

Damon Holmes

Principal

Ginn Academy

When Ginn Academy principal Damon Holmes went to college, his mind was on athletics more than education. He knew he wanted to continue playing football and going to college was the way to make it happen; deciding on a major was secondary. He changed majors until he took a chance on an education class as a way to earn a few credits. He loved the class and switched his major one last time to education.

“And 25 years later, I’m still in it,” said Holmes. His own experience, going to college for the wrong reasons, is a testament to why Ginn Academy works with their students to create individual life plans. The other reason is that after a decade as an educator, he realized that the educational structure was preparing students to pass state tests in preparation for college, but not preparing them for anything else.

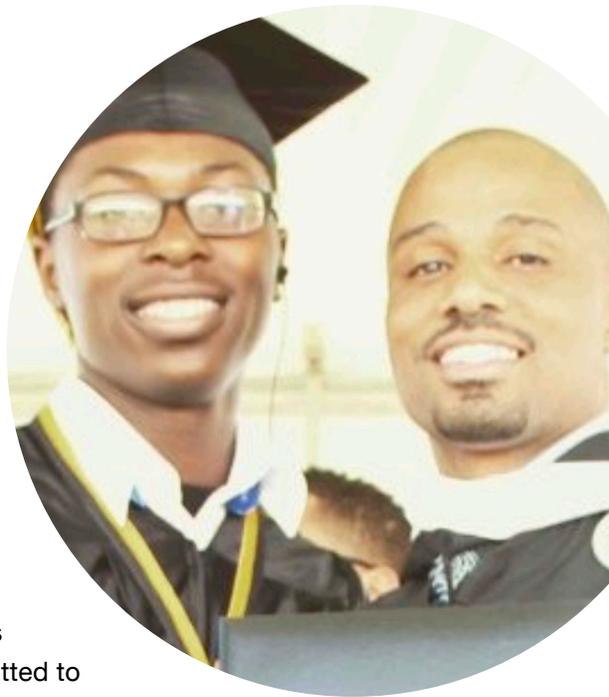
“As I began to see students leave for college only to return without graduating, feeling they had wasted time and money and had no life plan, I knew we had sent them on a fool’s errand. We hadn’t taken the time to know the students, specifically how they viewed their future and how they saw themselves becoming a contributor to society. What exactly was their life plan? I knew we needed to change things.”

At Ginn Academy each student’s life plan is designed by a guidance counselor, an industry or college partner, and the student. Students take aptitude tests and a life coach goes over the results of the test with them. From there, the student and the life coach design a roadmap leading to the student achieving their goals. The exercise is driven by the student; the professionals are there to

support and guide, not to force them down a predetermined path.

When students fail to get admitted to MAGNET or have an interest that is not related to manufacturing, Holmes finds other programs and opportunities for them to pursue. “We have a number of partners, but we don’t have everything,” said Holmes. “We had a student who wanted to be a dentist, but we didn’t have a partnership with a dentist or dental program. So we called around to dental schools to see what we could do to help that student get introduced to the dentistry profession.” While the student attends classes at Ginn, Holmes and the other educators involved in the process will seek out the opportunities to help students with internships or other programs. It is very helpful to the students, because many teenagers are not aware of the intricacies of certain professions and the pathways to get there. Having educators do that work for them is a responsibility Holmes takes seriously.

“That’s our job. As adults, as educators, our job is to show kids as much as we possibly can, about what the world offers and help them figure out where they fit,” declared Holmes. “If we don’t do that, if all we do is focus on how well they do on standardized tests, then shame on us.”



The pandemic has meant that Holmes no longer sees students in person on a daily basis. Although he does miss them, he hopes the adjustments the academic sector is making leads to a post-pandemic conversation to re-imagine educational structures.

“(As educators) we’re in a service industry, and how we provide services should be routinely reviewed. It doesn’t always have to be bricks and mortar, we can rethink things,” he said. Questioning why students are taught certain things and not others, how they are taught, and the time it takes to teach should all be on the table, according to Holmes.

“I’d love to offer my students every possible opportunity within the walls of Ginn Academy, but space and financial constraints make that impossible. But if I know there’s another building or another school within the city or state or in another state, even another country, offering a class that students could benefit from, why can’t they take that class? During the pandemic we have learned that virtual learning is a viable option. In the post-pandemic educational world, I see us being able to access resources from every possible avenue and not being limited to the walls of our buildings or district.”

Holmes hopes that post-COVID the academic sector does not return to conventional thinking just because it is easier, familiar, and inexpensive. He feels that there should be more flexibility in how students learn because the economies of the future will require people to constantly adapt and think strategically. Passing a one-time standard test will not be enough.

“I’m really excited to be part of this change. With the few years I have left in this game, I hope to really make a difference by helping kids, and changing this whole landscape.”