

# Leadership Profile of Linda Wayman of CurrentlyTrending

Nikole Joseph Thomas 20 January 2020



Linda Wayman has been a school leader in Philadelphia for 32 years, and a principal for 13 of those years. During that time, she found a pattern; the highest number of high school dropouts were consistently 9th graders. When a new set of 9th graders would enter high school, she began asking them a series of questions regarding 8th grade and whether they felt it set them up and prepared them to go to high school. The answer was a resounding no. A number of students felt like this was partly due to the fact that they were so used to being with the same children in the same school since pre-K. No one really took the time to sit down and talk to them about being scattered across the city once they enter high school, and the implications of that big change. They had to build so many new skills when moving schools -- around making friends, how to talk to a counselor, how to read a roster, etc., that they were overwhelmed. The students never

learned critical skills to help them become self-advocates and navigate the complex systems and paths ahead of them. Linda knew then that when she formally left the school system, she wanted to start a nonprofit and fill that gap to address the dropout problem head-on.

CurrentlyTrending's first benchmark is to have their 24 students pass this year with the full five credits. Data says if they don't move on to the 10th grade on time, chances are they'll drop out of school. Their second benchmark is having these students graduate high school within four years. Those are the two main metrics they're measuring their impact and success by.

CurrentlyTrending has been steadfast in their mission, adding to it but never taking anything away. They were selective and intentional in who they put on their board and who would work with the children. They knew they wanted to help children and knew no one would take them seriously and raise capital without being a 501(c)3 so they went about enlisting Morgan Lewis's assistance and relied on external partners to help them overcome challenges in fields which they had no former expertise in.

There are other organizations that are focused on the transition from middle school to high school but what makes CurrentlyTrending unique is that they have retired teachers and retired principals coaching their kids in the schools in real time. Having mentors who are intimately familiar with the inner workings of schools has helped

them surmount barriers and allowed children's needs to be assessed in the school during the day in ways that other organizations have been unable to. Additionally, CurrentlyTrending works with professionals to expose students to various career paths and partners with universities so they can leverage additional resources. A key feature to their Saturday meetings is circle time, where the students talk about one challenge and one accommodation present in their high schools. Most of the time, the students have nothing good to say about the school. The prevalent narrative is around violence and issues with teachers. They have had students straight up tell them they are not going back and want to drop out. CurrentlyTrending steps in and walks them through their issues so they can stay in high school and have a positive experience overall.

Lessons that Linda Wayman has learned along the way include the necessity of prioritizing the grant writing and fundraising aspects of keeping her nonprofit going in a sustainable manner. Currently, they are obtaining all their funding from private donations, and they have partnered with Villanova University -- an institution she has a longstanding relationship with, to obtain small grants. Another major challenge CurrentlyTrending has run into, is working with a population of children who live in deep poverty without having the support of their parents. All of these kids want to be a part of the program, but the parents won't sign the paperwork. "You can't reach the

parents, the work we had to do to get 33 students to bring back the slips was unbelievable. You can't help the kids without their guardian's consent." Finally, a somber unexpected challenge CurrentlyTrending has discovered is that they "always talk to children about leaving the neighborhood and going to schools outside as a way of getting out and gaining better education opportunities." What they're finding from their students, however, is that they don't feel welcome in these schools. They're always reminded that these outside schools will just send them back to their neighborhood schools if they don't want them to be there. That's the reason why a lot of them wind up back in the neighborhood, they simply don't feel welcome and accepted outside of it. They don't feel like there are adults in the building they can go to and who truly understand them. That's something CurrentlyTrending never thought would come out of this, but it has and it's a reality that they have to face and learn to work with and around.

Linda Wayman's role model has always been politician Barbara Gordon, and just like her, she doesn't intend on letting these challenges get in the way of triumphantly fighting for the underdogs in this country and helping actualize paths of success for the next generation.

## **Author bio**

**Nikole Thomas** is currently a policy analyst at Homebase, a nonprofit technical assistance provider dedicated to

ending homelessness. Nikole graduated in the spring of 2019 with a Master of Public Administration from the Fels Institute of Government.