

SCHOOLS TO WATCH AS A TEMPLATE FOR GROWTH AT DURANT ROAD MIDDLE SCHOOL

Bob Smith

Is it nature or nurture? Just how does one become a “Schools to Watch” institution and once you have arrived, how do you continue to maintain the level of excellence that took you to those heights?

Durant Road Middle School, located in Raleigh, North Carolina, with a student population of 1160 and a staff and faculty of 125, originally answered these questions in 2003. They stood equal to the task again in June, 2006 and were honored with an award signifying the completion of the re-certification process.

Schools, very much like the students who pass through our doors each day, are looking for standards or guidelines by which to measure themselves. For the faculty and staff of Durant Road Middle School, the criteria established by the Schools to Watch program was a suitable template that allowed us to challenge ourselves.

Academic Excellence

Wake County Public Schools in general and Durant Road Middle School in particular have always taken great pride in striving for and achieving academic excellence. From the first day in 1995 when Durant Road Middle School opened its doors, the goal of academic excellence for its students was in many ways the cornerstone upon which to build. In 1995 Durant Road Middle School was one of the few multi-track year-round schools in the nation.

The students and faculty chose to be here. The goal of meeting high academic standards by all of its students was immediately put in motion. Every year from 1996 until 2000 Durant Road Middle School was named “A School of Distinction” in North Carolina. This level of achievement is reserved for schools in which at least 80% of the students are achieving at or above grade level. Between 2000 and 2005 the students at Durant Road Middle School raised their level of performance, to entitle it to be named a North Carolina School of Excellence. This recognition is given to schools that have 90-100% of their students achieving at or above grade level. This is truly rarified air in the public school world.



Durant Road students have many ways to demonstrate academic excellence

These gains did not happen overnight and once they were achieved, there was the strong motivation to keep the bar high. The programs developed for both the students and faculty helped to make this level of student performance not just attainable but sustainable. It takes well-trained, well

prepared and dedicated teachers to enable students to achieve academic excellence. How do we do this? Teachers at each grade level share common planning periods. There are regularly scheduled grade and department meetings. For the 2006-07 school year, our school wide initiative is to transition to a professional learning community. This expanded collaboration among our faculty members should assist us to achieve more through the sharing of ideas, developing common assessments, establishing standards, and analyzing those results. By asking and answering “What do we want our students to learn, how will we know they have learned it, and what do we do when they have not learned it?” our students benefit.

Bringing in the new does not mean abandoning the tried and true. Students at Durant Road Middle School will continue to benefit from wide ranging assessments such as portfolios, multi-media presentations, and the use of rubrics. Teachers strive for their students to achieve mastery of materials, allowing students the opportunity to retake tests, receive additional help and remediation during team time as well as during trackout sessions. Teachers, counselors and grade level administrators keep a close eye on the academic progress of all of their students so that missing assignments and low performance are the exception rather than the rule. Teachers strive to develop relationships with the students so they realize that teachers and staff are there to support, not just report.

Developmental Responsiveness

Durant Road Middle School is dedicated to addressing challenges faced by young adolescents. Each child has a unique set of needs. We have 12 teams of students and teachers covering three grades and four tracks. These teams provide an instructional framework and a welcoming environment where students can explore a variety of activities. The Administrative Team, as well as our leadership team, evaluates activities on an ongoing basis.

Peer evaluations, along with utilization of in-depth projects, help the students develop a strong sense of ownership of their learning. Simulations, hands-on activities and interdisciplinary lessons are used to help students see a real world connection to integrating reading, writing, and math across the various curricula and are emphasized and put into practice every day. The use of “Content Literacy” allows students to learn how to properly utilize language and to understand its usage in text materials.

The guidance department at Durant Road Middle School has developed a variety of programs for student and family support. They cover the three domains of a comprehensive guidance program. On the academic side counselors identify those students who struggle academically or emotionally. Group talks center on male or female issues, grief and loss, changing family dynamics and classroom guidance. Counselors work on the personal and social side by providing individual sessions as needed. Parent workshops, referrals to outside agencies

and regular classroom visits help bolster the students' needs.

Counselors are also very active in helping students begin career development conversations. Counselors conduct small group sessions, complete assessments, and help students realize the variety of real-world challenges that must be faced.



Dance is one of the many elective classes offered at DRMS.

The Physical Education Department utilizes the Hellison's Model of Social Responsibility to evaluate individual progress. Students and staff develop good decision making skills and accomplish stress management through the use of the Wellness Center. The center is equipped with treadmills, exercise videos, mats and other healthful living resources.

Character Education is key to the development of adolescents. The Golden Ruler Award is given to students who exemplify the character trait of the month. These students are recognized on a weekly basis via the morning announcements and are awarded a small prize. The Dynamic Dolphin Award is given to students who consistently demonstrate good character traits. These students are selected every nine weeks by their team of teachers. Their pictures

are exhibited on the main office wall and each student receives a small prize.

Students at Durant Road Middle School take the opportunity to serve their community. They have participated in fundraisers for Duke Children's Hospital, Red Cross Tsunami Relief, Hurricane Katrina Relief efforts, various food bank drives, the Angel Tree, and stuffed animals for children.

Social Equity

At Durant Road Middle School we believe that each of our students matter. They bring to our school a wide range of personal experiences and challenges. Equity for our students is a firm commitment that our faculty strives to achieve on a daily basis. One of our strengths is the fact that our Special Education Program students are involved in every aspect that one would expect for a middle school student. A wide range of programs from electives to after school clubs and athletic teams are open to all students. Visually impaired students, who are enrolled in our instrumental music class, are provided with music in Braille format. This formatted music is provided by the Library of Congress, as well as by our own VI staff. In-class resource, or ICR, is used to aid special needs students during their Language Arts classes. Curriculum Assistance classes are also offered to these students as needed for their individualized education program. Behavior Support teachers provide additional interventions for students with significant behavioral needs; our Social Skills class, is one example, in that it is designed to teach problem solving,

handling peer pressure, and anger management.

Our ESL Program provides support to both our non-English speaking students and faculty members. School forms and other student resource materials are available in both English and Spanish. Our ESL staff, as well as other Spanish speaking staff, is available to help with home contacts and parent conferences. An open house for our ESL parents is an annual event.

The staff at Durant Road Middle School understands the important role of family in the everyday life of our students. Parent volunteers are welcomed as part of our PTA. The PTA is an active partner in several of our evening events. They are the prime movers in our annual fundraising activities. The PTA funds a wide range of activities and materials all centered on students and their achievement.

Organizational Structure & Support

Durant Road Middle School continues to be a leader in creating a child centered, multi-track, year-round experience. Scheduling adjustments and modifications have been implemented to meet the needs of our student population. Durant Road Middle School is centered on a site-based management model. With input from our Leadership Team, the administration makes data driven decisions to improve the quality of service and instruction that is provided to our students. Staff members are involved and actively participate in

About the Author:

Bob Smith is principal of Durant Road Middle School in Raleigh, North Carolina.

on-site workshops, staff meetings, and regional and national conferences. Members of the School's Data Team meets at the county level on a monthly basis to help the school progress towards the goals set out in our School Improvement Plan.

Each team of teachers has a computer disc with detailed student information regarding EOG growth and special needs identification. Teams have been encouraged to create data walls that are easily referenced and are used in helping make the right decisions surrounding student achievement.



The media center is one of several areas that students may go to do research.

The Schools to Watch process has encouraged the entire Durant Road Middle School community to study what we do and how we can improve the delivery of our academic programs. The true beneficiaries of this process are the students at Durant Road Middle School. We will continue to monitor our progress as we fine-tune our programs to the Schools to Watch standards.