

I Choose to Stay

Salome Thomas-EL grew up in the inner city of Philadelphia to become a teacher and principal with an unwavering commitment to the mentoring and education of inner-city youth.

By Jennifer Chase Esposito
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Educational historian Jonathan Kozol, United Negro College Fund President William H. Gray, the Philadelphia Inquirer, Disney Studios, and countless troubled-teens-cum-functioning-adults have recognized Salome Thomas-EL as an inspiring role model for both troubled students and parents at a loss for knowing how to help them.



Thomas-EL is the principal of Russell Byers Charter School in the heart of Philadelphia and is far from your average administrator. Witness a few of the ways Thomas-EL is stepping beyond Philly to help the nation's parents: He has a Supernanny-esque reality show in development about guiding parents toward keeping their kids in school (scheduled to hit the airwaves in fall 2009), he has made appearances on CNN, C-SPAN and NPR, and he is a winner of the School District of Philadelphia's Marcus A. Foster Award as an "outstanding school administrator." In addition, the rights to his first book, *I Choose to Stay*, have been bought by Disney for a future feature film. Back at home, "Principal EL," as he's called by his students, continues to use outside-the-box tactics like late-night visits, uninvited parent-principal meetings around the dinner table, emphasizing the power of positive thinking, and chess to help his students reach their potential and stay in school.

Such passion for his students' success oozes from Thomas-EL that you wonder why Disney hasn't cast him as the star in his own story. But fate, and faith, are funny about keeping people exactly where they should be. "Women have been carrying our profession for thousands of years," he says. "But when kids see a male teacher, they think, 'Wow. He didn't give up on us.'"

From the Streets of Philadelphia

Thomas-EL, 43, grew up in the Diamond Street Projects, one of Philly's most notorious neighborhoods, to become a vigilante for enriching urban school students. One of a twin and among six boys in a family of eight kids raised by his inspiring single mom, Thomas-EL credits his teachers early on for instilling in him a desire to go to college.



“A lot of times we assume that people who don’t look like us don’t want to help us. But I was blessed to have my teachers help me,” he says. Although 90 percent of his teachers were white females, Thomas-EL believed that being a black man in the classroom would enable him to be a role model. He entered Philadelphia’s system in 1987, where for 10 years he taught math at Vaux Middle School and for nine years was principal of John F. Reynolds School in North Philadelphia.

Amid his current administrative duties, countless extracurriculars, and an active family life, Thomas-EL still teaches an algebra class at Russell Byers, the charter elementary school where he is principal. The school serves children from 37 ZIP codes, a majority of whom are minorities, and has an average yearly list of 400 kids hoping to be among the lucky ones to gain admission.

Success through Chess

Thomas-EL’s teaching days were also spent in special needs classrooms, the discipline in which he earned his master’s degree. “I really made that my mission—to help move kids out of special needs,” he says, quickly adding, “Smart’s not something you are, it’s something you can become.”



So began what has become his claim to fame: world recognition as the coach of eight National Chess Champions. “Chess for me was a way to teach students,” he says. “I started teaching special ed through chess.” Vaux had a chess team in the ’70s and ’80s, when chess-playing kids had Bobby Fischer aspirations. But Thomas-EL knew that revamping the program would have greater ramifications for his inner-city students. “There’s a large achievement gap but an even larger exposure gap,” he says. “Two-thirds of the trips inner-city Philadelphia students have taken are within a two- to three-mile radius of here.”

Thomas-EL would take them to national championships in faraway places— and win—year after year. Today he sits on the board of America’s Foundation for Chess (AFC), a group that works with superintendents and boards across the country to implement chess programs in their own districts. Thanks to Thomas-EL’s passion and a voracious weekend and summertime speaking schedule that takes him to schools across the country, AFC hopes to make programs available to every second- and third-grade student in the United States. “We’re not teaching our students to become chess champions, but to get them to use their brain matter,” he says. Thomas-EL considers his chess programs to be among his crowning achievements as an educator.

Positive Programming

Russell Byers Charter School is an “Expeditionary Learning” school, the only one in Pennsylvania to offer the hands-on academic program that promotes what Thomas-EL describes as an “enter to learn, leave to serve” mentality through empowering students to take responsibility for their own education. Twelve-week “learning expeditions” teach kids about places like Africa by



having them stage plays about the African-American experience, and about animals through trips to the Philadelphia Zoo.

Russell Byers has programs including two-year kindergarten starting at age four, the state's largest school-based Big Brother/Big Sister program, and a "Reading Olympics" in which students in all grade levels read as many as 20 books in a competition against other schools. Now, Thomas-EL's five-year plan is to have his district open another building, to accommodate the kids who so badly want in.

Kids in School at All Costs

During Thomas-EL's classroom years at Vaux Middle School, 20 of his students were murdered before high school graduation. Since then his tactics for helping keep kids on the straight and narrow have run the gamut.



But his work is not without controversy. Some parents don't like his "program," which over the years has included trolling his hometown streets to dig out kids from the grocery stores and laundromats where he knows they hang out. If students consider his unannounced visits to their homes not to be a welcome sight, they often are just as disliked by parents, who can feel attacked. When that happens, Thomas-EL turns politely to them and says, "If your program was working, I wouldn't have to use mine."

His program is indeed working. In the two years that he's been at Russell Byers, Thomas-EL hasn't broken up a single fight, in the city with the country's highest murder rate.

"We still have a good number of students who struggle," he admits. "But it's a safe environment where students experience joy and rigor every day."

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