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INTERVIEW

Taking on the Challenges of Urban Education

An Interview with Sito Narcisse

Originally published in the *District Management Journal*, v.33, Fall 2023

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Taking on the Challenges of Urban Education

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Amid the chaos of Covid-related disruptions to schooling, Dr. Sito Narcisse assumed the superintendency of East Baton Rouge Parish School System, Louisiana, in January 2021. He arrived at the district well acquainted with the challenges of urban education: he came from the District of Columbia Public Schools where he had been serving as chief of secondary schools, and his other prior experience included serving as chief of schools in Metro Nashville Public Schools in Tennessee, and as associate superintendent of Prince George's County Public Schools, Maryland.

Having emigrated from Haiti as a child, Narcisse, a native Creole and French speaker, went through the public school system in New York where he learned to speak English. He went on to earn a B.A. from Kennesaw State University, a master's of education from Vanderbilt University, and a doctorate in education administration from the University of Pittsburgh.

This summer, Dr. Narcisse and his teams were in Boston participating in the Summer Institute of Harvard University's Public Education Leadership Project (PELP) and the PELP Accelerating Board Capacity Institute (ABC Institute). During his time in Boston, Dr. Narcisse sat down with John Kim, CEO of District Management Group, Harvard Business School professor, and faculty co-chair of PELP. Together, they spoke about the many challenges new and old in urban public education. We share their conversation in this edited interview.



Sito Narcisse

Superintendent
East Baton Rouge Parish School System (LA)

Welcome, Sito. It's wonderful to have you and your teams attending both the PELP Summer Institute and PELP ABC Institute, working alongside peer urban public school districts to tackle challenges in urban public education. We can see from your career path that you are clearly not one to shy away from challenge—you have devoted your career to urban public education.

Yeah, that's always been my passion. For me it's always been about impact, specifically on Black and Brown kids, because I'm a product of that growing up in New York.

I came to East Baton Rouge because it's an urban district and shared challenges common to most urban districts, but I also saw lots of opportunity to increase alignment and coordination, better leverage resources, and really make a difference. The district has about 41,000 students—it's the second largest in the state. And, being in the South, it has another subset of challenges.

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But I always tell folks that the context of the districts may be different, but an urban district is still an urban district. And the people who mentored me—some of the great urban superintendents—instilled in me that all these myriad challenges are just part of the work. And to me, there's nothing like going to a place where you see tremendous opportunity where people tell you it just can't happen, right?

I want to focus specifically on some of the challenges you have been addressing in East Baton Rouge—the higher incidence of disruptive or violent behavior. What you are facing is probably similar to the challenges that virtually every other urban and maybe even some suburban districts are facing.

What do you think is the root cause of this? Is it Covid that set off something? Or how much of this is the aftereffect of the murder of George Floyd, which raised consciousness and also resulted in reducing some institutions of discipline, whether it's policing or school resource officers or items like metal detectors, etc.? How much of it do you think is one versus the other?

I think it's all of the above. It's hard to separate this out because it happened over the same period of time. I think of it as a snowball effect. I feel like before Covid there were rules of engagement. Discourse was different. If there was a challenge around a particular issue, kids or families would try their best to figure out, “Okay, how do we solve this problem?” But when you start adding Covid, George Floyd, and all that has happened in recent years, I think our country has changed how we talk about things, how we frame things, and what we say. It's become more unfiltered. And I think the tolerance level that we had no longer exists.

So, you think it's become more polarized? You think people are taking harder stances?

Absolutely. It's very tribal. It's like, “If you're not with me; you're against me.” We're no longer in an era where educators are like superheroes. Those days are done, especially if you're in the superintendent role. Now, it's as if there has to be somebody to vilify: “If some effort isn't working, it's because of that person who led it—it's them.” But we all know that in a large system with many people, you're going to have lots of complexity. So, now as leaders, you have to figure out how you manage that and stay focused on the core issues.

You've taken what I think is a courageous step of performing a survey on safety and disruptive and violent behaviors to find out what the teachers and staff in the buildings are experiencing and thinking. Maybe you were forced to do this, but it's a courageous step nonetheless to conduct such a wide-reaching public survey.*

*District Management Group was engaged by East Baton Rouge Parish School System to develop and conduct a survey with all school-based staff on perceptions of violence and incidents of disruption.



Sito Narcisse and John Kim at Harvard Business School following the PELP Accelerating Board Capacity Institute

I've always believed that the people who are closest to the problem can help you solve the problem faster than people further from the problem. So, my approach was to conduct a survey to understand perception versus reality, and then also begin to engage with different groups of stakeholders and partners. We all have to collaborate and work together. And you have to create feedback loops to be able to constructively figure out the needed supports and make sure progress is really happening.

It's important to get real feedback from those on the ground in your district in order to figure out how to proceed. In the national press there's certainly a lot of conversation about whether we bring back police, security officers, and/or metal detectors and fences. These feel like symbolic moves that are not necessarily going to address the underlying problems that we've been talking about.

Yeah. I would agree. I mean, they are—some are—symbolic moves. So, I'll give you an example. We in East Baton Rouge had to decide on whether we were going to put police officers with guns in schools or not. Well, Uvalde had a guy with a gun and that still happened, right? I think the underlying issue is more about how kids are being treated by adults and the processes we put in place for safety. These are the bigger issues.

I think that people are trying to come up with these silver bullet solutions to a more complex problem. Not to say that if a community feels that's going to make them safe that you don't go do that, but you've still got to solve the fundamental problem, because if you put a fence up and you still get an incident, you still haven't solved the actual problem, right?



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Another example is the metal detectors. When I was a principal, we put metal detectors up. But it didn't stop kids from bringing weapons into school. The real issue was, "Why do you need the weapon? Is it because of where you're walking? Because of gangs?" I think that you have to have an approach that's trying to solve those deeper issues. It has to happen in coordination with the community and with different sets of stakeholders.

So, what do you think should be done?

Right now, I think teachers feel the brunt of it. If you're in a school and feel like you have no support, we've got to structure that support. It also means we may want to invest more in social workers and counselors. In East Baton Rouge, I'm pushing to have full clinics in schools that include social workers and all these other positions to support students and families. If you don't get those issues solved, you can't get to the academics.

I want to engage not only with my partners in schools but also with a broad range of stakeholders so we can have much more robust coordination on trying to solve the fundamental issues. From a superintendent level, I work with the mayor, the chief of police, the business community, and the social services folks to problem-solve.

As you note, it's the root-cause issues that need to be tackled.

What I've learned working in so many school districts in this urban space is when we believe in our own minds that our students come with such disadvantages and tell ourselves, "Let me give them a chance. Let me not raise expectations because they're coming from such a tough background," we are actually doing students a disservice.

If my parents and teachers had had that lens for me, Sito Narcisse would not be sitting in front of you today at Harvard as a superintendent with a doctorate degree. I'm a son of Haitian immigrants and grew up in New York in a Black neighborhood. I spoke Creole and French at home, and I had to learn English at school. But I was told in no uncertain terms, "You've got to learn how to read, whether you like this or not. You've got to sound out your alphabet. You've got to make sure that when you get to the table, you behave in a particular way. You have to make sure that you are articulate."

I think that that those days should be back versus what I call the "savior approach." A long time ago when I was principal, I caused some controversy by saying, "I'm not here to save kids. I'm here to teach kids how to save themselves."

I'm sure that was controversial. The politics of educational approach, especially related to urban Black and Brown students, is so fraught. I'm thinking about the "no excuses" charter schools—how for a while they were lauded and celebrated because they





set high standards and said, “We’re not going to let any child be left behind.” But then, the other side of that was, “Why is this harsh level of discipline focused mostly on Black and Brown kids while the approach in affluent White areas is ‘try your best?’”

Yeah, that’s right. Totally different culture. Well, the issue to me is not upholding the standard. If you know a student is further behind or that they have challenges, you’ve got to put more resources in to help them get to the standard. You don’t just change the standard. I feel like we have changed the standard, and that’s where the problem is. So, yeah, if you have no excuses, you’ve still got no excuses, but if the child can’t read, then you’ve got to help them read to reach the standard. And I think that to me is where we should be unapologetic.

In East Baton Rouge—I’ll give you a concrete example—I require every child in the ninth grade to take one advanced course. It doesn’t matter if they haven’t achieved a certain test score—and I’m not waiting for a teacher to recommend them for the advanced course. When I started, we had 2,000 kids taking advanced courses and most of them were White students—and we’re a district that’s 89% minority and 10% White. And once I took those rules away, we went in two-and-a-half years from 2,000 to 6,000 kids taking advanced courses.

Impressive.

I kept hearing, “Well, these kids can’t do AP.” Well, they’re now doing it. “These kids can’t pass dual enrollment,” people said. Now, we have college professors that come to our school to teach, and 84% of the kids are passing dual enrollment. Same group of kids, same context, but different standard. And with supports. And I’ve found in that transition that more adults than kids had issues with me changing the standard. But now, parents are starting to say, “Wait a minute, if my kid earns a lot of college credits, that could be a year or two of college I don’t have to pay for!” So, they’re beginning to figure out the benefit.

But the challenge is holding the standard and getting funding for the extra support that is needed. But standards should not change—we can’t just keep moving the goalposts.

Thank you, Sito. Yes, we can’t just keep changing the goalposts. Root causes need to be addressed. Thank you for all your work to support students to meet the standards and for making a difference in their lives. ♦