



LOWELL SCHOOLS FUND

Interview with Neyder Fernandez

Tiana: Can You Introduce Yourself & Tell Me a Little Bit About Who You Are Today?

Neyder: My name is Neyder Fernandez. I'm a Lowellian born and raised through its public schools. Currently, I'm a Community School Manager at Butler Middle School here in Lowell—one of eight, I believe, in the district. I started off as an educator teaching English as a second language, then moved into this role, so I've been in education for about three years now.

Prior to that, I studied political science at UMass Lowell, where I served as Student Body President and Vice Chair of the Boston Intercollegiate Government. I've been involved in the nonprofit and education ecosystem going on six years now, and I'm passionate about uplifting our community.



Tiana: How Did Your Years As A Student At Lowell High School Help Shape The Person You Are Today — Both Personally and Professionally?

Neyder: I would say being a student at Lowell High School showed me how to interact with a lot of different people, to navigate complex environments, and to advocate for myself. At Lowell High, there is so much going on. There are so many different people and many different opportunities that you have to really shape your own path and find your own way.

You know, that's the beauty about a classic liberal arts education that you are sort of the one guiding where you want your journey to take you. Lowell High really gave me the skills to advocate for myself and others, and how to navigate complex environments within systems.

Living and working in Lowell, we're kind of used to certain paths. I think my time at Lowell High School showed me that there are many different ways to do things and to have the same outcomes, or even better outcomes.

Thinking about my time at Lowell High, where I was a student advocate for a multitude of causes, I specifically remember working on changing our dress code to become more inclusive. Specifically for our Black students who were using traditional cultural headwear and ensuring that they weren't being discriminated. That was a successful policy that was led by peaceful student protests, petitions, working with school leadership in a respectful way to successfully change the dress code, which I believe is still intact today. It garnered the unanimous support of the School Committee and that was only done through partnerships from a bunch of different sectors at the high school working together with the administration. It really instilled in me the value of community building and working with systems instead of against them.

Tiana: Is There A Specific Class, Mentor, Or Experience From Your Time At Lowell High That Really Stuck With You And Influenced Your Path?

Neyder: There were definitely a couple teachers that influenced me. One teacher specifically that influenced me was Ms. Kendra Bauer. She really showed that just because I was a kid from Lowell didn't mean that I had to say, "I'm only limited to these amount of opportunities or options." She really opened my eyes to becoming a better advocate through my writing. Which, in turn, helped me develop my oral skills and focus on using what I learned in the classroom, and my skill set in being a persuasive writer, to translate that into the real world to advocate for other students.

For a class, I would say my AP Gov class with Mr. Nathaniel Kraft who, I believe, now is a testing coordinator at Lowell High. He showed me how my classroom learnings can really impact the work that can be done in the community. I specifically remember that I was really encouraged by his classroom in learning about how we can advocate for what we believe in at a local scale, a state scale, and national scale. I also remember, doing opinion letter to the Lowell Sun about more recycling. Specifically, how we need to become more sustainable and focus on our cleanup efforts and recycling efforts, not only at Lowell High, but in the communities surrounding Lowell High School and safety concerns around that.

I remember walking into class one day and he had a snippet of the article that he had put it up for the whole class to see. My name was kind of covered, but I immediately knew that that was my writing. It was good to see that there was a teacher that believed in the work that I was doing.

Even though it was small scale, he showed it to the classroom and used it as an example of how what we're learning in the classroom, specifically in AP Gov is related to all the systems that we that influence all of our lives. It was really good to see that and it influenced me to pursue a career in public service and continue the work. Not necessarily in just an advocacy way or lobbying, or working to influence legislators while doing the work on the ground, too.

Tiana: Why Did You Decide To Join The Project LEARN Board And How Does Your Work There Connect Back To Your Own Experiences As A Lowell Student?

Neyder: I decided to join when LZ Nunn saw the work that I was doing as a student leader at UMass Lowell. She kind of pushed me and said, "You know, we have this position on the Associate Board that we think you'd be a really good fit."

At the time I was, I believe, in my junior year of college. I was student body president, so I was involved in university policy, I was connected to leadership in the city as well as at UMass Lowell, and I was involved in education. I really liked Project LEARN's mission about being innovative, about trying different things, about using different strategies. I think sometimes in education, we're kind of seen as a bit antiquated, and it kind of takes us time to catch up. Which is interesting because we are educating the next generation; but we're using the learnings from the previous generation. I think it's good to have a combination of all those different knowledge bases, but I liked Project LEARN's mission to be more innovative and trying to get more students connected into the community.

Although when I was in high school, I didn't directly participate in Project LEARN's programs, I knew that their advocacy and the work that they were doing really helped Lowell High change the way it was looking at things. I was a part of GEAR UP/TRiO, so I had college readiness, but I was just missing the career piece. Then, I was an extern with the City's Planning & Development department in high school during my senior year and that work showed me it was possible for students who were in a traditional high school setting to gain real-world experiences and college & career readiness.

I think that the work that Project LEARN was doing helped make sure that Lowell High had these resources that allowed me to do that.

When connecting it to the work I do now, the Butler Middle School is one of the only college and career readiness middle schools in the entire Greater Lowell region. We work with federal, state, and local programs to make sure that students have access to pathways starting as early as 6th grade. The work that Project LEARN does interested me. I knew that if I was working in Lowell Public Schools, I wanted to use my school as a pilot and really be a catalyst for that work. I wanted to make sure that every student in Lowell, no matter their zip code, what country they come from, how much money their family has, or their education level, has the same opportunities of being college and career ready.

Tiana: From Your Perspective, Why Do Strong Public Schools Matter So Much To The Lowell Community?

Neyder: I think public schools are the bedrock of our community. I am a strong proponent of the community school model, where the school is a hub for resources and connecting people to different opportunities available in the city. I think education is something that touches all of our lives at one point, whether it's us directly being in the education system, our siblings, our relatives, our children. So it's the perfect launching ground to make sure that a community is growing sustainably. There was just a memorandum about schools becoming carbon neutral by 2050. Lowell kind of set the example and the tone since we service 15,000, plus all of their families, the community members and all of the people that we employ. So we're kind of the bedrock of any functioning sustainable society.

I think Lowell is in a unique position in the sense that our schools have so many services to offer and so many avenues where we can be like the stage and the ground for community partners and businesses can come try programs and invest in the community.

The Butler just recently had a generous donor, Northern Bank, sponsor our STEAM night. We also run a 32-year-long partnership with Angkor Dance Troupe to support our annual Cambodian New Year program, an after-school program that is then turned into a performance for our students and community members. The Lowell Cultural Council donated a sizable amount too to make sure that the event was successful. All of this work is supported by the Lowell Public School District, but also supported by our partners.

We just had a mural put up this year celebrating Hispanic and Latino culture, 40% of our students are of that background, that was supported by the state, the Lowell Cultural Council and some other local other cultural groups. That project was a prime example of what Lowell stands for. It's about working together to make something beautiful. The mural was made by a local artist who went to Lowell Public Schools, then the Voke where he learned graphic design and then he came full circle and gave back to the community. It made this beautiful piece of art that represented the diversity of our community on a public park that actually received a bunch of federal investments.

I think that all of this showcases why public schools are so important and how we can really be a place where we can all come together and make things happen.

Tiana: What Excites You Most About The Future Of Lowell's Schools And The Work You're Leading To Support The Next Generation Of Students?

Neyder: I think what excites me the most is that students really feel like they're empowered to change the future, to take control of their own path. I'm really excited to see all the different work that we're doing to make sure that students' needs are met in and out of the classroom.

I think that specifically as a community school, and as a proud partner of Project LEARN, I'm really excited to see this generation having college and career readiness earlier so that they can really kickstart their careers and the work earlier on. I think sometimes we focus on that high school level, but we really miss out on that key cohort of 6th, 7th, and 8th graders. These are kids that want to volunteer, that want to get out in the community all the time.

I have students coming up to me, saying "Mister, when can I get my work permit? What's the next steps to finding a job. How can I give back to my community? Is there any volunteer opportunities?" I'm really excited to see all that energy being put back into the community because they're not saying, "Oh, I want to go do something in Boston," or "I want to do something in a different city." They're always talking about how they can do something here in Lowell, how they can help their neighbors, people that look like them, and people that went to Lowell Public Schools.

I'm really excited to see the long term impact of work that's going on right now. I look at my 8th grade class that's graduating in a couple months. Four years from now, they'll either be going to the military, or into a career, or technical education, or to college. I'm really excited to see where that takes them and how work being done at the middle school level and all throughout Lowell Public Schools is given back and brought back into the city to make it better for everyone. At the end of the day, a lot of this generation wants to see that the work that they're doing is making a positive impact on their community.

Tiana: As Community School Manager, You Oversee 30+ Partnerships And Major Funding – What's Your Approach To Keeping Programs Effective And Sustainable?

Neyder: My approach is, first, to make programs that students want. We have our priorities as a school and as a district, but sometimes we forget that it's students and their families that we're servicing. I'm really intentional about bringing in and creating programs and opportunities that align with the needs and interests of our students. That's the number one, and making sure it's efficient because, if students don't want it, then the buy-in isn't there from the key stakeholder.

It's also about stewarding the right donors. It's not just about asking for money or for support from anyone that wants to give it. It's about doing it intentionally and making sure that I'm connecting to people that want to give back to the community, that have the capacity to do it, and that aren't just going to do it for one time. Even though we're going through a lot of difficult financial situations across the board, I really look for those that have the capacity to support longer-term projects. Even if that means just starting the pilot, that's a great start.

I also think about building coalitions. Not just relying on one person, but rather looking at how we can do this with a bunch of different people, thinking "where is the overlap?" I can think of so many programs we're running right now, where it's two, three or more partners that are working together to do this – they're all pitching in their little piece of support.

It can be small as writing a letter for us so that we get the grant or connecting us to a donor and it can be as large as them supplying personnel to support our after-school program or giving us a sizable amount on a recurring basis to make sure that the program is sustainable for the long term. It's about making sure that it's intentional, that students actually want it, and it's also about having that community focus.

Tiana: What Has Been The Most Rewarding Part of Building Partnerships That Drive Real Change For Lowell Students And Families?

Neyder: The most rewarding part is hearing from students and their families about the impact that the partnerships have had on their lives or the direct impact that the work that I am leading has helped change the trajectory of their lives. I can think of so many instances where parents have come up to me and thanked me personally for helping them find housing or helping them enroll in health insurance or helping them lower their energy bill. That's due in part to the partnerships that we have.

A couple of months ago. National Grid was here helping people lower their energy bill. It was open to the community, not just people that were associated with the Butler. We also have the mobile health unit that allows people access to healthcare services, plus all of the partnerships with local nonprofits that are donating food, gifts, clothes, helping connect them to resources housing. It's those stories where you hear from families saying the program that was at the Butler helped me succeed, helped me give back to my community, helped me find something to empower myself. That's what it's about for me.

I want to give people the skills that make them feel empowered so that they can take charge and really excel. Giving them the support, the skills, the opportunities and letting them tailor it to how they see best. Then seeing the product of that, I think that's the beauty of the partnerships that we have right now.

Tiana: What Advice Would You Give Current Lowell High Students As They Think About Their Own Futures And How They Might Create Impact After Graduation?

Neyder: Don't be afraid to ask questions. Don't be afraid to put yourself out there. I think a lot of times, especially when we're young, we're afraid of failure or of being rejected or not given an opportunity. I've had so many instances where simply just asking has opened so many doors for me, and it might have not opened the door that I thought.

When I was applying for jobs and internships in college, I simply would send out emails to people and say, "Hey, I am interested in the work that you are doing. Can we connect so I can talk to you a bit more about your interests, the work that you are doing, and my career path and where I want to go?" That landed me an internship at one of the leading hospitals in the country, Dana-Farber in Boston simply through asking someone how they got there

and what skills I needed to get there. It wasn't even me asking, "Can I get a job?" It was, "I applied for this position, and this is why I wanted to meet with you." In the interview later on, that same person thought, "he expressed interest in this position, and seems really motivated." That's what changed me getting the job or not. This was a job that I had no experience in.

There's so many opportunities like that. I think sometimes we're afraid to ask because we feel like we don't have the skill set for that opportunity or that we don't merit it, but it doesn't hurt to ask. You can even think of something as small as going to a restaurant and saying, "Is it possible for me to add this?" or "can I take this off?" We feel like, "Oh, I don't want to do that. I don't want to disturb the person," but even just asking in a polite way could change the whole meal. When you think about that in the grand scheme of things, that's what happens every day.

Tiana: When You Look Ahead, What Kind Of Legacy Do You Hope Your Work Will Leave For The City Of Lowell And Its Students?

Neyder: I hope that I leave a generation of students that feel seen and a generation of families that feel like they have an advocate. That advocate might even be themselves. It doesn't have to be someone in a position of power or someone working within the system, but I want to make sure that I leave the toolbox open and ready for anyone to grab the tools when they need it. I want to make sure that everyone feels like they can open doors that they think are locked, whether it's knocking it down, simply knocking on the door, or just opening the handle.

I want to make sure that the legacy that I leave is about laying the foundation for people to empower themselves, to be the best version of themselves. That's always what I tell my students. I always say, "I'm here to support you, but you're the one that makes the final choice." If you want to do your work or if you don't want to. If you want to come to school or if you don't want to. I want to lay out all the options, give multiple pathways, give all the support that I can, so that they can make the decision. I think sometimes, specifically as school leaders, we want to come in and say, "this is what you're going to do and this is how you're going to get there." But I want to change is the narrative and say, "what we need to do instead is make sure that everyone has access to these opportunities." Everyone can see the choices out in front of them and make the best choice for them. I want to leave a generation of empowered individuals.