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School Culture: Pump It Up!

By Diane James, SREB



LaQuanta Nelson, principal of Magnolia Middle School in Mississippi

Principals and teachers agree a positive culture is one of the key ingredients to running a successful school. But with the national push for higher test scores and graduation rates, something as intangible as culture often gets put on the back burner.

At Magnolia Middle School in Moss Point, Mississippi, Principal LaQuanta Nelson has made it a priority to improve her school's culture because she sees a strong correlation between

a positive culture and student performance and readiness for college, careers and a successful life.

Magnolia Middle is an under-performing school in a high-poverty community. Ninety percent of its 425 students receive free- and reduced-price lunch.

When Nelson took leadership in 2018, she says there was a sense of hopelessness and despair in the building. Discipline referrals were up. The suspension rate was high. Students didn't speak to each other in the hallways, and certainly didn't speak to teachers.

"It was like they were walking, but not seen," says Nelson.

Nelson's mission to turn things around started with giving the school a cultural boost. She believes schools must be intentional in their actions, both big and small, to make major cultural shifts. That meant starting with the end in mind and getting students to see their future selves — doctors, lawyers, teachers or engineers — and empowering the school and students to work toward those career goals.

"So much of what has to be done is confidence-building," says Nelson. "We believe these kids [who she affectionally calls scholars] can be high-performing academically regardless of their deficit, and we are intentional in speaking that to them."

Magnolia Middle Core Values

Nelson maintains that cultural shifts require a clear vision and core values to guide decisions made within the school. Her core values are: all in, walk the talk, high standards and no limits.

All in — Every day, all day, Nelson challenges students, teachers, custodial staff and cafeteria workers to be team players.

Walk the talk — Nelson implores teachers to ensure that what they say to students matches what they do. Teachers should not chastise students for being late to class if they themselves are late to school. Teachers should not tell students to be respectful when they themselves are disrespectful.

High Standards — Nelson constantly tells students that no matter where they come from, if they have high standards for themselves and keep trying, they *will* reach the bar.

No limits — There are no limits to what students can accomplish.

Positive Interactions

Each morning Nelson plays music, greets students and encourages them to have a great day. She's always visible and on the move with her "rolling office" — a cart that carries her laptop.

Nelson urges teachers to be *intentionally* positive each day because effective and "positive teachers can trump poverty."

"Kids need to feel like they belong, and they need to feel like we see them," she adds. "Simple things like acknowledging them in the hallway, speaking to them by name or encouraging them to have a good day matter."

Parent and Community Outreach

Nelson is adamant that the school and community are intricately linked and can impact school culture. Magnolia has been creative in finding "out of the box" ways to engage parents at school. The school threw a Parent Power Gala at which parents dressed up in semi-formal attire and came to a party at the school to eat and meet with the principal and teachers. Faculty also conversed with parents about literacy. "If they trust us, they are going to expect their child to come to school and do what they are supposed to do," maintains Nelson.



Student members of the Principal's Book Club (left); Winners of a schoolwide STEM Challenge (right)

Key Transitions

Nelson sees value in getting students off on the right foot and preparing them for what's ahead. Magnolia takes steps to make the stressful transitions from the elementary grades to the middle grades and from the middle grades to high school easier for students and parents. Staff meet with incoming sixth graders and their parents before school starts so they understand what will happen academically and behaviorally.

Middle school staff also meet with high school educators to understand what's needed to prepare eighth graders for proficiency in ninth grade. "Our aim is to frontload," says Nelson. Such preparation makes transitions less daunting.

Supporting Students on Their Personal Journey

Middle schoolers are in their "tween" and adolescent years, and their often erratic behavior reflects it.

"I call middle schoolers hormones on speed," laughs Nelson. "Girls are all over the place. One minute they are laughing; the next minute they are crying. One day they want to be hugged; the next day they say, 'Don't talk to me.'"

As for the boys, Nelson says they're starting to look and sound like men while also trying to figure out how macho to be and whether "it's cool to be smart."

Nelson advises parents and teachers to be cognizant of the normal physiological changes students go through in the middle grades.

Celebrate Accomplishments

Nelson is a fan of keeping scoreboards and celebrating success. "Regardless of the goal, it's important for everybody to see the goal and how we are progressing toward meeting [it]," she says. Posting data on a scoreboard "can truly transform effort."

Celebrations have included activities such as parties and skating, but due to COVID-19, the school is pumping up the positives on social media, sharing accomplishments on Facebook and other platforms, and getting amazing feedback from parents.

Results

One year after Nelson became principal at Magnolia Middle, discipline referrals and suspensions have gone down drastically. Students are greeting their peers, offering words of affirmation and celebrating each other's successes. Teachers have intentionally built in "joy and a happy vibe," says Nelson. Culture is now one of Magnolia Middle's shining achievements.

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Oklahoma CareerTech: Bringing the Workplace to the Classroom

How the state is helping educators and employers deliver work-based learning virtually

By Kirsten Sundell, SREB



Marcie Mack, State Director, Oklahoma CareerTech

Work-based learning doesn't just empower students to explore careers and acquire workplace skills, it also helps states and employers meet their economic and workforce development goals. That's a core message of SREB's [Commission on Strategic Partnerships for Work-Ready Students](#), which released its final report in October 2020.

But what happens when the local businesses needed to offer work-based learning are scarce or students can't visit a work site?

State leaders in Oklahoma are bringing the workplace to the classroom through several virtual initiatives.

Virtual Job Shadows

Work-based learning is a required component of Oklahoma's *Individual Career Academic Plans*, the personalized road maps that help students navigate the course work and skill-building activities they need for postsecondary and workforce success.



In this video clip, Oklahoma CareerTech's Marcie Mack explains how the state is supporting career counselors with tools, strategies and collaborative networks with industry partners.

That's why, when the COVID-19 pandemic struck, state leaders formed a plan to help all students participate in virtual work-based learning opportunities.

In a recent SREB webinar, Marcie Mack, state director of Oklahoma CareerTech, explained how the state [launched a pilot program](#) to extend virtual work-based learning to more than 18,000 students in 20 school districts through [VirtualJobShadow.com](#), a video-based exploration and career planning platform.

Videos on the platform offer a “day in the life” introduction to career options and workplace realities that students might never have imagined or be able to experience in their daily lives, especially if they live in regions that lack access to employers in top industries. Videos also help middle grades and high school students identify the course work and academic, technical and workplace skills they need to secure good jobs.

This video library builds on Oklahoma CareerTech's growing [YouTube channel](#), which currently spotlights playlists related to the state's [wealth-generating economic systems](#) — Aerospace and Defense, Agriculture and Biosciences, Construction, Creative Industries, Education, Energy, Health Care, Information and Financial Services, and Transportation and Distribution.

Virtual Educator-Industry Partnerships

Oklahoma CareerTech is connecting educators and industry partners virtually, too.

For several years, Oklahoma educators and industry leaders have met during the summer to explore what working in different jobs really looks like and to share industry best practices that educators can use to enhance their instruction.

This summer's virtual meetings were so popular, the state is now holding them every month.

“We did go virtual [this summer], and we had requests from our instructors to be able to continue to do that on a monthly basis,” said Mack.

Educators asked the state to “pick a specific industry and help educators and their whole classrooms connect with that industry and learn more about it,” stated Mack.

“The teachers then develop lessons around it, so they are getting that simulated workplace environment. They're connecting directly with industry in their classrooms and tying it to their lessons.”

Bimonthly Industry Panels

Oklahoma CareerTech's new bimonthly virtual panels convene educators, students and industry leaders to ask and answer questions about the workplace, discuss critical skillsets and explore job projections.

An [October 2020 industry panel](#) celebrated Energy Week and the state's new Energy Career Cluster — and helped expand educators' and students' understanding of this diverse field.

“We had some classrooms join and when they were thinking ‘energy,’ their focus was solely on oil and gas. Being in Oklahoma, that's a big piece of what we do,” reported Mack. “But they got to have a conversation and open their thought process to, that also means renewable – from solar, batteries ... [and] the conservation of energy, which even brought in the conversation around our automotive programs and how they are connecting with the energy industry.”

As Mack explained, the panel also allowed energy industry partners “to talk about what energy means to them, and what they are looking for in a future workforce. The jobs that our students may see now, what they need for them to know is some of the jobs that are going to be available in five to seven years haven't even been created yet, but these are some of the skillsets that are going to be transferable... They encourage them to make sure they work on those skillsets so they are ready for those new jobs when they're available.”

Oklahoma CareerTech invites educators and leaders nationwide to explore its curricular resources and future industry panels at www.okcareertech.org.

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SREB's New Powerful Social Studies Instructional Practices

Build literacy and inquiry skills and help students understand and engage with their world

SREB's new Powerful Social Studies Instructional Practices show teachers how to design instruction and assignments that inspire students to deepen their understanding of the history and rich cultural diversity of their community, country and world.

Teachers who follow these powerful practices create compelling thematic questions and choose a broad range of disciplinary and interdisciplinary sources — such as print, oral or digital texts, letters, cartoons, photographs, audio and video recordings, art, artifacts, maps and more— that spark students' curiosity and prompt them to complete inquiry-focused tasks.

Students develop essential literacy skills — reading, writing, speaking, listening and thinking—as they use evidence from sources to formulate ideas and share and examine different experiences and perspectives with their peers. Teachers look to the community and current events to engage students in gaining awareness of local, regional and global problems, conducting research and taking informed action.

The Powerful Social Studies Instructional Practices were originally developed by SREB in partnership with the Hawaii Department of Education and later refined by a team of SREB content-area experts to align with our [Powerful Literacy Instructional Practices](#).



Look for SREB to launch related services and new Powerful Instructional Practices for the arts, career and technical education, health education, physical education and world languages soon.

Explore the social studies practices and download the accompanying rubric and model at <https://www.sreb.org/powerful-instructional-practices-social-studies>



Conference Registration Is Open — Choose Your Hybrid Option Now!

Student achievement begins with you. Join us at the [2021 Making Schools Work Conference](#), which will be held as a hybrid event with two registration options:

- in-person attendance at the Gaylord Opryland Resort & Convention Center in Nashville or
- online attendance through our virtual event platform

All attendees will enjoy four days of learning, collaborating and networking and access to our keynotes and regular conference sessions livestreamed from the Gaylord Opryland.

In-person attendees can choose from more than 400 promising practice, deep dive and table talk sessions in every content area offered by our keynote and featured speakers and fellow educators. Don't miss our Education Marketplace, where we'll host book-signings, a hands-on project-based learning classroom, two escape rooms, nearly 100 of our popular table talks and other special surprises.

Virtual attendees will have complete access to 100+ live and on-demand sessions during the event, including our keynotes and many popular sessions livestreamed from the Gaylord Opryland. Virtual attendees will continue to have on-demand access to *all 100+ sessions* plus our eBag for handouts, presentation materials and special offers from conference partners for 30 days after the conference, increasing the value of this option.

Both registration options include networking events, escape rooms, prize giveaways and more!

Learn more [registration options](#) and [our hybrid event](#) on our website.

Northland Career Center Wins 2020 Pacesetter Award

By Jahana Martin, SREB

Northland Career Center in Platte City, Missouri, is the winner of a 2020 Gene Bottoms Pacesetter School Award from the Southern Regional Educational Board for the third year in a row. Northland Career Center will be honored on July 6, 2021, at SREB's Making Schools Work Conference in Nashville, Tennessee, due to the cancellation of the 2020 conference in New Orleans, Louisiana.



NCC students and faculty discuss career pathways in this video.

Pacesetter School Awards recognize schools that are implementing one of SREB's Making Schools Work school improvement frameworks and are achieving success in meeting bold goals related to increases in student graduation rates, readiness for college and careers, and credential attainment.

Northland Career Center implements Technology Centers That Work, SREB's school improvement design for technology centers. NCC offers simulated workplace practices in all of its career pathway programs. Real-world workplace experiences for students include developing resumes and portfolios, participating in mock interviews, clocking in and out, learning 5S work environment expectations, working in teams, taking leadership roles and dressing appropriately for their program field.

NCC prepares students for success through engaging, relevant instruction and by providing meaningful internships and work-based learning experiences. In the past eight years, the center has increased its related placement of graduates from 55% to 68%; increased enrollment by 72%, from 249 to 428 students; and increased pass rates on technical skills assessments from 52% to 86%. In 2018-19, 151 students earned industry-recognized credentials and 81 seniors graduated with college credit.

Featured Speaker Spotlight: Joe and Dardi Hendershott

Meet a featured speaker duo, Joe and Dardi Hendershott, co-founders of Hope 4 The Wounded, LLC. The Hendershotts have worked extensively with at-risk youth. At our Nashville conference, they will explore social-emotional learning strategies that help wounded students gain hope. In this video, the Hendershotts encourage educators to remember that hope is a belief that good things *are* possible.



Join the Hendershott's in Nashville to discuss social-emotional learning strategies that reach wounded students.

New National Workshop: Virtual Professional Learning Communities for CTE



Many CTE teachers may be the only teacher in their CTE program area or pathway in the whole school — or even in the whole district.

That's why SREB is kicking off **an on-going series of virtual professional learning communities** on Wednesday, April 21, 2021, that are focused on solving critical problems of practice for CTE leaders and teachers nationwide.

Organized by career pathway, our virtual PLCs will bring CTE teachers and leaders together to share the tools, resources and strategies they need to design and offer high-quality CTE instruction.

Cost: \$50 per person. *Registration is free for all registrants from paid TCTW network sites.*

Date/Time: Wednesday, April 21, 2021, 3 – 5 p.m. Eastern

Learn more and register today for this powerful PLC event at <http://bit.ly/CTEPLCS>

Making Schools Work Conference

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE
JULY 6-9, 2021



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