

Digging Deep is a passionate memoir of my career as a teacher and administrator in the NYC schools and the challenges I faced. With the help of a dedicated team of educators, we defied the odds, raised the bar, and encouraged all kids to succeed.

**DIGGING DEEP, AIMING HIGH:
An Educator's Lifelong Quest to Put Kids First**
By STEVEN ASKINAZI

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DIGGING DEEP, AIMING HIGH

An Educator's Lifelong Quest
to Put Kids First



STEVEN ASKINAZI

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To protect the privacy of individuals who are still living, some names and details have been changed. The following is the author's personal recollection of the events of his life and career.

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About the Author

Steven Askinazi had a long and successful career association with the New York City public schools and the City University of New York. As a student attending Public School 75 in the Bronx, Campbell Junior High School, and John Bowne High School in Queens, he knew early on that teaching was going to be his chosen career. After receiving a BA and MS in Education, with a minor in Spanish language at Queens College, Steve became permanently certified to teach in grades seven through twelve. Having spent a year studying and living in Spain under the sponsorship of the City University of New York Study Abroad Program, his newly acquired linguistic skills prepared him for a career working in the South Bronx and East Harlem. His entire work experience was invested in two heavily populated Spanish-speaking environments, which always made him feel at home. After teaching for twelve years in middle school as a teacher of Spanish and Bilingual studies, he received a transfer to The Manhattan Center High School for Science and Mathematics.

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Having completed a second master's degree in Supervision and Administration from Hofstra University, Steve became certified as an assistant principal. He served as a teacher of Spanish and English As A Second Language (ESL) at Manhattan Center while taking on the additional position of supervisor of Humanities at the school. Twelve years later he became the principal of the school, overseeing the River East Elementary School, Isaac Newton Junior High School, and Manhattan Center High School, which were all housed in the same building. Steve also worked as an ESL instructor in the evenings at Rockland Community College for several years.

After retirement, Steve became a consultant for the National Academy Foundation, serving as a mentor to principals in the Miami public high schools. He worked with the foundation for seven years.

Steve is married to a former teacher who is also a product of the NYC public schools and the City University system. He has two daughters living in New York, one who teaches Special Education in Queens and one who is the director of Global Alumni Relations for a law firm.

As a family, we have never forgotten our roots and continue to give back to communities of underserved populations.

Chapter 15 – A Seat at the Table

– Part Two

How do you define loneliness? Following the grueling experience with this teacher who acted inappropriately, which lingered for months because the press wouldn't let it go, I found myself steeped in self-reflection, sadness, grief, and disappointment. Although my very supportive staff offered kind words, compassion, and even their sympathies, their comments about me “getting the big bucks,” which I wasn't, and not wanting to touch my job “with a ten-foot pole” added to my feelings of loneliness. I needed to work through this crisis and my frequent anxiety attacks on my own. As always, I turned to the kids.

I loved these children. At times I found myself hugging the kids even though school regulations were clear about not showing this type of affection. After all, the students were of high school age and problems could arise. These youngsters needed the nurturing as much as I did. So many of them never received this type of attention at home. I needed a *student fix*, so I called upon the senior class teacher advisor, who was also the coordinator of

student affairs (COSA), to arrange morning meetings with different teams of kids. My thought was that in order to stay on top of student issues and gain credibility with the student body, I had to empower them. If I could accomplish this feat, everyone would then have a seat at the table. For my own sanity, I had to be with kids who always made me feel better. I wasn't sure, however, that an invitation to a 7:00 morning meeting would be appealing to them, as classes didn't begin until 8:35. Boy, was I wrong!

With additional effort, we were able to recruit ninth-graders who would have their seat at the table for four years. They were flattered to be sitting side by side with seniors, who helped to build their self-esteem and teach them the ropes (not always the best ropes, though). Believe it or not, there were days when I had standing room only, with over fifty kids showing up to my office, which was meant to hold twenty people maximum. Often, we had to move to the library. Initially, I wasn't sure whether they were coming just for the donuts and coffee or if they truly wanted to be part of a student-based decision-making body. Moreover, since our organization was not a neighborhood school, kids needing to arrive at 7:00 from other boroughs had to leave home in the dark, often before 6:00. The early hour and lengthy trip to the school didn't stop them from piling into the building.

It was probably the most rewarding part of my day. The kids prepared an agenda of student concerns, with the promise of not allowing the meeting to turn into a gripe session. I had my own agenda of student issues, as well as positive updates and upcoming events and projects. We all compromised on the time allotted to discuss each item. As the news of the group having a genuine voice at the table got around, more and more students attended. The icing on the cake came from

curious teachers who decided to frequent our sessions as well. Many folks were willing to put in the extra time beyond their contractual responsibilities.

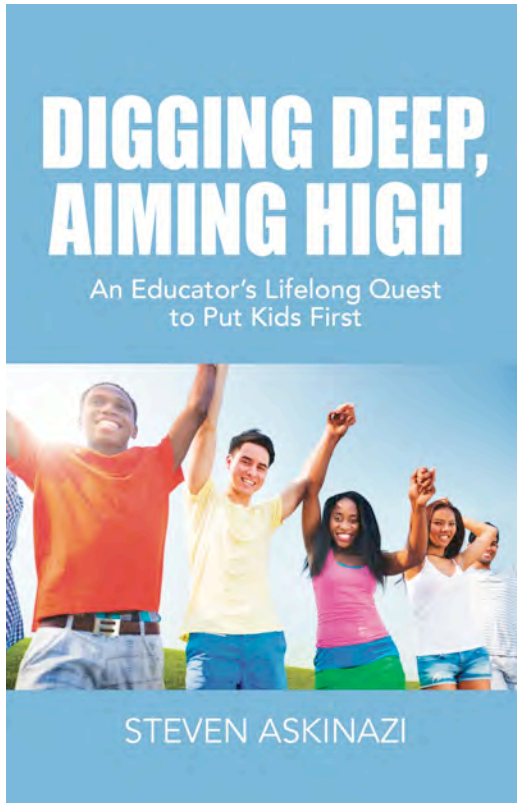
I could not let the refusal of others to join us ruffle my feathers. I was able to start my day on a positive and refreshing note, setting aside all the negativism that plagued the system as well as the people who continually tried to sabotage this beautiful effort. My eyes get all watery thinking about the love that we shared with these kids each day. The growth and maturity demonstrated by these youngsters in all the grades were phenomenal. They began to feel comfortable in their own skin. Timid kids became outgoing leaders, and their report card results began to soar as soon as the school started to mean so much more to them. The students had a purpose. I, in turn, was ecstatic. I was even more motivated now to create additional student choice opportunities and experiences through projects, clubs, and collaborations. It was exhilarating!

Some of the kids were still not convinced that their seat at the table would mean much. We immediately had to put their suggestions into action, so that other youngsters in the building would see that someone was actually listening and considering them as equal partners. Within days we created a school recycling program with volunteers from each grade overseeing the project. The students even engaged the middle and elementary school children housed in our facility. Next, the seniors scheduled voter registration drives and signed up almost the entire class. Before long, we had clean-up crews and "Graffiti Gorillas" for school beautification, blood drives, child care services, charity drives, and student-run groups working with parents at events such as new school orientation, high school fairs, and holiday celebrations. Our youngsters created the school's

National Honor Society, and even those youngsters who did not have the high scholastic grades to be accepted as members were willing to partner with the club officers to offer community service. In addition, our student leaders represented our organization on every citywide event publicized in the newspapers such as New York City Cares, the New York Marathon, and Penny Harvest.

As the number of student-endorsed and student-initiated activities increased, I tried my best to participate in some with the little time left in my day. I did work with the cleanup crew washing tables in the cafeteria, replacing toilet tissue in the bathrooms, and scrubbing down desks. The kids needed to see me get my hands dirty. After all, I wanted to be a good role model. The school's intercom and loudspeaker system became my favorite toy. Each morning I announced to the entire student body the new initiatives as living proof that there truly were seats at the table. At times I did abuse the loudspeaker. After all, on the day that Frank Sinatra died, and the entire city was lit up in blue, I promised the older staff members that I would sing "My Way." The kids thought I was losing my mind, but at least we stayed connected.

The youngsters put our name on the map, and college recruiters were already knocking on our doors to meet their future activists. Again, we needed a much bigger table. My heart was bursting with pride, and I was no longer feeling that lonely at all. By the way, our girls varsity basketball team took first place citywide, and I was called upon to accept the trophy on their behalf at Madison Square Garden. At least this time I made it on the major television networks for a good reason.



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