



ATTRACTIVE BEST PRACTICES

Magnet school principals share their secrets to success

By Elaina Hundley





Magnet schools have become both successful and popular because magnet school educators bring fresh, theme-based approaches to their classrooms and challenge students to meet higher standards—no matter their race or socioeconomic status. Magnet school leaders facilitate these triumphs and navigate the challenge of moving beyond the neighborhood school model by creating positive work environments for their faculty and staff, and promoting high-quality, interdisciplinary learning experiences for all students—worthy goals for any principal. As former magnet school principal Mary Jane Dann explains, “The initial leadership challenges I faced were ones that may be relatable for any principal starting at a new school. Getting to know your staff, and understanding how the school is currently operating and what systems are in place are paramount to mapping the road to improvement.”

The following are a few case studies of top-performing magnet schools and wise advice on the topics of empowered leadership, contagious enthusiasm, and exploratory engagement from the principals who lead them.

EMPOWERMENT

Principal Kathleen Decker



Nevada principal Kathleen Decker is not new to success. She simultaneously leads Walter Bracken, Walter Long, and Howard Hollingsworth STEAM Elementary Academics in Clark County School

District. She was named Magnet Schools of America’s National Principal of the Year in 2013

for her vibrant leadership skills and ability to turn around Walter Bracken—which in 2001 was a failing school—into a National Blue Ribbon School. Since her initial national recognition, two more schools have been placed under her leadership. She attributes her success to a combination of creative solutions, dynamic leadership, and more specifically, her use of the empowerment method.

Mike Strembitsky developed the empowerment concept (or site-based school management) during his tenure as the superintendent of Edmonton Public Schools in Canada. It’s a very simple premise: Empowerment schools enable principals, teachers, and students to determine how the schools actually operate. Instead of the district telling the principal what the school needs and the principal filtering instructions down to the teachers, principals and teachers work together to make decisions and problem-solve. Principals then report this information to their district offices. These schools are held accountable for the same district standards as nonempowered schools, but they have a little bit more freedom in reaching their goals.

Decker describes some simple ways in which school leaders can utilize this method on a daily basis:

- **Instead of responding to a problem with an immediate solution, brainstorm a solution with your teachers.** Vote together on a solution to a schoolwide problem, then see how the solution you developed as a team goes. A month or so later, re-evaluate the solution as a team. Collaboration yields a wealth of creative ideas and also allows for staff to have



REFLECT ON THIS

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- **Include faculty and staff in budgetary discussions whenever possible.** Although the district office may ultimately have the final say on a budgeting decision, those closest to the classroom may have the most realistic perspective on how much money is required to meet student needs.

Beyond implementing day-to-day techniques inspired by the empowerment method, whole schools can apply to be recognized as empowered schools within their district. This is just what Decker did. She explains, “There was an application process, and the staff needed to vote, and a majority had to agree to apply.” Becoming a truly empowered school is an in-depth process; once Decker’s school was selected, they participated in three years of training. In the case of Clark County, the district sustains the magnet by providing transportation, 19 minutes of additional instructional time each day, a theme coordinator position, and a computer teacher position.

Key Considerations

Decker says that for her, “the challenge with leading a magnet school is always focusing on innovation. Since you are recruiting families to attend, you must always adapt and innovate so that your choice stands out. You must also get good results, which means the staff has to work as a consistent team. Your role as a leader is to keep everyone on the same page.” In order to overcome these challenges, Decker suggests

that as a principal, you need to be proficient in and passionate about your school’s theme. “It is essential,” she says, “to stay up to date on current research and educational trends. It is valuable to visit other schools to stay fresh.”

ENTHUSIASM

Principal Derek Burns



For Derek Burns, the principal of Douglas Creative Arts and Science Magnet Elementary in Raleigh, North Carolina, succeeding as a magnet school is all about the theme. He insists, “If you don’t go all-in, it’s not going to work.” At the Wake County Public School System elementary school, the arts and sciences are not single subjects; instead, these core themes shape the entire curriculum. In addition to fidelity to theme, several core ingredients spell out success at Douglas Creative Arts and Science Magnet. These include:

- A dedication to teacher professional development, satisfaction, and encouragement, as well as practical support.
- Engagement of parents and an active PTA.
- An interest in helping students recognize their strengths and weaknesses, and grow from understanding themselves and their learning styles.

Finally, Burns continually exudes his passion and excitement for his work. No matter what type of school you lead, enthusiasm is contagious and boosts morale in both faculty and students. Leading by example sometimes means modeling the attitude you wish to see throughout your school. Burns is adept at this skill.

ENGAGEMENT

Principal Elizabeth Hill



Bear Exploration Center for Mathematics, Science, and Technology, a Blue Ribbon-winning school in Montgomery, Alabama, has been a high-performing magnet elementary since 1996. The principal at Bear Exploration Center (BEC), Elizabeth Hill, works hard to keep her staff highly motivated. She attributes her school’s success, in part, to Bear’s high employee retention rates and their

enthusiasm to come to work every day—only 3 percent of the 29 teachers at the school missed more than 10 school days in the past few years—as well as the support and involvement of the parent community.

By engaging staff in regular team-building, immersive, off-campus professional development, and by fostering camaraderie among staff members, leaders at BEC are able to keep educators excited about teaching. In addition, members of staff such as Loretta Harrison, the school's reading specialist, are on hand to provide teachers with support and a fresh set of eyes when considering the implementation of new teaching and learning strategies.

In this supportive work environment, teachers are also able to be flexible and creative in addressing student learning needs. For example, one student at BEC struggles to see letters, so the staff worked together to determine a new strategy to try with him. For this student, the team is experimenting with a three-dimensional font. Since the student performs well in math and possesses advanced spatial awareness, three-dimensional letters may help him improve his reading skills. Principal Hill's openness to working with staff to brainstorm solutions such as this one and providing support for alternative teaching methods is beneficial to the student and also brings the staff together.

Key Considerations

The ability to employ creative solutions can sometimes come with a cost. Hill says one of her most pressing challenges as a magnet school leader is funding.

In Clark County, the district is willing to foot some of the bill when it comes to choice programs, but not all districts are alike. Hill explains that when her magnet first began, it was established with federal Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP) funds, but once the funding from MSAP runs out, there will be no funding source unless the school is a Title I school—a school with a large percentage of low-income students. In contrast with many magnets and many schools in Montgomery, Alabama, only 18 percent of BEC's student population comes from economically disadvantaged families. As a result, BEC is not a Title I school, so funding is an ongoing struggle for Hill.

Magnet Schools: Just the Facts

Magnet schools are public elementary and secondary schools of choice that are designed to promote diverse and innovative learning environments. They are generally open to students outside the neighborhoods in which they reside and employ lottery systems to fill their seats. Magnet schools, unlike most charter schools, are managed and operated by school districts. They typically have specialized or theme-based curricula in STEM, fine and performing arts, International Baccalaureate, career and technical education (CTE), and world languages, among many other themes. Magnet schools often approach learning from an inquiry- or project-based model. Although they are held accountable to state and district standards in all subject areas, the overall theme of the school is woven throughout each course.

By the Numbers

Approximately 4,340 magnet schools currently serve nearly 3.5 million students nationwide.

67 percent of magnet schools have waiting lists.

Most magnet schools report graduation rates of 90 percent or higher, with 72 percent of students pursuing some form of postsecondary education.



Magnet Schools: Five Pillars

Magnet Schools of America (MSA) is a national nonprofit professional association dedicated to providing leadership for high-quality innovative instructional programs that promote choice, equity, diversity, and academic excellence for all students. Based in Washington, D.C., MSA espouses the five pillars of magnet school excellence:

Diversity

Innovative Curriculum and Professional Development

Academic Excellence


High-Quality Instructional Systems

Family and Community Partnerships

As a solution to the funding quandary, Hill advises other magnet leaders to reach out to parents and include them in what is going on in the classroom. Parents are an essential part of any school community. She explains, "As a principal, I work very closely with an active PTA. I have to be a huge supporter of the PTA in order to make the partnership work. The PTA conducts one fundraiser per school year, which raises anywhere from \$25,000 to \$40,000 that they put back into the school in numerous ways." For Hill, the PTA is essential to continually improving the school and supporting innovation.

The PTA is not merely a source of funds, though. In addition, the PTA is highly engaged and helps bring in more parental involvement and support through regular Math Nights, Science Nights, and other activities. At BEC, community and family involvement is meant to foster a sense of togetherness. Events such as these seek to encourage parents and kids to come spend the evening with their BEC family, because the school community can and should be just that—an extension of family. Consistent inclusion of all parents and families has led to greater financial support and established the close-knit feeling of the school.

Bringing It All Together

Each of these principals utilizes different funding streams and leads schools that comprise varying student demographics and are located in their own distinctive state and local cultures, but they share key strengths and offer similar words of advice. They each allow their staff members to have autonomy in decision-making, they are extremely passionate about what they do—and work hard to make sure their teachers and staff members are, too—and finally, they are creative problem-solvers. They work to build diverse student populations, employ interdisciplinary approaches to learning in various forms, collaborate with their communities, and most importantly, they focus on their students' needs. They listen to their students and their staff members to meet the students where they are and determine the most effective solution to address any specific need or challenge. Although magnet schools, through their specific characteristics, create a unique blend of features, many of these techniques and best practices are strategies from which all school leaders can take note. 

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