

A Conversation with Ahmes Askia

Ahmes Askia is Professional Development Director of the [National Urban Alliance for Effective Education](#)® in Syosset, NY. The NUA places mentors -- teachers and university professors -- in school districts to provide professional development activities for educators.

The NUA's mission is "to substantiate in the public schools of urban America an irrefutable belief in the capacity of all children to reach the highest levels of learning & thinking demanded by our ever-changing global community."

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Good schooling can lift students above the limits of physical poverty and even above a social environment indifferent to academic success -- that's the philosophy of Ahmes Askia, who has worked with urban districts and students of color for over 20 years. Askia is Professional Development Director for the nonprofit National Urban Alliance for Effective Education, founded in 1989. NUA mentors, who are educators themselves, work with districts to provide ongoing professional development activities for teachers and administrators, and to improve school communities. Askia described NUA's work and shared some strategies for urban classroom success in a recent conversation with HotChalk.



Q: What's the NUA philosophy?

A: The NUA believes that intelligence is modifiable, not fixed. It focuses on culture, language and cognition.

Q: How do urban schools differ from their suburban counterparts?

Urban schools are different in that youngsters come to school with a lower vocabulary than suburban students. Academic language is not spoken in the home, so teachers should spend more time doing background development for the learning itself -- vocabulary development, and also making sure they use the strengths students bring to the learning environment.

Q: What's the biggest challenge for teachers in urban schools?

A: The fear of what students have done in the past academically and how they have performed on high-stakes tests, and using that as a barometer of the student's potential.

For example, we work in a district that's doing voluntary racial desegregation. Students from an urban district are allowed to go into a suburban district. The suburban teachers are saying they need help working with students who are culturally different and functioning two or more years below grade level.

Q: How do you train teachers to address that challenge?

A: We use a Pedagogical Flow Map. This helps teachers design lessons to mediate the learning for students. First, a teacher outlines the standard they're working on, and then how they plan to assess the learning upon completion.

Then they make sure the students understand the concept they're supposed to be learning and how it relates to the lessons they have learned in the past, or how it will relate to learning going forward.

After that, they would start the vocabulary specific to that lesson. Then the students get the background they need for that lesson.

Q: What's a specific example of how this works?

A: Take a lesson on the Civil War. A standard might be that the students would have to understand historical events. A concept would be conflict. We might use a taxonomy, an A-Z vocabulary list associated with a particular topic -- in this case, conflict.

We also use David Hyerle's Thinking Maps®. When we're dealing with concepts, we might use a circle map. In the center of the map would be the word 'conflict.' We might ask the students what they know about this term. Then the students are allowed to talk about their knowledge of the concept.

Q: What's the most important advice you would give to teachers in urban districts?

A: Start with student strengths. Teachers often say that urban students are very verbal, so you would set up lessons using that strength -- debates, for example.

Q: What's your favorite NUA success story?

A: Hearing teachers remember why they went into teaching in the first place.

At the end of our training, we ask teachers how it has been different. They say that it reminds them to nurture the potential in students, and it gives them an opportunity to share their love of a particular discipline.



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