

# How Patrick Harris Found Healing In The Classroom

[educationviews.org/how-patrick-harris-found-healing-in-the-classroom-2/](https://educationviews.org/how-patrick-harris-found-healing-in-the-classroom-2/)

By NewsOne

January 19, 2020



By Michael Tomlin-Crutchfield –

On a late Thursday afternoon, 5th grade teacher Patrick Harris closes out his day planning lessons for the coming week and helping his students find their friends throughout the building.

Rather than being disturbed by the occasional shouts from students during our conversation, he met them with a smile as he paused to reflect on his path into the classroom.

“I wanted to be a teacher since I was in the first grade,” said Harris. “I know that’s something you don’t hear a lot of kids say, but I had a phenomenal pre-K experience and great teachers who encouraged me.”

As he began to matriculate through school however, Harris quickly found that the passion he had for the classroom wasn’t always shared by his teachers.

“Because of a lot of the policies that began to impact teacher pay, threats of layoffs, and pressures put on teachers to ‘teach the test’, they went from telling me to go into teaching

to warning me that I should do something else,” said Harris. “So, when I graduated from high school and went on to Michigan State, I initially majored in communications.”

Shortly after his first semester at Michigan State, Harris decided that he wanted to give teaching another chance and enrolled in the school of education. It was in the school of education where he found his first college summer job as a camp coordinator and when Harris found a deeper meaning in his pursuit of being a teacher.

“When I look at my classroom, if it weren’t for the kids, I wouldn’t be here talking to you today,” said Harris. “During my time as a coordinator at the camp, I was sexually assaulted by another staff member. I hadn’t told anyone about what happened until now and I walked around every day with the pain of that traumatic experience. The kids at the camp saved my life,” said Harris. “Their energy, their joy and their optimism reminded me of why I wanted to become an educator in the first place, and because they saved my life, I felt like I owed them. I decided that I wanted to repay them by giving them the education I felt like they deserved.”

After graduating from Michigan State, Harris started his career as a Teach for America corps member where he discovered an alternative route to gaining a certification and developed his teaching style.

“When I graduated from school, I couldn’t afford to do the student teaching program that was offered by Michigan State, so TFA allowed me to gain my certification alternatively through the New Teacher Project,” said Harris. “Aside from the preparation and certification, TFA gave me the experience to create environments that allowed my students to think critically and the space to determine what learning style worked for them.”

Harris, who began his career at a public-charter school in Washington, DC, went on to teach at a traditional public school, and now, a private school for boys where he teaches 5th grade. He says that each of his experiences has helped shape his approach to academia and classroom management.

“Before you can even think about management and discipline, the first thing on your mind should be building relationships with your students,” said Harris. “This is my third-year teaching and my second year without fights or any other disturbances in my classroom. We have to reprogram how we think about running a school; it isn’t about management or punishment.”

Harris focuses on building trust in his classroom by making his students take ownership rather than telling them what to do. He also provides a classroom with flexible seating options where collaboration is optional, so students can learn what works for them.

“I want school and learning to be as accessible as possible, the academics and the social components,” said Harris. “Students should be able to take ownership of their learning

even if that means taking myself out of the way.”

Throughout his time in the classroom, Harris also learned the importance of engaging parents in the education of their children. He uses take home assignments that require students to interview their families to keep parents involved in the process.

An area where he waits to engage parents is when a student is having behavioral issues in the classroom. Rather than contacting families or sending children home, he gives them the space to solve problems on their own.

“A lot of people believe that running a ‘tight ship’ in the classroom will lead to higher achievement and a more well-behaved classroom, but when you bring together any group of people, children or adults, from diverse backgrounds conflict is inevitable. Whether it’s a difference of opinion or ideas, I believe the most important way to resolve a conflict is to teach children the importance of building respect and community,” said Harris. “Rather than removing a child from the classroom, I bring everyone together as a class to talk through and resolve issues. It helps students practice their communication skills, develop their executive functions, and learn from one another. It also takes pressure off me as a teacher by allowing me to focus on the academics and teaching students how to handle conflicts in the classroom in a way that’s applicable in the real world.”

In addition to giving students a real world experience in problem solving, he believes it’s his responsibility as a teacher to be a steward of honesty in discussing current issues.

“I don’t believe there’s a such thing as a neutral teacher. People who teach students of color have a responsibility to tell the truth,” said Harris. “I design units that reflect the students in my classroom and the leadership in our country. Sometimes that means utilizing text from James Baldwin with references to Cardi B – if it helps my students understand what they’re learning.”

Harris encourages other people of color, especially black men and women, to consider the path of being an educator.

“When you take on the role of being a teacher, you not only become a role model, but a lifelong learner. As teachers, we have amazing opportunities to travel the country and the world attending conferences meeting amazing people. The best part is you get to take those experiences into your classroom,” said Harris. “No one day is like the next and you have the opportunity to craft your day and the learning experiences of kids who look like you. Depending on the type of school you’re in, the job comes with autonomy and the support to help you develop as a person and a professional.”

“I teach at school with all black boys and it’s special for them to see someone teaching them who is a direct reflection of their identity. As a black male teacher, I get to challenge the stereotypes they see of themselves in the media and redefine not only what a black man

looks like, but who we can be. Because of the positive things they see from myself and other black male educators and administrators, they began to view themselves more positively,” said Harris.

“There are some cons to the job, but it’s great to work in a place where I can be my authentic self where I’m given the space to grow.”

Source: *[How Patrick Harris Found Healing In The Classroom | News One](#)*

Designed by [Elegant Themes](#) | Powered by [WordPress](#)