**GatesFoundation\_JamieMeurer\_DaemondBenjamin\_FINAL**

Coworkers Jamie Meurer and Daemond Benjamin share their experiences over the last few years as “on-track coordinators” working with ninth graders to support their academic success in Hartford, CT. They are a part of the RISE network, a group of teachers, counselors, and administrators helping all students achieve their full potential.

**Daemond:** I never imagined myself being an educator until I had kids. At the time my son was just entering elementary school, I was an insurance agent, but even when I was in insurance, I would always say I was educating people on insurance. One day, I remember saying, "You know, I don't think the world needs another businessman. I think the world needed another educator but especially Black male educator." I felt like I would be able to make a good imprint here and be a good example for the student body, and I think I'm doing that.

**Jamie:** So we're both on-track coordinators here. I'm interested to hear how you explain the job that we do.

**Daemond:** I like to tell people that I'm like an all access player. I help students in any which way that they kind of need help, specifically ninth graders that have been identified as at-risk.

**Jamie:** One of the things that I really do enjoy about the job is that each relationship with kids on our caseloads is unique. Every kid needs something different from each of us. Some days, I am a cheerleader. Sometimes, it's more of like a mentor, so it's really different.

**Daemond:** We've learned so much. Every year is something different, but I'm one who believes experience teaches wisdom. What it has been able to help me do is be more patient with my kids and the kids here. I listen to them more intently and try to be more empathetic. What lessons have you learned in this experience?

**Jamie:** The last two years with the pandemic taught me that I need to be creative and open to trying anything to reach out to kids, to reach out to families, making sure that I'm letting the teachers know this kid has this going on. We need to be a little gentle at this point. Every kid is not going to show up as a perfect ninth grader every single morning. These are teenagers. There are things going on at home that you have to take into consideration. Something else that has really helped me is we have the RISE network of our other schools, and so there's always people to bounce ideas off of, borrow ideas from, ideas that maybe you and I wouldn't have thought about. It's also been helpful to have other people to commiserate with — like, “This is super rough, but we're all going to figure out how to get through it together.”

**Daemond:** We've all grown as a school community, working out the kinks together. It's definitely been exciting.

**Jamie:** Yes. Education will take you places, and you can always come home if you need to. And that's the lesson that I'm trying to pass on to these kids.