

FLYING COLORS

MSA Member Success Stories

August 2016

How Going ‘All In’ on a Theme Makes for a Joyful and Fun Learning Experience at Douglas Elementary School

Derek Burns, the principal at Douglas Creative Arts and Science Magnet Elementary School, insists that, “If you don’t go all in, it’s not going to work.” The “it” he is referring to here is Douglas’ magnet theme, the creative arts and sciences. Mr. Burns is heading into his third year at Douglas and he believes that allowing his faculty and staff the freedom to be creative, and modeling a strong commitment to infusing Douglas’ creative arts and sciences theme into everything they do, are the keys to building and sustaining a successful magnet school. Douglas earned the most prestigious award given by MSA this year, the Dr. Ronald P. Simpson Distinguished Merit Award for embodying all of MSA’s Magnet School Pillars: diversity, innovative curriculum and professional development, academic excellence, high quality instructional systems, and family and community partnerships.

I took the time to have a conversation with Mr. Burns as well as Ms.

Heidi Bledsoe, a former teacher turned Magnet Coordinator at Douglas, about what makes Douglas thrive. There were several distinct areas to which they attributed Douglas’ success over the course of our conversation: professional support and development for passionate faculty and staff, family and community involvement, and finally, pervasive theme integration inside and outside the classroom. These crucial ingredients make their magnet a playful and meaningful place for teachers, parents, and students alike to explore knowledge, experiment, and express themselves.

It starts with good people

Burns and Bledsoe are still a little new to Douglas, but they both agree that the school has always been staffed with passionate people. Burns believes that as a semi-new principal he’s simply allowed his teachers a bit more flexibility and as a result, he’s noticed that they have begun to flourish. His openness to creativity cultivates a healthy, idea-centric workplace. Douglas Creative Arts and Sciences Magnet is a school that encourages its teachers, as well as its students, to try new things on a daily basis.

The school invests in its teachers by providing strong arts and sci-

ence integration trainings each year (which the teachers voluntarily attend, unpaid), providing two hours’ worth of extra planning time each day to ensure high quality curriculum, and most recently, Burns has opened the “innovation inn,” a coffee house style space on campus, a space specifically meant to facilitate collaborative lesson planning brainstorming.

Creative freedom and a strong commitment to integrating the creative arts and sciences theme into everything they do, helps teachers and students at Douglas thrive.

Fast Facts

Douglas Creative Arts and Science Magnet Elementary

- **Theme (s):** Creative Arts & Sciences
- **Location:** Raleigh, NC
- **District:** Wake County Public School System
- **Grades:** K – 5
- **Enrollment:** 660
- **Website:** <http://www.wcpss.net/douglasses>



My interview with the two school administrators said it all. Both Mr. Burns and Ms. Bledsoe exuded contagious energy and enthusiasm for their school. They described how the staff participates in their weekly theme days with gusto, and described the eagerness of their faculty to share ideas. They also discussed the value of celebration and encouragement not only among students but among staff and parents.

Taking School out of the Classroom and into the Community

On top of enthusiastic and engaged faculty and staff, Douglas Creative Arts and Science Magnet boasts engaged parents. Burns says of Douglas' PTA and parent volunteers, "They aren't just funders of things, they bring their ideas regularly and we welcome their input."

Strong parental engagement was not necessarily automatic for Douglas, Burns and his staff work hard to promote parent involvement by holding parent nights and other functions at accessible locations. They make an effort to plan inclusive and stimulating activities for families of all back

grounds. Additionally, they often find low-cost ways to serve food their events (in the past a PTA member donated burgers). Reading and math nights are flexible, fun, and hands on – meant to welcome English Language Learners as well as native speakers. Just as Douglas teachers and administrators strive to make learning fun for their students, they try to show parents how fun learning can be as well and make consistent efforts to bring the community together in the process.

Multiple Intelligences + Arts and Sciences = Self Aware, Curious, Creative Learners

From in-house field trips, and a community garden, to hallway art galleries, Douglas consistently weaves its themes into every activity under their roof and under the sky surrounding campus. Douglas uses their two themes, creative arts and sciences, to bring awareness of local and global issues to their students. For example, students tend to a community garden to help their neighbors and their larger community by cultivating fruits and veggies. Through the garden they also have a chance to learn more about environmental science first hand. The garden plot is a great example of

project based learning that gives back.

Mr. Burns even integrates project based learning techniques as well as the creative arts and sciences into staff trainings. In order to demonstrate to faculty how to create meaningful grading rubrics, the whole team baked cookies. The first batch was baked based on a vague rubric with limited instructions. The second batch was baked with the guidance of an explicitly detailed rubric.

PBL is not just for students, Burns uses project based learning techniques in staff trainings

As one may guess, the latter batch was much more delicious. The activity models theme integration - not only is baking a chemistry, but teachers were able to experience how a rubric can allow for creativity while still providing clear direction.

In addition to employing the creative arts and sciences theme to enhance the student learning experience, teachers at Douglas encourage self-awareness by using Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences. Howard Gardner's theory recognizes a number of categories of learners, i.e. musical-rhythmic, visual-spatial, verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, and at Douglas, it is used to educate students about their learning needs.

Awards & Recognition

Dr. Ronald P. Simpson Distinguished Merit Award winner 2016

[\(read more about this prestigious MSA award here\)](#)

Merit Award of Excellence 2015

Merit Award of Distinction 2014

8 Staff Members are National Board Certified

14 teachers with Masters in Education degrees

1 Teacher won the Presidential Award for Science

Home of the National A + Teacher of the Year for 2014 – 2015 & 2013 – 2014

Identified as a Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS)
[Exemplar School](#)

[Check out their School Report Card](#)



Faculty and Staff Celebrating at DES

Students take a survey that helps designate their learning style, strengths and weaknesses at the beginning of each year and discuss the meaning behind the designation with their teachers.

Teachers tailor lessons to address their students' unique skills and learning styles and regularly discuss with students how learning categories and styles impact their day-to-day classroom experiences. In addition, students recognize and explore their strengths and weaknesses through the theory.

It's important to embrace strengths and to embrace weaknesses

Not only do students and staff celebrate successes and strengths, but they also take time to recognize and celebrate weaknesses. Teachers train their students to embrace their weaknesses alongside their strengths and to experience disciplines they excel at just as much as they experience those that are challenging to them. This openness to challenges frees students up to explore limitlessly and without fear of failure.

Contact Us

Do you have a member you wish to nominate to be profiled?
Interested in more information about membership?

Contact:

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Visit us on the web at
www.magnet.edu

The Whole Package

Douglas integrates diversity, innovative curriculum and professional development, academic excellence, high quality instructional systems, and family and community partnerships into their philosophy and day to day function with infectious energy, a conscientious approach, and a deep commitment to not merely teaching their theme but living their theme.

Douglas is a safe and fun learning space for all students.



Schools Students Want. **Schools Students Need.**