

**DR. JACQUELINE LANDRUM SANDERLIN**

The  
**WHY NOT?**  
Challenge

**SAY "YES!" TO SUCCESS WITH  
SCHOOL-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS**

 **SCHOLASTIC**

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## ***Dad, I dedicate this book to you.***

*You are the epitome of community empowerment! You are never afraid to smile and light up a room. You taught me about love for life, love for people, and love for community. Your sparkle will never go out and will continue to be a light along my path. You are my hero!*

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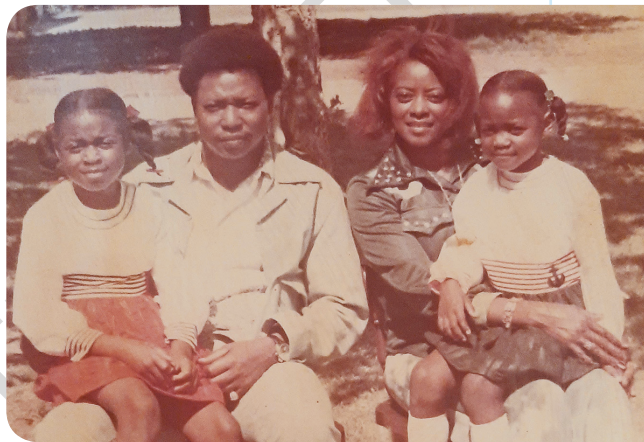
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## INTRODUCTION

# All Children Deserve a Why Not? Approach



**A**s I reflect on my life, I realize why I have truly embraced the words, “Why not?” My mother, Mrs. Earline Landrum, was a nurse by occupation and a strong and uncompromising parent by nature. She is a woman who never backed down when it came to her children. Whenever she saw a wall, she tried to find out how to scale it. Even today, I think she actually looks for problems to fix. That is my mother. She has a way with people that is almost unbelievable. Over the years, I have seen her do some pretty amazing things for me and my sister, Cathy. She secured thousands of dollars from financial sponsors to support me when I was competing in beauty pageants, hired the best tutors for us even when her funds were low, and even took on the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs in a 14-year battle to get our dad the benefits that were due him. She is a force to be reckoned with.



When my sister and I were in elementary school, our mother was determined to enroll us in a school that she felt would provide us with a better education than our neighborhood school. While we lived in a nice middle-class community, the other school was in a more exclusive neighborhood and had a lot more resources and programs.

My mother believed that this other school would be more challenging for us with all of its additional enrichment opportunities. She believed in diversity as well, and yet this school was not diverse—it was 100% Caucasian.

In fact, if we were accepted into the school, we would be the first two black students they ever enrolled. But the truth was that our current school was not diverse either. It was made up almost entirely of African American students and our parents wanted us to also be exposed to other cultures. Our father had traveled the world while in the Navy and had met many different people. He taught himself Spanish and could

**It was my parents who first planted the “Why Not?” idea in their children’s heads. I never knew where it would take me, but I was listening.**

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speaking it fluently. He cooked us foods from different cultures and wanted us exposed to every race. My parents felt that attending this other school would broaden our minds.

Once she found out about it, the school stayed in my mother's heart. On her lunch breaks, she used to walk around the exterior of the school and drive around the community. She loved the flowers, the trees, and the green grass in front of almost everyone's home.

*“I decided to ask them to tell me what would make our school even better. I told them to imagine anything they wanted and yell it out!”*

Our parents discussed the pros and cons of us attending this school and knew there would be some hurdles they would have to get through to get us enrolled. It was already the middle of the school year and we did not have a permit to attend the school; it definitely did not seem like the right time for us to transfer. One night, my sister and I overheard our parents talking in the living room. My mother leaned over to our dad and said, “Why not? At least I can try. Maybe they will welcome our girls. They are good girls.” When I heard her say that, I smiled with pride.

The following morning, she drove to our new school. She walked in with her beautiful smile and asked to speak to the principal. Because of the permit issue, he was hesitant. Then she pivoted and asked if she could stay and help that day. She told him that she took the day off and she loved to volunteer. He allowed her to help on the yard, in the library, and to monitor the lunch line. It was a different world back then—today, she would have had to submit fingerprints and get approved as a school volunteer. Back then, they just trusted her smile and her enthusiasm. My mother was able to meet the teachers and the staff and became friendly with them. I think my mom was working her magic.

Before the end of the day, the principal came and thanked her for taking time to volunteer at a school at which her children were not enrolled. She told him she was happy to do it. In fact, she did such a great job that several people on the staff had told her that they wanted her to stay. Well, to her surprise, the principal did, too. And he wanted her to bring

her daughters with her next time. That principal ended up helping my mother get the permit we needed and we soon enrolled in their school.

My sister and I never forgot that day. In fact, I believe those foundational years were the catalyst that created the Why Not? mindset I have today.

Years later, when I was a principal in Compton, California, I was on the playground during one of my morning assemblies with my scholars. (I always called my students scholars because I felt that it was important for me to hold them to that expectation. That's the term I will use throughout this book.) Many came from tough circumstances and it was important to remind them of their potential. I ran school assemblies nearly every morning on our playground, mainly to give the teachers time to prepare for class, but also to pep up the kids for the day. We would repeat a multitude of affirmations, chants, and songs. Sometimes, if I was in a particularly good mood, we might even dance! Morning assemblies were always an exciting time for me because I had a chance to speak to all of our students at the same time. But this one morning was different.

Instead of repeating the same things as we usually did, I decided to ask them to tell me what would make our school even better. I told them to imagine anything they wanted and yell it out!

Many of them literally stared back at me like I took them by surprise. But when I continued to nudge them, they began spouting out answers like new basketball courts, musical instruments, field trips, and much more. Once they got on a roll, I could hardly stop them! Finally, one of them shouted, "Can we really get all this stuff, Dr. Sanderlin?" I thought about it and yelled back, "Why not?" And that was it!

Hearing myself say "Why not?", it was like I lit a fuse that would not burn out. All of them began shouting those words in unison. "Why not? Why not? Why not?" Soon the parents and the staff joined in. "Why not?



**The question, "Why not?" opens up doors of possibilities. Think about it!**

Why not? Why not?" I could not stop them. It was almost like the words created an energy that could not be contained.

As I walked around the campus or visited classrooms, every scholar would say, "Why not?" I knew there was something to this Why Not? business when one of my parents made a T-shirt for me with the phrase "Why Not?" graced on the front. Something was happening at my school and it wasn't just a passing fad. Those words became our school mantra. Little did we know that this simple question would spark a flame of community empowerment and partnerships.

## About This Book

This book is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on getting ready for successful partnerships. I am convinced that before real partnerships can come, you have to empower your community to get on board. This first half of the book will help prepare and position your school for developing all types of powerful community partnerships. I

am convinced that school leaders should focus on community empowerment before attempting to develop community partnerships in order to create a sustainable impact for their scholars and school.

The second part of the book provides strategies to help you create and maintain successful partnerships. To be clear, I am specifically focused on philanthropic partnerships that often come through businesses, corporations, CEOs, and individuals who have a strong desire to support education.

Each chapter includes action steps and personal stories designed to help you take the Why Not? Challenge and make a difference in your school and community. The personal stories included are lessons I have learned over the years that I hope assist you with empowering your school community and developing sustainable partnerships.

Please go to [scholastic.com/WhyNotResources](https://www.scholastic.com/WhyNotResources) for additional checklists, forms, and other materials that will help you with your personal Why Not? Challenge.

**PART I**

# *Preparing for Successful School-Community Partnerships*





**B**efore developing successful partnerships, it's important to empower your community and get them enrolled in the idea of powerful partnerships. When I reflect on my early experiences with partnerships, I realize that I was too focused on my school's many needs. My desire for partnerships was focused on superficial short-term fixes. I was not thinking about sustainability at all.

When I thought of developing partnerships, I only wanted partners to help us or write us a check that went beyond my school budget. I didn't have time (I thought) to empower my community. I needed new stuff for my school by any means necessary and for good reasons since I was in an under-resourced community. I had a large population of troubled youth who came from complicated situations like foster homes, homelessness, and group homes. I believe they deserved better!

*“Here is the ultimate truth that I learned: If you don't empower your community, nothing will happen. Empower means to give someone the authority or power to do something.”*

That was not the right approach and it did not produce the outcomes I hoped for. Yes, we would get a few donations, but never any lasting partnerships.

Here is the ultimate truth that I learned: If you don't empower your community, nothing will happen. *Empower* means to give someone the authority or power to do something. As educational leaders, we have the power to get our local community members (families, businesses, corporations, CEOs, politicians, etc.) excited about our school vision and mission! Why not?

Don't be afraid to do this. In fact, I think it is our obligation to do it. Our scholars are depending on us. Our parents are depending on us. Our community is depending on us! So how do you empower your community? It all starts with a shift!

## Shifting from Engagement to Empowerment

I want you to consider a shift from engaging your community to empowering your community. For me, these are two very different approaches. Let's face it, we, as educators, have been discussing community engagement for years, which basically means creating opportunities for involvement. Involvement is a wonderful thing, but I think it's time to take that to another level.

Think of it like this: When we engage, it is like getting a lease. When we empower, it is ownership! See the difference? When we empower our community, we are offering an opportunity to share in ownership. And ownership, my friend, translates into investment.

*“When we engage, it is like getting a lease. When we empower, it is ownership!”*

## An Unlikely Example of Empowerment

At one time, I was the principal of a school adjacent to a park where gang members would regularly meet up with one another. Our scholars would watch them through our chain-link fence as they were having their meetings. It was not a positive sight. We would often hear loud cursing and fighting, and we'd often witness police activity. Every loud sound would cause us to look over and duck. It was dangerous. I thought, this is not what young students should be exposed to.

I made an executive decision, against the advice of my staff, to go over and ask these gang members if they would consider holding their meetings somewhere else. On my way there, I was becoming less and less confident. As I approached their circle, they looked at me with curiosity. They must have thought I had lost my mind. As I was asking, I began to think about what I was actually doing. I had the gall to ask them to leave their community park where they grew up, played, and now had their gang meetings. I only worked in the neighborhood and

I went home every day. My actions were to disempower them—not empower them. To this day, I am so glad that I had that realization in that moment. My plan instantly shifted before the conversation went south.

On the spur of the moment, I decided to ask them if they would be willing to come speak to my male students in a new afterschool program called Gentleman Scholars. From that point on, their faces changed from confused and irritated to possibly interested. I explained the mission was to help them with etiquette skills and positive behaviors. One of the gang leaders spoke up and said, “I like that. Yeah, we could do that. What do you want us to do?” Another said, “I used to go to your school and we didn’t have that when I was there—good idea.” I can honestly say, I initially didn’t know what I wanted them to do. I just knew this was one way to get them out of the park...but on my campus?

The next day, I was on my way to work and drove past a restaurant called Three Bears Burgers. I was drawn to the restaurant because I could smell the grilled burgers a mile away. I thought that it would be great to order food for the upcoming Gentleman Scholars meeting. I shared this with the manager who happened to take my order. She became so excited that she was willing to donate all the burgers for that day. I was shocked!

What happened next still amazes me when I think about it. This woman decided to bring her team and cook the burgers and the fries at the meeting! It was at that moment when I realized that she had become empowered by the idea of participating in this community event. She told me that she grew up in the same neighborhood and her family had gone through many challenges. By then she was catering major events in Hollywood, but she felt that this was an opportunity to help out in a way that was important to her.

On the day of the meeting, the gang members came in smiling because they smelled the burgers as they entered the school. While my young Gentleman Scholars ate, they listened intently to each gang member as they shared their different stories. Each one had a different path

and some surprising turns. While some came from broken homes, others grew up with both parents and finished high school, yet they became members of the gang in order to survive where they lived. As we listened, they all talked about how not to get into gangs. They gave advice and said if they could do it again, they would have done it differently. This was the first and most powerful meeting we had to kick off the Gentlemen Scholars program. They brought something I could not...they brought community empowerment. If I could do it over again, I would not change a thing.

After hearing their stories, there was not a dry eye in the room. I learned so much that day. Instead of asking these young men to leave their community, I now invited them to be empowered to help their community. While I thought this was the end, it was only the beginning. The park became a passion project for all of us to clean up. The entire community got involved! We painted murals, remodeled the community pool, and made it a place for families to feel safe to go to. It became an oasis instead of an eyesore. More than that, it became a vehicle for community empowerment.

The Gentleman Scholars program lasted for many years, continuing to bring in guest speakers, field trips, events, and new experiences. We even had alumni come back and share their stories.

This is certainly one way to empower your community—inviting them to share their stories and to work with you. Think about your local community and find avenues and pathways to work together, collaboratively. The empowerment will be like a ripple effect.

From that day forward, I continued to develop a Why Not? mindset and to believe anything was possible for my school. I started thinking big and dreaming even bigger. I got bitten by the Why Not? bug!

*“Think about your local community and find avenues and pathways to work together, collaboratively. The empowerment will be like a ripple effect.”*



## Why Not? Challenge #1

# Develop a Why Not? Mindset

**B**efore I began to empower my community, I had to truly believe that we had something to be empowered about. It was not enough to get people excited, it had to be much more than that. We all had to fully realize our value in the community.

It was a new state of mind that we had to adopt, and it wasn't always easy. Listen, when you have such a high percentage of your scholars in foster homes or homeless, and many other challenges, it is easy

