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CMS » News

Alejandra Garcia: 'I never think inside the box'

9/27/2017 *Beacon Learning Community Principal of the Year*

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There's been a lot of celebrating going on at Nations Ford Elementary lately. Recently released data from the state showed that the school has gone from an F to a C in three years. Now, Principal Alejandra Garcia is the Beacon Learning Community Principal of the Year.

"We had a staff party to celebrate our letter grade," said Garcia. "The principal announcement came just an hour and a half after that, so it was quite a day."

Garcia was meeting with her instructional assistants when she heard someone start talking on the intercom. "There is a strict rule at my school, no intercom from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.," said Garcia. "So I jumped up to see who it was."

It was Dr. Kondra Ratley, Beacon Learning Community superintendent, who came with flowers to surprise Garcia. "Everyone was clapping and cheering and I was just freaking out," said Garcia. "I looked like an emoji."

Ratley said Garcia is committed to excellence for students, staff and the school community. "She upholds high expectations for performance and refuses to allow any barrier to prohibit student success," said Ratley. "Her intense focus on individualizing support for all adults and children contributes to a culture that fosters lifelong learning. At Nations Ford Elementary, no one goes unnoticed."

The celebration continued several days after the announcement when Garcia's entire school decorated the gym and held a lunchtime party for her. "The students made a video, banners and cards," said Garcia. "It was beautiful and overwhelming."

Garcia was born in Colombia, South America. Her family moved to New York City when she was 5 years old. "We struggled," she said. "My parents came here to give me a better life. We lived in a rough neighborhood in Queens, but I thought I was in heaven because I had air conditioning."

When she was in middle school, Garcia's family moved to Hollywood, Fla. Her family moved around a lot and she was never at the same school for longer than a year or two. Garcia earned her bachelor's degree from Florida Atlantic University. She married her husband, a childhood sweetheart she met at the age of 10. He moved to Charlotte and she followed. She received a master's degree from Gardner-Webb University. She started teaching in Florida and Gaston County and joined CMS in 2003 as a teacher at Oakdale Elementary. She also worked at Pinewood Elementary and became principal at Nations Ford four years ago.

Garcia's experiences as an English language learner have helped her better serve her students, 70 percent of whom are from Spanish-speaking homes. "When I came here, I didn't know a word of English," she said. "My teachers didn't feel sorry for me. They held me to high expectations."

Garcia encourages her staff to set those same high expectations for their students. "I tell my staff all the time, 'Imagine if I was your student. How would you treat me?'"

The school's theme for the year is "Exceeding the Limits" and every staff member has a t-shirt with the slogan. Nations Ford has met and exceeded growth for the past three years. Their growth was the highest of all Title 1 schools on the district. Science scores have increased from 23 to 72 percent under Garcia's leadership and proficiency has had double-digit gains in all content areas.

"Diversity is a positive thing," said Garcia. "It doesn't matter where we come from. If you believe in students, they will do anything to make you proud. Ninety-one percent of our students come from poverty. We can be role models for them. And every year, we are improving in proficiency, growth and teacher morale."

Garcia is usually dressed casually and can often be found on the floor or playground engaging with students. "I think outside the box," she said. "When someone tells me something has been done the same way for 20 years, I always think there has to be another way. I've had several learning community superintendents and they always say, 'Don't you ever think inside the box?' and I say, 'No. I use the box to climb on.'"

After 11 years of teaching, Garcia was encouraged to pursue leadership opportunities. "It was something that someone else saw in me," she said. "It was an opportunity to serve a bigger group of kids. I was lucky to have mentors and role models to help me along the way."

Garcia said her experiences from childhood have shaped who she is as a principal and parent of three sons. "I've really just been influenced and mentored throughout the way," she said. "And I've followed a path that was already paved out for me."

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Ericia Turner: 'I want my purpose to be evident every day'

9/26/2017 *East Learning Community Principal of the Year*

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As a new principal a year ago at Rocky River High, Ericia Turner shook things up a little. "I took away students' cell phones," she said. "That caused a bit of controversy."

Turner's policy allowed students to use phones only before and after school. Student government representatives asked her if they could earn back their phone privileges. Turner worked with the students to set behavioral and academic goals. When those were met after the first quarter, Turner allowed students to use their phones at lunch.

"For the first month without phones, some students wouldn't even speak to me," said Turner. "After a while, they started to see the purpose. They started coming up to me and saying their grades were improving and that they were excited about class."

Enforcing the policy was a team effort. "If the teachers didn't buy into it, it wouldn't have worked," said Turner. "They are in the trenches. They were a little skeptical at first, but I had to get them to trust me and encourage everyone to be consistent."

This demonstration of strong leadership is one of the many reasons Turner was named the East Learning Community Principal of the Year, said Learning Community Superintendent Nancy Brightwell. "Ericia is an incredibly dedicated and influential principal because she prioritizes building strong relationships with her students, supporting the continuous improvement of her staff and creating a strong sense of community with her feeder-pattern schools," said Brightwell. "She believes in striving for excellence in all that she does and models this each and every day."

After leaving CMS for nine years, last year was Turner's first year back in CMS and her first year as a CMS principal. She was overwhelmed to be chosen by her peers. "There are great principals in the East Learning Community," she said. "Some have been mentors. Almost all of them have helped me out on many occasions. Any of them could very easily get this recognition as well. I was speechless. I really did not expect it at all."

A native of Sherrills Ford, N.C., Turner earned her bachelor's and master's degrees from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University. She has an additional master's degree from Gardner Webb University and an education specialist degree from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where she is currently pursuing her doctorate.

Turner began her career in Forsyth County. She lost an infant son to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) two years into her career and moved closer to home to be with her family. She taught physical education and coached girls' basketball at Independence High School. In 2007, she began her principal internship at Mallard Creek High. Then she left CMS for a job as assistant principal at Newton Conover High School. She worked in Alamance and Iredell counties as an assistant principal and athletic director until she returned to CMS last year.

"I want my purpose to be evident every day," she said.

Turner was drawn to education as an undergrad, mentoring young girls as part of the Big Brothers, Big Sisters program. As she settled into her career, she said the loss of her son only solidified her decision. "My purpose became clear when my son passed away," she said. "I am a teacher and a coach. I want my purpose to be evident every day. My son died in someone else's care and it is not lost on me that people entrust their children to me every day. I am sensitive to that and it is not something I take lightly."

As a new principal, Turner had to work to win over not only the students, but the staff as well. "I appreciate the work they do," she said. "Changing leadership is a difficult thing. Before they went home for Thanksgiving, I secured a bag of groceries and a frozen turkey for every employee. We tend to forget about the sacrifices that teachers make."

In the year that she's been at Rocky River, disciplinary incidents have decreased and academic scores have increased. Turner credits her staff and her students willingness to engage in a new culture. "The participation and willingness of the students is so strong here," she said. "They refuse to fail. I work with student government to set school-wide behavior and academic goals. If they're met, we have a school-wide celebration."

Many of the school's new programs are student-led, including a new mentorship program that pairs seniors with freshmen.

Turner tries to exceed expectations by showing up when she isn't expected. "Everyone thinks I will be football games, but I show up at swim meets, plays anything I can get to without neglecting my own children," she said. "I care about them outside of school."

With such a successful year under her belt, Turner is thankful for the support of her staff and community. "I share this with my entire community," she said. "Without them, it wouldn't be possible. There is no way you can do the work by yourself."

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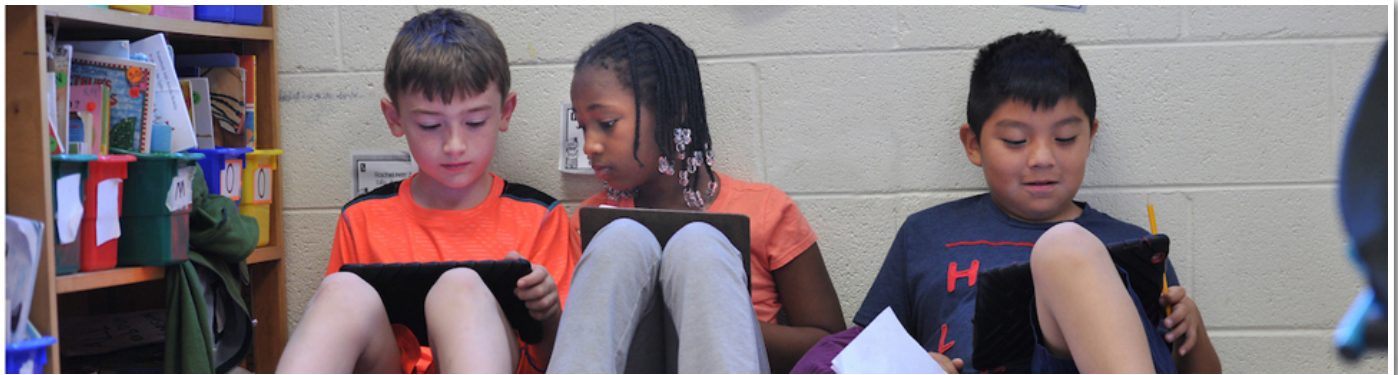
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Rick Parker: 'Being the principal at East Meck is a dream come true'

9/25/2017 Central Learning Community Principal of the Year

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In the spring of 2016, East Mecklenburg High Principal Rick Parker heard that students were walking around wearing his face on t-shirts. "I immediately ran around looking for it," he said.

Parker found his seniors wearing shirts with his face on a dollar bill. They said, "In Parker we trust."

Today, one of those shirts hangs in Parker's office. All of the 2016 seniors signed it. "I can't imagine them wanting to put my face on something and wear it around," he said. "But they were proud I was their principal."

Strong student relationships are one of the many reasons that Parker is the Central Learning Community Principal of the Year. "Rick is an energetic, dynamic leader who ensures that each and every child at East Meck High School has the opportunity for success," said Tara Lynn Sullivan, learning community superintendent. "He is the model of a servant-leader who works hard to ensure that the teachers and staff have the resources and tools to help students be successful in his school. He is innovative, dedicated, passionate and hardworking."

Student achievement and growth have increased under Parker's leadership. The cohort graduation rate increased from 88.8 percent for the class of 2016 to more than 91 percent for the class of 2017. East Meck has also exceeded growth standards for the past three years. Through Parker's leadership, the school obtained a grant from the Cal Ripken Foundation to build a multi-use field on the campus for the school and surrounding community. East Mecklenburg High has been recognized as the first Global Ready High School in the state of North Carolina, a Magnet School of Excellence and a certified IB Career Program school.

Recently, a driver's battery was dead and Parker was in the parking lot trying to help when he got a radio call that there was an emergency in the media center. "I thought, 'Oh, no. What could this possibly be?' and I ran to the media center," he said.

It was a ruse. Parker was surprised by his staff, Sullivan and his wife, present for the announcement that he'd been named principal of the year. "It was quite a moment," he said. "It means so much when you have your friends and peers nominate you."

There are nine principals up for the district award this year and Parker said he was humbled to be nominated with such strong candidates. "I think of all of them as my friends," he said. "They are all amazing principals."

Parker grew up in Charlotte and graduated from West Mecklenburg High. He also attended Oakdale Elementary, University Park and Coulwood Middle School. "It's been very rewarding to give back to my community," he said. "I remember what it was like to be a student here. And while many things have changed, some things are evergreen like good studying habits, good manners and treating people with respect."

Under the influences of two great CMS teachers, Jim McConnell and Zelda Cline, Parker decided to go into education. "They made you feel like you were important and valued. You didn't want to let them down. I went into education to do that for other kids."

Parker earned his bachelor's degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and has two master's degrees, one from Winthrop University and one from Appalachian State University. He returned to Charlotte as a physical education and health teacher and coach at Quail

Hollow Middle. He worked there as an athletic director for 10 years and was offered an assistant principal job at East Mecklenburg High. He served in that position for nine years and has been principal for 10.

East Mecklenburg High is 67 years old, but has only had seven principals in that time. "I am so proud to be a part of the rich tradition of excellence here," he said. "Being the principal at East Meck is a dream come true."

After working 19 years at one school, Parker has been able to develop strong relationships with many students. The school has a large population of Exceptional Children and Parker developed a close relationship with one former student who used a wheelchair. He and Parker remain close. Parker frequently picks him up to celebrate his birthday and other milestones. They celebrate Christmas together. Parker recently attended the former student's mother's funeral with him. "I think that he's influenced me as much as I influenced him," he said. "I've been so inspired by his strength and faith."

Parker is a strong presence at school events, attending as many games and other extracurricular activities as he can. He stays in frequent touch with parents, sending out voice messages every Friday to update them about what's going on at the school. He calls students on the phone to wake them up and get them to come to school. This year, he became a walking billboard. He wears sandwich boards with messages for parents when he's doing carpool in the mornings. Graduation is a bittersweet time of year. "When they walk across that stage, I get emotional every time," he said. "I am their biggest cheerleader."

Parker says he has his own cheerleader, his wife. "She's heard me talking about all these students every year and has been supporting me the whole way," he said. "When you have people like that behind you, it creates positive energy."

He said he went into education with a purpose to give every child the best education possible. He lives by a PRIDE acronym: passion, respect, integrity, drive and energy. He also takes pride in being the principal at his school.

"East Mecklenburg, this building, is not a magical place," he said. "The work we do every day and how we work creates magic. We have an amazing staff that builds relationships kids and creates a family atmosphere. Every day we create magic."

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Valoria Burch: 'A passion for working with students with challenges'

9/22/2017 LEAD Learning Community Principal of the Year

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Turning Point Principal Valoria Burch was walking through her school when she heard herself being summoned to the office on the intercom. "I started making my way up there and they called me again," she said. "That time, I realized the voice was coming from John Wall [Leadership Enrichment Achievement Differentiation learning community superintendent]. I had no idea what was going on."

When Burch got to the office, Wall announced that she is the LEAD Learning Community Principal of the Year. She was given flowers and Wall made the announcement again on the intercom. "It makes me feel good that my learning community is confident in me to represent them this year," said Burch. "It means a lot that they notice the work I've been

doing at Turning Point."

Wall said Burch's focus on her students makes her a great candidate for CMS Principal of the Year. "Valoria Burch is a compassionate, respected servant leader who is constantly focused on what she can do to improve students' lives. She works with some of the most challenging students in CMS, but her positive attitude and spirit helps her to help students overcome even the most difficult of situations. She is always focused on students and how her staff can work together to make a difference in their lives. She is the first to believe in a student and the last to give up."

Burch's students have been congratulating her in the hallways and her colleagues are recognizing her as well. "I was at a training on Friday and a colleague came up and said, 'Hello, Principal of the Year' and bowed. Then others started doing the same," she said. It was a little embarrassing but fun too."

Burch is from Fayetteville, N.C., and earned her bachelor's and master's degrees from Fayetteville State. She began her education career in Cumberland County Schools and was asked to help start an alternative middle school. "I wasn't sure if I would like it or not, but I gave it a chance," she said.

She got her students involved in service learning. They visited veterans' hospitals, made baskets for cancer patients and made other investments in the community. "Very quickly, I was able to see a difference in the students," she said.

Burch then accepted an alternative learning position with the Department of Public Instruction. She married a man from South Carolina and they moved to Charlotte. She applied for a job at CMS, interested in working in other areas besides education. "They called me about the Turning Point opportunity and I wasn't sure if that was what I wanted. But I thought about it and realized this is my calling. I accepted that position immediately." She's been the principal of Turning Point for 10 years.

Turning Point students are placed there by learning community superintendents for anywhere from 35-180 days because they have either violated the student code of conduct or been through a triage process. Once students arrive, behavioral and academic goals are set. Burch and her team work with the students to meet those goals before they can return to their home schools.

"I know that all teachers care, but if you're working at Turning Point, you have to have a passion for working with students with challenges," said Burch. "No two days are alike. Students are definitely at risk of failing school. You have to be in this to make a difference. The academic component comes second. First, you have to build that relationship to help with other needs before students can be taught."

Burch focuses on exposing her students to new experiences and adventures. "I am constantly amazed by my students who have lived in Charlotte all their lives and never been Uptown," she said. "We take them on field trips. It's rewarding for them to see what's out there in the community. We get them to start thinking about how to be a productive citizen in society."

The staff and students at Turning Point work on creating a tightly knit community. They host their own graduation ceremonies where parents can come and hear motivational speeches. "We want to give an alternative to those who can't walk with their home schools," she said. "That motivates our students."

Many of Burch's students go to college but return to volunteer and share experiences with current students. Returning a student to the home school is the ultimate goal, but Burch said it can be bittersweet. "I do recall telling one student that he was a model student and I would miss him a lot but I wanted him to go have a normal high school education. Participate in extracurricular activities. Enjoy high school years."

She said the students who stay at Turning Point for 180 days are the students that are most influenced by the experience. "We're able to build those close relationships and put them into a mentoring process," she said. "Some of these students are selected to be on the Principal's Council. The students that are here the longest will not return to Turning Point."

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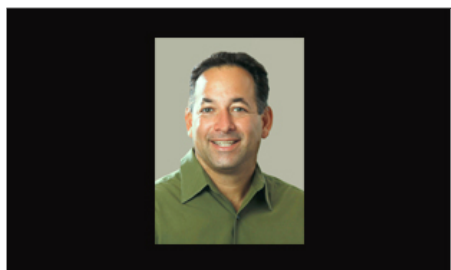
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Michael Lungarini: 'This isn't a job, it's a calling'

9/21/2017 Northeast Learning Community Principal of the Year

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Hurricane Harvey did not have the impact on Charlotte that was expected. But it did disrupt Hidden Valley Elementary, which lost power for two days. Principal Michael Lungarini and his staff managed to keep school open for one day, teaching students under the glow of emergency safety lights and feeding them grilled cheese sandwiches supplied from other schools with power.

"I walked through the school and there was genuine teaching and learning going on in the hallways," said Lungarini. "The team here rose to the challenge."

Lungarini cites Hidden Valley staff as the reason he was named Northeast Learning Community Principal of the Year. "There is no way I would be named for this great honor without my staff," he said. "I have a wonderful, dedicated fantastic staff. It is really a recognition for the whole school."

The Northeast Learning Community leadership team surprised Lungarini at a student assembly to announce that he'd won.

"What makes Mr. Lungarini a great principal is his love for children, his commitment to people and his willingness to go above and beyond in his leadership and service," said Charity Bell, learning community superintendent. "When Mr. Lungarini greets his children, he does so from the heart and with a great smile. When the children at Hidden Valley Elementary School see him, their eyes often light up and their faces glow. Without question, the students love him and he truly loves his students as well as his staff."

Lungarini said the recognition from his peers is humbling. "It's rewarding that your peers have selected you," he said. "You know you must have had some impact and your insight is valued among your peers."

Born in Connecticut, Lungarini and his family moved to South Florida when he was five. He was interested in education from an early age. "I've always been a people person and it just seemed like a natural fit," he said. He earned his bachelor's and master's degrees from Florida Atlantic University.

He started teaching middle school in Florida, but decided that to be a great leader he needed inner-city experience. "I think maybe I watched too much *Seinfeld* and *Friends*," he said. "I really wanted to be in a city."

He sold his house and car and moved to Chicago without knowing anyone and without a job. He started attending teacher job fairs and was hired to teach middle school math in western Chicago. "The kids taught me more about myself than I taught them," he said.

He developed a strong relationship with his principal, Lorenzo Russell, who was applying for principalships around the city. In Chicago, principals are chosen by local school councils.

"Lorenzo said to me, 'I am going to be a principal and I am taking you with me.'"

Russell accepted a principal position in one of the most dangerous Chicago neighborhoods and brought Lungarini along as his assistant principal. "I think before becoming an assistant principal, I had the kid part down," said Lungarini. "Going into leadership taught me how to inspire and lead adults." He was assistant principal for four years, earning the Chicago Public Schools Assistant Principal of the Year award.

Six years of living in Chicago weighed on him. "Living in the city is hard," he said. "The winters were so cold and everything, just going to the grocery store, was a production." So he decided to move to Charlotte.

He missed the assistant principal application pool. "That was OK with me," he said. "I went back to the classroom, where the action is."

He taught social studies at Ranson Middle for two years before becoming assistant principal at Statesville Road Elementary. He is in his third year as principal at Hidden Valley. "I decided educational leadership is more of the way to go for me," he said. "I like being able to impact policies and see the big picture and how we can impact a whole community. I saw that I could impact more lives."

Lungarini's grandfather was a first-generation Italian immigrant. Working at a school with a large immigrant population, Lungarini can relate to their struggles and challenges. "Some of our students have already been on amazing journeys," he said. "They've been crammed with hundreds of others on a train. They've crossed a border through the Rio Grande. Their stories are amazing and they have grit and the perseverance it takes to be successful. That might not always show up in the data, but it shows up in their hearts."

Lungarini said some educators view Title 1 schools as high-risk, but he considers it a high reward as well. "You can't just treat it as a job: it's a calling. When you start to see success, not just from the data but from the people, you see the positive benefit it's having on the community."

Lungarini's wife, Melissa, is a teacher at Long Creek Elementary and they often bounce ideas off each other. "There's no way I can be a poor principal and no way that she can be a poor teacher because we are always talking to each other about how to improve," he said.

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Dr. Allison Plunkett: 'I want every child to love learning'

9/20/2017 South Learning Community Principal of the Year

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Visitors comment that walking into Smithfield Elementary "feels like a warm blanket," Dr. Allison Plunkett, the school's principal, said that's intentional. "I want every child to love coming to school," she said. "My entire team works to make that happen."

Dr. Plunkett's work was recognized when she was named the South Learning Community Principal of the Year. She was working when she heard her assistant principal being called to help a kindergartener at lunch. "I didn't know if there was a child in distress but I wasn't going to let her go alone, so I headed down to the cafeteria," said Smith. "Instead, I was greeted by Avery Mitchell and Aquanetta Edmond with balloons and flowers. All the

students in the cafeteria went wild."

Dr. Plunkett is friends with many of her students' families on social media and has been overwhelmed by the congratulatory notes. "Being honored by your peers is one of the highest honors I can imagine a principal receiving. Our school is able to succeed because of the dedication of my team, including Jill Trotter, Emme Barnes, Michele O'Connell, Jodi Herring and Susan Stone."

Mitchell, South Learning Community Superintendent, said Plunkett's leadership shines in everything she does. "Allison is an innovative principal who always puts kids first," said Mitchell. "It is not uncommon to see students running up to her and hugging her in the hallway or find her participating in activities in the classroom when you visit Smithfield. She is extremely innovative and encourages her staff to take risks and make learning relevant and fun for her students. She is a lifelong learner and shares her knowledge with other principals by serving as a mentor both formally and informally. I am extremely proud of Allison's work and the impact she has had on students and other South Learning Community principals."

Smithfield is committed to keeping kids active and moving. Students get up and move around every 20 minutes. For several years, Smithfield was the only school that had a sensory motor lab. The school hosted many visitors who wanted to see how the lab worked and understand the research behind it. "Our P.E. team, Kim Cooke, Keith Kraemer and Andrew Romberger has done so many initiatives completely dedicated to getting kids excited about movement and being fit and the brain science behind everything," said Dr. Plunkett.

This summer, more than 400 teachers completed training at Smithfield to learn about fitness and neuroscience, including flexible seating. "We've changed a lot about practices that we have in the entire learning community," said Smithfield. "The things we are sharing help people beyond our school district, including future teachers and principals."

Dr. Plunkett is also focused on personalized learning. Teachers and leaders from throughout the state have visited to observe the school's personalized learning style. "When our teachers learned how effective personalized learning is, they decided to take the risk and fully engage in the process," said Plunkett. "It's really made a difference in our school culture."

Dr. Plunkett, a native of Roanoke, Va., said she was never interested in dolls as a child, but was always engaged in learning and school. "I played school and had little workbooks I would complete since I was like five," she said. "I've always been a little bit of a nerd."

Dr. Plunkett graduated from Virginia Tech and moved to Charlotte for a warmer climate. She earned her master's degree from the University of South Carolina and her doctorate from Wingate University. She began her teaching career at Smith Middle School and taught at Albemarle

Road Elementary. She became an assistant principal at Lebanon Road, Hickory Grove and Hawk Ridge elementaries and Alexander Graham Middle. This is her 10th year as principal at Smithfield.

There is one rule for staff members at Smithfield. "Don't mess up with someone else's child," said Dr. Plunkett. "My leadership team looks at this job as customer service. Our customers are children, but they are still our customers. We are there to serve them. We have the highest of standards."

Smithfield also has a strong focus on neuroscience, which Dr. Plunkett calls her ultimate passion in life. "If you're a lawyer, you should know the law," she said. "We are impacting children's brains eight hours a day, I don't know that you can really consider yourself a top notch educator if you don't know how the brain works. Movement can change everything about your learning and we owe it to children to understand how their brains work and to teach them how their brains work."

Dr. Plunkett, who teaches future teachers and principals at Wingate University, believes academics improve after social and emotional needs are met. "Our students know that there are adults in this building that love them every minute of every day, even on their worst day."

After 10 years as a principal, Dr. Plunkett has learned an important lesson about attitude. "I laugh at myself all the time. I act like a big kid at school," she said. "I don't know how to act any differently. Don't take yourself that seriously. People will appreciate it."

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Jeanette Reber: 'I have the coolest job'

9/19/2017 *Project Leadership & Investment For Transformation Principal of the Year*

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As a Charlotte teenager, Jeanette Reber learned how to drive on Milhaven Road. Today, she is the principal of a school on that same road, Statesville Road Elementary. "Charlotte is my home," said Reber. "I grew up less than three miles from my school. I am so grateful that I'm able to serve in the community that raised me."

Reber attended Tuckaseegee and Oakdale elementaries, University Park Creative Arts, Coulwood Middle and graduated from West Mecklenburg High. She earned her bachelor's degree from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and her master's in reading from Winthrop University. She earned an add-on administrative license from Wingate University and participated in the University of Virginia turnaround schools principal fellows program.

She also completed the Relay Graduate School of Education for principals.

She was recently named the Project Leadership & Investment For Transformation Principal of the Year. "Jeanette is not only a leader, she is also a nurturer and an encourager," said Denise Watts, Project L.I.F.T. learning community superintendent. "She has cultivated a culture of caring at Statesville Road Elementary School while maintaining high expectations and accountability for student learning. She makes student learning a priority but also understands how important it is for her to model being the lead learner in her school. Ms. Reber's peers see her as a role model and a thought partner in school leadership."

Reber was at a Monday morning staff meeting when the song "Celebration" started playing on the school's PA system. "I just thought the team presenting was going to do a little dance," said Reber. "Then I looked up and saw the Project L.I.F.T. team coming into the media center with balloons and flowers. It completely caught me off guard."

Knowing the learning community principal of the year is a peer recognition means the most to Reber. "I look up to the principals I work with," she said. "I aspire to be like them and glean as much as I can from them. Knowing that they see that in me just took my breath away. Reflecting on it three days later, I am still pinching myself. I am so grateful and honored that my peers think highly of me."

As a child, Reber spent a lot of time with her grandmother, who was a teacher. "She always had school supplies and I would play teacher all the time," said Reber. "I always knew I wanted to be an educator."

She started teaching at Derita Elementary then moved to Steele Creek, Idlewild and Smithfield elementaries. She became a literacy facilitator and moved to McAlpine Road Elementary and Ashley Park where she became an assistant principal and then principal. This is her third year at Statesville Road. Reber said the decision to transition from teacher to administrator was a difficult one.

"My principal saw things in me and wanted me to share things I knew with other teachers, so the transition started happening naturally," she said. "I became a leader on my team, growing and learning more myself. One day, he said, 'You should go get your masters.' I said, 'I don't want to be a principal, I want to teach my entire life,' so I got a master's degree in reading. But then I found myself taking on more administrative tasks and really liking it. I was able to impact an entire school and I decided to give it a try."

Because of her own experiences, Reber encourages her staff to pursue professional development opportunities. "We work really hard on growing our teachers professionally and believe in lifelong learners," she said. "We try to offer a strong model for coaching and feedback."

The coaching and feedback is there for students, too. "We do frequent check-ins with our students and say, 'I know that you're having a challenging moment. What can I do for you to help you through this?' We want our kids to know we're there for them and they can get through anything."

Every teacher greets students as they walk into the school each morning. "We offer hugs and high-fives. We find out what's going on in their lives. We engage and connect," she said. "I am incredibly proud of my staff here and what they bring to this building for our kids. I think we leave it all here on the classroom floor. We are spent when we leave because of our aligned belief in our kids and what we can do."

Reber loves the variety of her job. "I have a master key, so I can go anywhere I want to," she said. "In the span of 10 minutes, I can join a fifth-grade class where they're learning about prime and composite numbers and then go to a kindergarten class where they're identifying lower-case letters. I have the coolest job."

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Terra Kennedy: 'Let your work speak for itself'

9/18/2017 *West Learning Community Principal of the Year*

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It's not unusual to find Principal Terra Kennedy sitting at a desk in a hallway at Phillip O. Berry answering emails. "I don't like to be shut up in an office," said Kennedy. "I like to be out and about, interacting with my students. They know they can come to me any time."

Kennedy sets an open-door policy for her students. She keeps healthy snacks in her office and students often drop by. "They want to see what I have in the bottom drawer," said Kennedy. "They need nourishment before they take a test."

Kennedy's strong bond with students is one of the many reasons she was recently named West Learning Community Principal of the Year. "Leaders are often described by the qualities they possess," said Dr. Curtis Carroll, West learning community superintendent.

"When I think about Terra Kennedy and her leadership, I think about her actions. The decisions she makes are derived from her belief that every student is gifted. As a result, she challenges them to become our future leaders. She empowers her staff to bridge knowledge and understanding with the 21st century landscape of constant innovative disruptions. The love Principal Kennedy demonstrates to the staff, students, parents and community is rooted in her passion for young people, her dedication to learning and teaching, and her desire to positively impact the community."

Dr. Carroll surprised Kennedy with a visit to her school and announced the news over the school's PA system. Kennedy was taken to a classroom where a reception was set up for teachers and students to celebrate with her.

"My initial response was, 'Why did they select me?'" said Kennedy. "I am so passionate about my students and education, but I like to fly under the radar and let my students and staff shine. But I was so honored that my peers have noticed my dedication and feel like I am worthy of being honored."

Kennedy is from the small South Carolina town of Coward. As a child, she pretended to be a teacher, influenced by two paternal aunts who are teachers. "I was encouraged to find a career that would allow you to serve others," she said. "I joined the Teacher Cadets program in high school and I knew teaching was the career for me."

She earned her bachelor's degree from Winthrop University and her master's degree from Gardner-Webb University. She was a student teacher at South Mecklenburg High and she spent one year teaching in Rock Hill, S.C. where she was named new Teacher of the Year. She returned to CMS for her second year to teach at Marie G. Davis, then an IB Middle Program. When she heard about Phillip O. Berry opening, she immediately applied.

"When I heard the story of Phillip O. Berry and how he wanted to be an engineer and couldn't receive the education he needed, but he didn't give up, I was inspired," said Kennedy. "It reminded me of my own upbringing."

In Coward, post-secondary education was not encouraged for African-American students. "My family knew how important it was, but African Americans were expected to get a farm or a factory job," said Kennedy. "Being a part of Phillip O. Berry allowed me to help students from all backgrounds have an opportunity to find a career, a STEM vocation or a college path."

Kennedy taught at Phillip O. Berry for a decade and then became the leader of the Career and Technical Education program at Myers Park High School. A year later, she was invited back to Phillip O. Berry to lead the magnet program. The school's principal, told Kennedy she had a gift for leadership. "I'd never considered that," said Kennedy. "I thought I would teach for 30 years and retire."

Kennedy earned her license, but remained in her magnet position. Dr. Carroll became the principal of Philip O. Berry and encouraged her to become an assistant principal. "I wanted to be an AP at Phillip O. Berry," said Kennedy. "Curtis told me that I needed to broaden my horizons and that I would love students at any school."

She became the assistant principal of instruction at Garinger. After two years, Learning Community Superintendent Charity Bell approached her about being a principal. Kennedy wasn't sure she was ready. "I asked Brian Schultz (chief academic officer) to come observe me and see if I had a skill set to lead a school. He thought I was ready."

Kennedy has been the principal of Phillip O. Berry for four years now, returning to the school she's always loved. Her biggest goal is to prepare her students for the future. "When students sit down with me and say they aren't going to college, I ask why," she said. "When they graduate, they will have a diploma that gives them options. We are going to prepare them for the college, career or military. They will have access to the most rigorous coursework."

Whenever she has a chance, Kennedy pushes aside her paperwork to interact with students. "It gives me the energy and strength to remind me why I do this," she said. "For the students. My grandfather always said, 'Don't tell people what you do. Let your work speak for itself.' Service is what guides me each day. It lifts me up when I give to others."

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