



Episode #194

**Educator and Community Activist Jason
Allen on Differently Wired Students of Color**

February 4, 2020

Debbie: Hello Jason, welcome to the podcast.

Jason: Hello. Thank you for having me.

Debbie: Well, I'm really glad to have your voice in this conversation. When I reached out to you, I think I mentioned that though this podcast is primarily for parents, I have a goal of doing more conversations that can be shared with educators as well. And just talking about the education system. And I wanted to get your perspective because I found you online and some of your blog posts, which were really powerful. And so I just thank you for coming onto the show.

Jason: Oh wow. Well thank you so much for your words. And I look forward to sharing some of the best practices that I use in my classroom and also being a former family engagement specialist, things that I also do to engage my parents in the learning process.

Debbie: Well, as a way to get into this, I always ask people to, as a way of sharing who they are in the world to also talk a little bit about their personal whys for doing the work that they do. So could you tell us a little bit about yourself and why and how you got into this work?

Jason: Okay, awesome. Well my name is Jason Allen. I live in Atlanta, Georgia. I attended public schools here I had amazing teachers. I come from a family of entrepreneurs and educators. My mom actually just retired from being a teacher and my father is an entrepreneur. And so I'm very familiar with the education field and you know, the impact that teachers have. That wasn't my dream. My dream was to actually be a lawyer, which, you know, one day I think I may actually go and do that. But I actually just fell in love with teaching and you know, I believe that this is my calling because I'm really honored and talented at doing it at the same time. So that's just me. I'm a writer also, so anyone who may be interested in following me, you can check me out at edlanta.org and also my personal blog, which is professorjballen.blogspot.com.

Debbie: Well, thank you for that. I will include links to that in the show notes for listeners to check out your writing. So, and I was reading your bio and you're in the classroom now, but you were working as an administrator as well before this, is that correct?

Jason: Yes, that's correct. I have been an assistant principal in a charter school here in metro Atlanta and also a district administrator with federal program in Atlanta public schools.

Debbie: I love that you come from a family of educators. Okay. So one of the things that I wanted to talk with you about was, I know that for kids of color, the challenges for being differently wired are amplified. And you know, there's been a lot, I'm living in New York city, there's a lot of conversation right now about equity and

the gifted program, and that so many kids are not being identified. And I know that is not just in New York City, that happens everywhere. And I know that kids of color are also treated differently in many schools, especially black boys, which I know is your area of passion. So, as a way to get into this conversation, could you share with us some of the biggest challenges that you see in your experience that black students in traditional school settings face? You know, we can talk about black students in general but also differently wired black students.

Jason: So I can tell you that it's definitely a struggle. I think there are several dynamics that are happening. One it starts at home. Parents are doing the best that they can, but they don't have all the information they need to make a better decision because there's not a clear pathway of communication from the school to home. That's a roadblock for a lot of families who have black and brown children in public schools. The other dynamic is having a child that has special needs, whether they're gifted and talented or whether they have a learning disability that isn't being met properly in their school setting. It's a struggle for both. I have seen gifted students that were tested in elementary school and they have great test scores. They've shown their abilities, but they weren't taught properly. So when they get to middle school and they come to us as being gifted and talented, we're giving them the rigor and the work to build the airplane or you know, write a speech to the President and be able to articulate what you need and what you want and what you keep in your education in your community and they're not able to do it. So when we worked with them and we started to uncover that there are foundational skills that haven't been placed, this is a gifted and talented student, a student that should be soaring, you know, high above the standards that are set by the school and the state. And that's not happening. So you can imagine what's happening with the children who have learning disabilities. They are coming to us in middle school and they're literally on a first and second grade reading level. And so that's just one of the many things that the children with learning disabilities are facing. So there's a lot of work that needs to be done and we need to have more conversations that are happening right now.

Debbie: Yeah, I always say that there's so much work to be done and then I get so inspired when I, you know, through doing this work and this podcast, I get to meet so many people who are doing the work, which gives me so much hope. But it can be overwhelming. It can be very daunting.

Jason: Yes. It can be overwhelming at times. I, you know, I know school leaders and you know, schools such as Ivy Prep where I have seen them develop an amazing special education department with the assistance of their board. And also other specialists such as an educational company called Lead Bright that has helped them develop this vision for how they will successfully educate girls that have learning disabilities and it's working. The current school that I met, 7 Pillars Career Academy, we are making strides with our scholars that have learning disabilities and that is myself, our leadership team and our other teachers. And so one of the things that I've seen with my students is that they didn't have the right goals for them to overcome some of the challenges that they have with learning. Some of them were not really evaluated properly, so they have some challenges that are happening with the way that they learn and we are servicing

them for something else. And so, you know, you have a lot of those things that are happening and then you have a child that's frustrated because they feel like they can learn. And it's not that they can't learn, we just aren't teaching them in the manner where they can successfully produce the standards that are being presented to them.

Debbie: So it sounds like you have strategies that you're able to get these students kind of back on track and meet their needs. Can you share with us some of the approaches that you've used successfully to help these kids feel confident and, and engaged and learning in a way that can really support their own style?

Jason: Yes, it is. Things that should be very familiar with, you know, some of us. And I do think that are very old school. You know, I tried to merge the old school and new school. So one of the things that I definitely do is reinforce homework. Learning has to continue at home. One of the things that I teach my students and I reinforce with the parents that I worked with, is that learning takes place at all times. And so one of the things that we do to change the narrative about children's fear of school or fear of not learning as fast as others is to show that we learn in different places. And so that's important because when we do research on why children don't show success or growth in the classroom, we look at the whys. And so one of the whys is children, especially children who have autism, for example, if they don't feel comfortable in the learning environment, they're not going to interact with the teacher or their peers.

So they're not going to do anything. And so you want to make sure that you engage that student, but it has to be the right climate and the right atmosphere. And so knowing what the need of the student is, is very important. And so changing the narrative and changing the dynamic of what the classroom looks like and what learning looks like is important for a student like that, because they need to see that they can learn at home. They can learn whether they're driving in the car with their parents or on the bus or on a field trip or on vacation at their grandparents' house. Learning can take place in different environments. And so for a child who has autism, seeing that repetition and seeing that, okay, I can learn in multiple places, that is what breaks down that barrier from them being able to engage with the teacher and other people.

Debbie: Yeah. So it's really a mindset shift and I love that idea of being a lifelong learner too. And yeah, that's really interesting that I haven't heard that as an approach that other teachers I've talked to have used. And it makes so much sense.

Jason: Yeah. So another thing that I do with my students and my parents I break down how we're going to do homework. So homework connects to what we do in class. Of course most teachers are doing, there are some teachers who aren't doing homework and that's okay too. But I believe that homework, you know, is important. And especially for students who have learning challenges because it helps them build up their skills. And so, you know, in my current school we do BrainPOP which is a familiar website with students and parents. And we do our bell ringer our opening with BrainPOP. And so, you know, as we close out our lessons, you know, we do our exit, you know, closing activities, you know, as a

follow up with BrainPOP. And then on various days as selected, they, they have an activity at home that they do on BrainPOP.

Student is familiar with it, parents are familiar with it, students are able to share with their parents what they're doing. They're engaging activities with continue learning at home and students are wanting to do it. One of the interesting things is, I don't have a problem with getting homework back or homework done from my students. And that's something that's very rare because I could tell you right now, I know a lot of teachers and they're like, my students are not doing homework. They are not doing it at all. So, you know, that's one of the things that I celebrate in our staff meetings and also with our parents is that, you know, we have a 99% or 100%, you know, turn in rate of homework and that's something that you don't traditionally see or hear about. So homework does work and that's a strategy that I use to help my students improve in their goals.

Another strategy again, because I just mentioned goals, is goal setting. I'm teaching them foundational basic life skills. And so, you know, reading strategies come with that, teaching them how they can overcome their speech impediment by practicing at home in the mirror. So, you know, we do different skits and then they home and they practice. And so practice makes perfect. That's the philosophy that I teach my students, for them to be really engaged and improve in how they learn. You know, engagement is the key to everything. That's another strategy. So a lot of these days that I'm speaking of are different ways that I'm engaging my students in their learning. And that has worked for them. I have had, out of all of my caseload, every one of my students has made gains in some area for their goals, whether it's math, whether it's reading, whether it's writing or whether it's grammar. And so it's very important. And actually I have students who take speech. So speaking is also a goal. So teaching them public speaking and getting them comfortable with speaking in front of their peers and in large settings is important. And so, how do you get a child to have the speech impediment to feel comfortable with asking a question?

Debbie: So it sounds like you've really created a culture around learning and curiosity and engagement in your classroom and your kids are really taking your lead and it makes sense. I mean, it sounds like you're probably an amazing teacher and your kids, I can imagine they want to show up for you. And so I'm wondering, there are so many different school models and traditional schools I know are the ones where differently wired kids tend to suffer the most. And I'm wondering where do you see the barriers in terms of some of these strategies being implemented in a traditional school model?

Jason: Well, here's what we do at my school, one of the things that makes us unique is that we're a non suspension school. And so my students are, you know, coming from all different types of placements. They're used to being in school suspension. They used to be suspended from school, suspended from the bus. That has not happened for them this entire year. So, you know, students that I have that have behavior plans, they've met their goals, they met their goals months ago. And you know, that's a huge improvement because the culture changed for them. And so when you mentioned that earlier, culture is a big part

of how schools can really reach their students. Our public schools, they struggle with that. One reason why is because school districts do not invest in family engagement programs and services. They don't invest in student services departments. And so that means that the counselors, your social emotional learning teachers, your graduation coaches, your parent liaison or family coordinators your special education teachers, your parent professionals, all of those persons have to be actively engaged and supported in the schools. And I worked in a public school, I've been a district administrator for a public school district and I can tell you that, you know, public schools across the United States, they struggle with funding and supporting those departments. And so that's why, you know, a lot of children with learning disabilities, even children in the general education setting are struggling because schools aren't really being supported as we believe that they are.

Debbie: I'm wondering as you're talking about this, I'm wondering if politics is in your future. I mean it seems like, and people have brought this up to me too, there's a lot of policy change that needs to happen as well. And I'm like, that is not my wheelhouse. But I'm wondering, you know, is that something you think about doing?

Jason: You know, I have colleagues or friends who are elected officials and I'm never a person to say never. So, you know, I will say that I have been actively engaged in student government since I was in elementary school to college. So public office could be a possibility.

Debbie: Okay. Sorry, this isn't on the record people, so no promises, but no, I just had to ask, because again, we talk about the enormity of the challenges that these kids face and there are just some systemic policy challenges that as you said, you know, just that funding piece is, is huge. And I think it is something that so many parents aren't aware of, right? They think they pay their money or the PTA and you know, they just kind of assume it's all a finely oiled machine perhaps. And that's not necessarily the case.

Jason: That's correct.

Debbie: So I wanted to talk a little bit about the kids that come to you. You talked about in other school settings that these are kids who opt in. They didn't have the right evaluations done. They weren't being taught with the right goals in mind. What do you see is going on in terms of these kids maybe when they're in elementary school that is preventing them from being identified and supported the right way? I mean you talk a lot about family engagement and I think that is a really important piece of this. But what other challenges especially our definitely wired kids of color when they're young and they're in preschool or early elementary is preventing them from getting the support that they need.

Jason: Okay. So several things that I would like to touch on and it's gonna bring up to highlight. One of the things that I have seen is that black boys are being pushed into special education programs because of behavior and behavior is impacted by discipline. Discipline comes from the school. This comes from policies that are

normally bias because research has shown that a lot of school districts, behavior and discipline policies are based off of research and studies of how black boys act and perform in school. And so it's almost as the, well we created a policy because we're making the assumption that you're going to do something wrong. So here's what we're going to do if you show a sign of this. So I have black boys that have been pushed into special education for behavior improvement plans and it was because they didn't want to sit down, they wanted to stand up to learn or they needed to get up, you know, every five minutes for a break because their minds race so fast, it's like, okay, I have all these ideas but I have so, so much energy.

So they need to be engaged. You know, I've read notes that, 'Oh, you know, he's being evaluated for this because he won't pay attention to the teacher in class.' But the teacher's style of teaching is that they lecture the whole time. So they're just talking the entire time. There are no visuals, there's no breaks, there's no group work. And so that type of setting didn't work for the child. And so that is one of the major issues is that schools don't know how to handle the behavior black boys. And so they're willing to push them into special education. That way they're done. They're not disrupting the classroom and other students aren't being disrupted, but their education is just corrupted because they're just being placed somewhere that may not be servicing them.

Debbie: Right. So what is the, you know, I'm always trying to think of how can we as a community create change, be part of shifting this paradigm? Where do you see the heavy lifting being done here? Is it in education of the teachers? Is it in education of the parents community in general?

Jason: So three things. It can start with advocacy for better policies in special education and also, you know, including the gifted and talented area. They, you know, they like to distinguish the two. Secondly, it starts with also how we engage families. Families need to be a part of the process in regards to how goals are implemented, what it looks like, how they can support it at home, you know, I know that most parents, they told me this year, they were like, I've never really been engaged in the process like this. And I'm looking at them like, what are you talking about? And they're like, you know, we normally have the meeting at the beginning of the year and that's it. And I'm like, well, that's not how I do things. And so, you know, engaging the parents and the goals and the words and ways that they can help their child overcome their disability, that's where the major work starts. The other thing is we need to improve the co-teaching model in public classrooms. You know, a lot of teachers are being, I don't want to say forced, but their passion isn't to co-teach or have another teacher in their classroom working with them. And so when that dynamic is not, you know, congealed than in place, it impacts how the children learn. So schools need people who can come in and train their teachers on what it should look like. And also ensuring that the general ed teachers are aware of how different strategies and accommodations can help, not just the children that have a learning disability, but also the general ed children as well. And so being able to bring together and merge those best practices is important. And that comes with having a good team that can provide professional development that's ongoing for teachers so that they are learning as well as the students.

Debbie: So are you seeing, you know, you've been in education for fifteen years and I'm just wondering, are you seeing change in doing this work as being an advocate and, and working in administration and being so involved in these issues? And this is what you write about often. You've got a lot of great blog posts and articles where you're sharing these perspectives. Have you, are you seeing things improving? What's, what's going on?

Jason: Things are improving in some places, but in a lot of places it's not. It's really a lot of the same thing. You know, I'm really disappointed in where the field of education currently stands. We are in a major crisis with a huge deficit and teachers across the nation. I'm so aloof as to why it's not on CNN on a daily basis in regards to the number of teachers that are leaving the profession. It's concerning, you know, and it's not even teachers, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, nurses, counselors. It's like we don't have people that are showing up for our children because they either being underpaid, overworked, or not being able to grow in their field. And so it's really challenging and education is very political. You have a lot of things that happen in communities with gentrification and affordable housing and transportation and so, you know, that impacts education when you don't have the staffing that you need in your school. That impacts education. So there are so many dynamics that are happening where it doesn't make any sense. I was telling my students this yesterday that my great grandparents lived well into their nineties. My oldest, great grandfather lived to be 107 and I told my students that I have letters and cards from my grandparents and I told them, I said, I'm not saying this to you know, belittle you all. Then they know what that word means because I taught and I told them, I said, I'm going to show you guys the letters because I want you all to see how they were writing with a third grade education. They didn't finish school after third grade and the things that you guys are struggling with are foundational things that my great grandparents could do and they didn't go pass third grade. And they were so puzzled by that.

Jason: They were like, we'll, why did that happen? I said, well, we have to look at the beginning. These were your challenges with learning and you all are telling me that you didn't even know that until I asked you in our first interview. I interviewed my students. So at the beginning of the year, every student gets an interview with me so they get to learn who I am as a teacher and I get to learn who they are. And so when I asked them about their deficiencies. My students that had speech impediments, they had never even heard of that. They didn't even know that that's what that meant. They just knew that they stuttered and something was wrong with them and they didn't get that from home, they got that from a teacher.

Debbie: Yeah. I mean, I'm wondering, and I've heard this from other guests I've had on the show that within the black community as well, that there is more stigma attached to certain disabilities or the idea of getting support might be look, looked down upon or frowned upon working with a therapist. Has that been your experience, the kids that you're working with?

Jason: You know, this is what I believe school districts have to have something going on with the medical field because all of these children, whether they're black, red, yellow, black, white are being diagnosed with ADHD. You know, I'm not saying that it's not real, but when I look at what's being told and shown to me on paper, I look at these students and I'm like, I've seen this. And then I go back to my own experience and I'm like, well, we were doing that at school and they never told us that this is what it was. But this is what my teacher did and it worked. And so I think that, you know, it's several dynamics that are going on. A lot of children are being placed on medicine and it's for things that can be managed. And when I say managed is parents and teachers have to understand that every child is not the same.

You know, my teachers were learning that if they were teaching, you know, our generation in the 90s like this isn't working. We're going to have to start integrating. We're going to have to start doing more engaging things. I can't just get up here and talk for a whole hour and say, write down everything I say and expect every child to do it. Because we realized that we were failing children and we were leaving children behind. So we had to change our practices in our awareness to meet every child. And unfortunately that's not happening everywhere. So black children, especially black boys are being left behind and especially education programs because their needs or simply not being met.

Debbie: Yeah, I mean with differently wired kids, it really is about getting to know who they are, right. Becoming fluent in them and the way that they're thinking and the way they process information. And there is a lot of heavy lifting to be done, but I really appreciate your, your perspective on, you know, the, the ADHD diagnoses and it's just an interesting thing to, to consider. And the fact that most classrooms, I feel like most students don't thrive in a traditional classroom. And those that do, it's because they're, for whatever reason, able to just get through that that day, that, that construct. But it's not what would really make them thrive. You know, I think the whole system needs to be overhauled so kids can really just learn in a creative way.

Jason: And that is exactly what you said. Kids have to learn in a creative way. And I think what makes my teaching style unique is because of my learning style. You know, I share with my students and I, I started doing that when I was an assistant principal because a lot of the students that were being sent to my office had learning disabilities. And so I started sharing with my students that, you know, when I was at school, I was gifted and talented, but I also had special services. I also told them that I had a speech impediment and you know, they now understand what that means. So they're like, Oh my God, Mr. Allen, you used to study. And I was like, Oh, you would not even believe it. And I was like, but you know, when they hear me talking and they, they're watching me as I teach, you would never think that that was one of the challenges that I had. So I'm telling you what I know because it works. And then I, you know, I tell them stories of former students that had challenges with reading and comprehension and being able to write. And I'm like, you know, this is one of my student's story on the

blog. And they read it and they're like, Oh my God, they had this challenge that I have and they wrote this. And I was like, yeah.

So that it's also a connection. Teachers have to be able to have a connection with their students, but you also have to be understanding and you have to be willing to change your perspective on what you believe is the best thing for the child. And I'm saying that in this perspective that what I have learned is that my students, based off of what they are able to produce and what they show me, they show me and teach me what I should be doing to help them overcome the deficiency. So we have to be more engaged with our students and looking inside of what's happening to determine what we can do to help them overcome their challenges and not teach to them. We have to teach with them. We have to learn from them and they have to also learn from us.

Debbie: Hmm. I love that so much. Yeah. Again, it really is about seeing, seeing the child and, and being vulnerable with them as well. So I wanted to just as a way to close this out in talking about the teaching profession and, and I appreciate your thoughts on, you know, just the profession as a whole and how overworked and undervalued and underpaid and stressed out our teachers are. And within my community, many parents are challenged by the school system. It's kind of the biggest pain point for them is their child is not thriving in a school system. And so I'm trying to again, help bridge that gap in some ways and just get some conversations going. So I'm just curious if you could give one one change or planting a seed for one thing that you think is the most urgent mindset shift or change that we want to start encouraging teachers to make. We know teachers are working and have the best of intentions for our kids. So what's one thing that we could encourage them to do to better support our differently wired kids in general and specifically differently wired kids of color?

Jason: The best thing that I could say is whether it's a special education teacher, general ed, teacher, support staff, administrators any educator that touches the life of a student, whether they have a learning disability or not, is to truly be engaged with them so that whenever you're teaching them and modelling for them and exposing them to is empowering them to be their best self, to make the best choice and to critically think about things, to actively listen to respect the thoughts and presence of others and to be the best representation of their community and their family. And I feel like those are basic things. Those are things that connect us as people. And so when we can connect as people, then we can make the difference. When I was an administrator, one of the things that I would tell my teachers and support staff, our students have to see us as human first.

So Mr. Allen is able to make a difference as a teacher because they see Mr. Allen as a human, they see me concerned about what's happening in the world and what's happening in the community and what's happening in their family. You know, what's happening with them when they see that you're a human and you actually, you know, care about things that's happened in the news and you listen to the music and you know what's happening on TV or you know, what the latest

movies are, you know, that connects you as humans. And that's what makes a difference. And any of us can do that if we're willing.

Debbie: What a lovely note to end on. You know, I think connection is really everything and there's so much research that shows how critical it is that kids have healthy connections with the adults in their lives. So I just love that, that you brought that up. So before we say goodbye, could you again just remind us where listeners can connect with you online and read your, your articles that you're working on.

Jason: Okay. Awesome. Well again, thank you for having me and thank you for everyone that's listening. I hope I said something that is a positive takeaway for you for ways to keep up with me. My personal blog which is called, I Am a Black Male Educator is professorjballen.blogspot.com. And I also am honored and proud to work for the Education Post through EdLanta, which is a blog for really everyone in the state of Georgia. At this point cause we've grown so much. But you can check us out at edlanta.org. And that's where you can subscribe to both of those blogs and keep up with strategies and different ways to empower teachers and parents strategies that work with children who have special needs ways to engage families and the learning process. Also ways that communities can partner with schools and how businesses can partner with schools that a variety of different stories that can touch you and empower you in different ways. So please check me out.

Debbie: Thank you for that. And again, listeners, I'll include links on the show notes page and I should just point out that Edlanta site, even though there are some Georgia-focused things, there's definitely a lot of content on there that is applicable anywhere that you live in. Great perspective. So definitely head over there. So Jason, thank you so much. I know we're recording this after a work day on a Thursday, so I just appreciate you making time to come by the podcast and share with us today.

Jason: Well, no problem. Again, thank you for having me and have a great evening.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- Jason's Blog iAMaBlackMaleEducator
- EdLanta
- Education Post
- 7 Pillars Career Academy
- BrainPOP