

Paymon Rouhanifard



When Paymon Rouhanifard was about four years old, his father was fired from his engineering job in Shiráz, Iran, because he was a Bahá'í. Revolutionary Guards came to their home and demanded that his father deny his faith. He refused, and the family fled from Iran. They lived as refugees in Pakistan and Austria for about two years. Finally they moved to Tennessee, U.S., to start new lives, free to practice their religion.

Paymon grew up and earned a degree in political science and economics from the University of North Carolina. He taught sixth grade in New York City, then spent four years in the financial industry. At age 32, he became the school superintendent in Camden, New Jersey. When he's not working to improve education for 15,000 students in 26 schools, Paymon likes to run, play basketball, and spend time with his wife and their infant son.

Q: What's your favorite childhood memory?

A: Just playing with my little brother. He's one year younger. And [the] first home I can remember growing up in [was in] a small town in Tennessee.

Q: What was the most challenging experience for you when you were a kid, and how did you handle it?

A: We moved to Tennessee when I was six years old, and there weren't too many other kids on our block who looked like us. So I remember that was at times a little challenging, kids picking on you because your name sounds different and you look different. But my parents did a really nice job of teaching us how to interact with other children and eventually overcoming those challenges.



Left: Paymon at age 10 in Tennessee, U.S. Right: Paymon celebrates his graduation from the University of North Carolina with his parents, Jalil and Sonya, and brother Nima.

Q: How does the experience of moving to the U.S. as a kid help you in your work with children and families today?

A: I can remember having conversations with my parents and my little brother when they would instill in us the importance of education. They would tell us that if it weren't for their education (my mom is a chemist and my dad . . . is a mechanical engineer), they wouldn't have had the wherewithal and perseverance to fight through . . . challenges and help situate our family . . . I share that story with students and families in Camden, and I think it also helps me connect to a lot of [them], because we have many immigrants . . .

Q: What are the three most important life skills that kids need today?

A: Life is challenging and will present many obstacles. But if you show grit, determination, perseverance, you will often overcome those challenges . . . [by] being a good neighbor, being a good colleague and peer in the classroom and in your school.

Questions and
Answers with an
Inspirational Bahá'í



Above: As school superintendent, Paymon is passionate about giving kids an "equal playing field" to succeed. Left: Paymon, his wife, Sarah, and their son, Jonah. Sarah recently earned a doctorate degree in biochemistry.

Q: How does the Bahá'í Faith influence you in your work?

A: I . . . think about the principle of universal education . . . You have communities where half the students are graduating from high school and very few are employable and are living in poverty . . . We're not embracing those ideals as Bahá'ís if we are living in this country knowing that tens of millions of students don't have those opportunities.

Q: If you have one wish for our readers, what would it be?

A: To pursue their hopes and dreams. I was fairly young when I discovered I . . . wanted to make the world a better place . . . Here I am, in a position where I can really positively impact the lives of 15,000 students in one of the neediest cities in America. So all students should vigorously pursue their dreams.

Q: What do you do in your work as a superintendent?

A: The governor decided that he didn't believe the school district . . . was getting the results the students' families deserved. So he appointed me to help turn it around . . . Our high school graduation rate is just a little bit over 50% . . . But I can tell you that . . . our children are immensely talented. And these data reports don't reflect their full potential. So my job is to make sure that the greatness of our schools matches the greatness of our students.

Q: You started with a 100-day listening tour in the community. Why?

A: I think that the root of great leadership is humility . . . So I think the most important thing I can do as a leader is to hear them all out and understand what the concerns are and understand not just what they believe needs to change, but also what's working and what we can actually build upon.

Q: What motivated you to take on the challenge of being a superintendent?

A: All students in this country have potential and have a mental ability. It's just deeply unfortunate that if you're born in a certain zip code . . . [or] a certain income level, that you don't get the same quality of education as those students in other parts of the country. And my passion is to ensure that we do everything we can to provide that equal playing field for all students.

Q: What's your favorite part about the job?

A: I love being inside of our schools and spending time with our students and families. A big part of my job is managing our financial complexities and . . . personnel. But what I do more than anything else is just visiting our schools, visiting students . . . That's by far the best part of the job.