forward — it all started there.

How did you personally — and your family — handle life under COVID?

I come from a big family. My mom has three sisters and I have a bunch of cousins — a big family — and what was the hardest for me was just being disconnected from my extended family. Even though I have my children and my husband at home, there are extensions of us that go beyond that. Coming from a big family it was hard for me to not have the big Thanksgiving and not have the annual BBQ. Those things were hard and getting back to those things is important to me.

And I think that's why it was so critical that we open our schools because those human connections are so important.