

Samuel Yigzaw's Bio

Samuel Yigzaw was born to Eritrean parents in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. He attended a parochial school run by the Jesuit Brothers of the De la Salle order. After graduating from high school, Samuel joined Addis Ababa University of Ethiopia to study geography. His initial career goal was becoming a cartographer. He became an accidental high school social studies teacher in 1982 when he learned from a friend that his former high school was looking for one. That same day, Samuel went to his former school and applied for the job. He was hired immediately and has remained an educator since.

In January 1991, Samuel came to the United States. Two and a half years later he enrolled at the College of Education and Human Development of the University of Minnesota (U of M). In the spring of 1995, he earned his master's degree in Instructional technology from the University. That summer, he reenrolled at the U of M's graduate school to earn his Ph.D. in Education. He earned his Ph.D. in April 1998. As a lifelong learner, Samuel could not stay away from education for too long. Thus, he returned to the U of M in 2003 to earn his administrative license. Currently, Samuel holds a Minnesota teaching license in social studies (grades 5 – 12), a K – 12 administrative license, and a District Superintendent licenses.

In the fall of 1996, while he was attending graduate school, Samuel got a job as a graduate assistant in what was previously known as the "Office of Student and Professional Services" at the U of M. He worked two years at that office. His duties included advising "teacher-candidates" and coordinating the mathematics and social studies licensure programs. While working at the U of M, Samuel was introduced to Bill Wilson, former president of the St. Paul City Council. Bill also worked at the Office of Student and Professional Services at that time. Unlike Samuel however, Bill was a regular employee of the U of M. During that time Bill was working towards starting the Higher Ground Academy. At the request of Bill, Samuel joined the former and together they worked on the Higher Ground Academy project. Samuel devoted many volunteer hours in 1997 towards the founding of the Higher Ground Academy.

Upon graduation from the U of M in the spring of 1998, Samuel became a paid employee of the Higher Ground Academy. The duties he performed as a volunteer in 1997 and as a paid employee in 1998 included curriculum writing, procuring instructional and non-instructional resources, recruiting and training teachers, student recruitment, several hours of meeting with prospective students and parents, attending workshops and conferences, meeting with possible partners, etc. He also worked with the

building architects who were redesigning the 1381 Marshall Avenue building that became home of Higher Ground Academy. As a result of his involvement in the redesigning of the building, many of the architectural features of the current building, “reflect Samuel’s instructional vision for the school” says Bill Wilson, who was then the Executive Director of the school.

Higher Ground Academy opened its doors for students in September 1999. From then to the end of the 2002 – 03 school year, Samuel served as HGA’s Director of Curriculum and Assessment. As such, he shouldered responsibility for curriculum, scheduling, teacher supervision and evaluation, student assessment and progress monitoring, managing Title I and English Language Learner (ELL) programs, etc. In September 2003, he became the school’s principal. He continues to serve in that capacity.

The list of duties in Samuel’s job description is very long. It includes managing all instructional programs (general education, Title I, ELL), recruiting and training new teachers and support staff, supervising and evaluating teachers, preparing and disseminating reports (to Minnesota Department of Education, its authorizer, and others), student safety, communicating with parents. In addition to those, Samuel oversaw the school’s guidance and counseling services as well as its after-school programs.

In school year 2008 – 09 Higher Ground Academy’s director, took an extended sick leave due to an unexpected illness. Then, Samuel ran the school as an Interim Director. Even though the director returned to work in late winter that school year, Samuel continues to be involved in some of the duties that were previously performed exclusively by the executive director. One such area is the school’s finance. Samuel is not only actively participating in the development of the school’s budget, he is also one of the people receiving periodic updates of the school’s finance.

Also, in the summer of 2008, Higher Ground Academy launched a construction project to add a few classrooms to its existing building this included remodeling existing classrooms and office spaces. It was in the middle of this project the Director took a medical leave. As second in command, Samuel’s responsibility was to fill the void created by the director’s absence. That project was completed on time and to the satisfaction of stakeholders of the school.

Samuel has a strong passion for teaching. Thus, in addition to his administrative role at the Higher Ground Academy, he continues serving as a high school teacher there and in area institutions of teacher education. He teaches advanced placement geography to a class of upper level students each year. In addition, he serves as an adjunct faculty member in area teacher training institutions. His first college level teaching job was at the U of M where he taught between 1998 and 2002. There, he taught a

number of education courses to graduate students in the capacity of adjunct faculty. He currently teaches at the School of Graduate and Professional Studies of St. Mary's University of Minnesota. Courses that he teaches at St. Mary's are Assessment and Evaluation, Education Research, and Ethics and Law in Education. From a professional development point of view, this experience has been helpful to Samuel as it helps him stay current with his knowledge and understanding of education. However, teaching the ethics and law class was by far the most beneficial for him. It keeps him informed of legal issues that he needs to know as a school administrator.

Samuel has authored a book that documents the history of Higher Ground Academy, *Keeping the Promise: One Charter School's Experience*. In addition, he has presented various topics in education. His audiences included educators and district administrators. Some of the topics of his presentation were "*Key Lessons from a Successful Charter School*" and "*Data Driven Instruction, The Higher Ground Experience.*" He has attended numerous workshops and conference offered by the Minnesota department of Education, Professional Associations, The Marzano Center for Learning Science, Minnesota Association for Charter Schools. Samuel also completed a one year internship for charter school leaders sponsored by The Center for School Change.