



SQUAD GOALS

IN CREATING TEAM ELITE, WASHINGTON MAGNET ELEMENTARY BUILT A STRONG STRUCTURE OF SUPPORT FOR STRUGGLING STUDENTS

It was the same old story. Washington GT Magnet Elementary Assistant Principal Roxann Sykes and fourth-grade teacher James Shaw were tired of talking about the same data with members of their School Improvement Team. They were tired of seeing increased discipline issues and lagging academic achievement among black male students in fourth and fifth grade.

They had tried a number of things to address these problems. Nothing was working. “We kept seeing the same subgroup of kids going to the office at rates that were double or even triple the rates of everyone else,” Shaw says. “At this school, we are a family. We look after each other. We knew if we were going to change this, it had to be all hands on deck.”

One night at the end of the 2016-17 school year, Sykes was up late shopping on Amazon and saw some Nike Elite socks. The socks, which run about \$17 to \$30 a pair and feature designs ranging from pictures of sports stars to gorillas and gummy worms, were all the rage with her fourth- and fifth-grade boys.

She thought about the socks. She thought about the boys. And then she got an idea.

Building relationships

Sykes spent her summer planning for “Team Elite.” The new program would focus on using staff mentors and a reward system to promote better decision making, teamwork and personal accountability among a specific team of students.

With Principal Bob Grant’s approval, she put her plan in motion.

First, she recruited Shaw – along with the school’s instructional resource teacher, instructional technology facilitator, magnet coordinator, and some members of the front office staff – to serve as Team Elite mentors. These staff members, who each interact with fourth- and fifthgrade students multiple times a day, would meet with the group of students every Friday during specials period to go over behavior reports from the week.

At these meetings, the students who received positive reports would earn rewards, including Elite Socks and time to practice basketball drills or play with Legos or other games. Students who did not receive positive reports would spend the time talking with a mentor about how they could improve before they practiced basketball drills with the rest of the team.

“We are intentional about building relationships with students outside of office visits,” Sykes says. “We knew if we could do something to help us build deeper relationships, we could start to figure out what is preventing these boys from being successful.”

A fresh start

One Friday in early September, Team Elite met for the first time.

“On the first day, the boys thought that is was just a group for African-American boys who don’t listen,” says Viola Nickson-Bastian, a school secretary who also serves as a Team Elite mentor.

“They struggled with buying into the team. They didn’t see that we were looking to help them to grow as young boys.”

But soon, things turned around.

“Our consistency and follow-through helped to build trust,” Sykes says. “We acknowledged the challenges team members faced during the week and moved past them together. Every day was a fresh start.”

Nickson-Bastian sometimes employs tough love, asking students if their family would approve of their actions. Other times, she shows empathy.

“My support system was not the best growing up, and I see myself in some of them,” she says. “So sometimes an ear is what they need to get them through their day. A no-judgment zone.”

They run to us

Before long, it became clear that this approach was working.

As an instructional resource and technology teacher and Team Elite mentor, Liz Harder works with fourth-grader Isaiah Holden in many settings.

“Isaiah has challenged himself to focus more in class and improve his academic performance,” Harder says. “He also challenges the students who sit around him to stay on task and to focus. He is dedicated, determined and driven and I am so proud of all he has accomplished this school year.”

The team’s support system extends beyond the handful of mentors.

Other Washington staff members anonymously “sponsor” team members by purchasing the Elite socks, snacks or other special treats to reward the students for making progress or achieving their goals.

Sponsors also helped purchase Team Elite t-shirts. The students came up with the design and each team members picked his own number for the back of the shirt.

“Now they see what a team is all about and how team members should support their teammates and hold them accountable for their actions,” Nickson-Bastian says. “And they know that they can come to all of their mentors with their issues. Instead of away from us, they run to us now for assistance and support.”

A vision of what is possible

Team Elite also receives support from people outside of the school community.

N.C. State University senior Ryan Broadie worked with the team throughout the year as a part of an internship. He arranged visits from guest speakers including N.C. State University student athletes and other successful black males working in education and business. Broadie also helped make it possible for the boys to take field trips to tour the PNC Arena and the locker and weight rooms at Carter-Finley Stadium.

“African-American males need to see someone like them who has faced similar challenges and who has gone through the same things,” says Broadie. “When they can get to know someone who has gone through the same things as them and achieved success, they gain a vision of what is possible and what they can be in the future.”

In my teacher’s footsteps

Team Elite member and fifth-grader Nigel Coates says that what he has learned as a part of the team this year definitely has him thinking about his future.

“They say middle school is a lot harder,” Coates says. “But I think I am ready because now I know how to get along with people that I may not really like, stay positive and focus on passing.”

He has goals for beyond middle school as well.

“I want to follow in my teacher’s footsteps,” he says. “I want to be fun and also teach students things that will help them be better people.”





PLAYING FOR KEEPS

Powell Center for Play and Ingenuity uses games and other hands-on activities to teach real-world skills

If play is the language of children, then Silas Groff is fluent. “In math class we get to play games and sometimes even go outside,” says the kindergartner at the Powell Center for Play and Ingenuity Magnet Elementary School. “My elective is architecture and sometimes we can build whatever we want. We even used marshmallows and toothpicks.”

Silas’ mom, Leah, says, “I think that playing in different subjects will allow the tougher ones to not be burdensome and allow for the love of his strong suits to flourish. And having a school that recognizes that kids learn best when playing has made the transition to school smooth, and the learning process fun.”

Powell began incorporating the Play and Ingenuity magnet theme this year, training its teachers over the summer to effectively use games and other hands-on activities to help children learn. Play-based lessons are organized by domains, which teach a number of different subjects at once.

Silas loves the Nature Play Domain. As he moves through the year, he’ll have the chance to choose from others, such as Bodies in Motion and Design Your Own. As he advances into upper grades, Silas will experience many others, such as Media Reconstructions, Arts Innovations, and Elements of Design, all built to accommodate student voice and choice in learning.

“These Domains allow students to design, test, redesign, create, communicate, and collaborate,” says Justin Kram, play integration specialist at Powell.

It’s not just in the Domains where “the play’s the thing,” however. The theme of Play and Ingenuity is incorporated within the curriculum across all classrooms and grade levels. Specialists – art, orchestra, dance, music/chorus, PE, and technology – integrate these principles into their particular areas of focus as well.

“Our students have autonomy and choice here at Powell,” says Principal Curtis Brower. This happens within core areas as well as Domains. “Through their design challenges, students learn to reframe failure as a learning opportunity,” Brower says. “Our students actively show their mastery of



skills when they participate in these challenges. Learning feels like play.”

Theme, as well as community feel, reputation, legacy, and a welcoming environment were important considerations when the Groff family was looking for the perfect school for Silas. Powell fit the bill.

Todd Groff, Silas’ dad, recommends Powell for all these reasons, and more.

“The theme of Play and Ingenuity appeals to a way of learning that is natural for children.” Todd says that his son Silas benefits from this theme because, “it provides outlets for his energy and natural curiosity through active learning.”

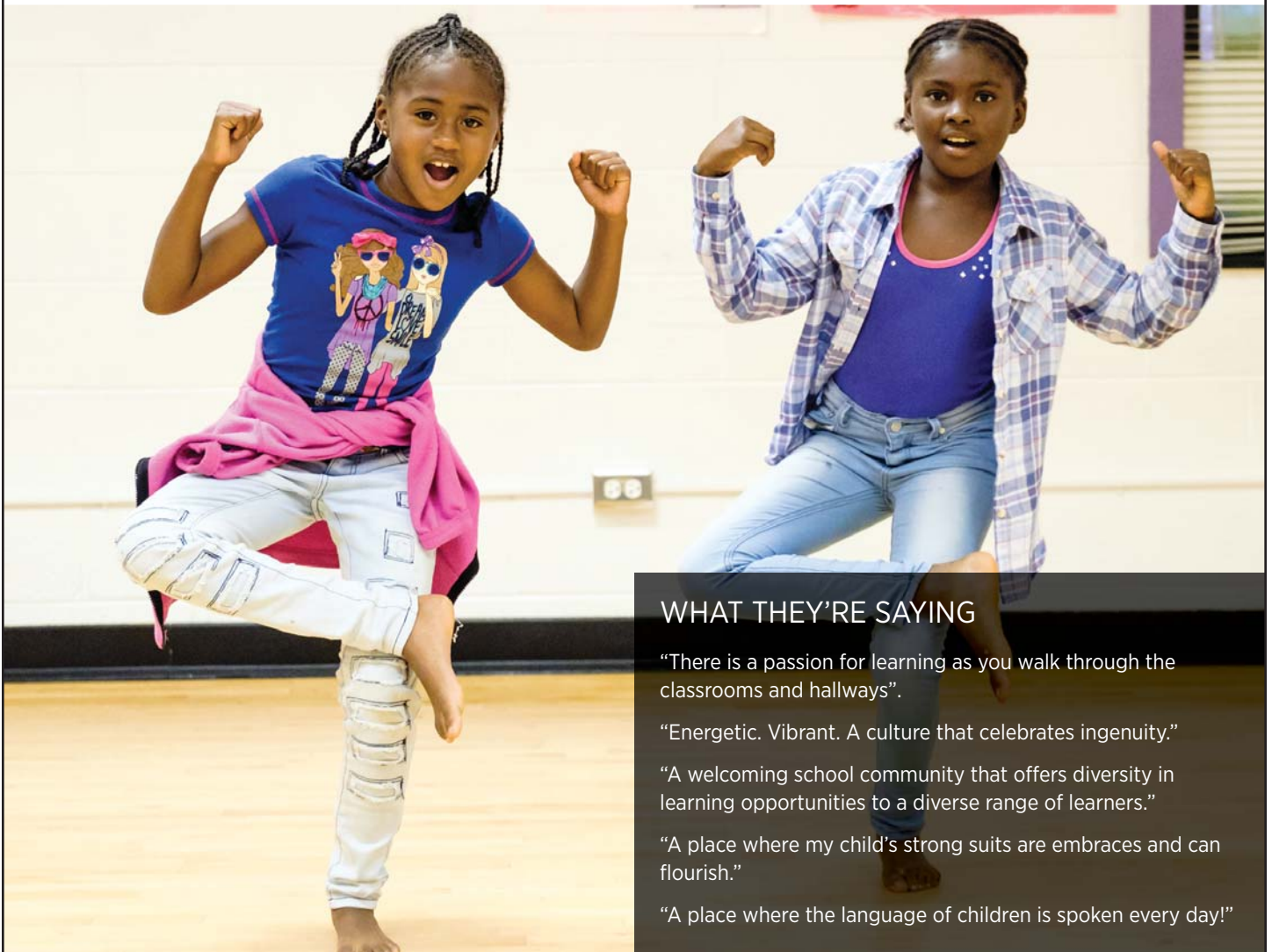
Kram works with teachers to tap into that natural curiosity. Teachers provide critical thinking opportunities by building design challenges, reframing their classroom activities to create deeper, richer play and game-like learning experiences. “Children are naturally creative and innovative; they learn about their world through exploration, problem solving, and play,” Kram says. “In allowing children to dynamically engage with the curriculum, we are promoting a balance that will help them find success in a world that requires nimble thinking.”

Developmentally appropriate challenges are critical in moving students to higher levels of success. “Our students are learning skills that are necessary in our ever-changing world. Students grow in their abilities to be clever, inventive, resourceful risk takers within this theme,” Brower says. “They are becoming proficient in social-emotional skills by collaborating with their peers through play and game-like learning.”

Opportunities to learn through play becomes more sophisticated as students move through the grade levels. The early years have more of a focus on the types of experiences in which the student engages as they enter a play situation or game: anticipation, surprise, pleasure, understanding, strength, and poise.

As students progress, they learn the importance of trial and error and the rewards of tenacity. Students learn to treat failure as a learning experience. They’ll be challenged at every turn – and have a blast.

“Students in our school are faced with design challenges that create opportunities for a deeper understanding for the skills being taught,” Brower says. “They explore the curricula in ways that are creative and fun.”



WHAT THEY'RE SAYING

“There is a passion for learning as you walk through the classrooms and hallways”.

“Energetic. Vibrant. A culture that celebrates ingenuity.”

“A welcoming school community that offers diversity in learning opportunities to a diverse range of learners.”

“A place where my child’s strong suits are embraced and can flourish.”

“A place where the language of children is spoken every day!”

IF YOU BUILD IT...



The Engineering theme at **Brentwood Magnet Elementary School** is perfect for hands-on learners

Stephanie Harwell is a maker.

“She loves to build things, especially with Legos, and as soon as something is done she starts asking herself how could it be improved,” her parents, Roy and Jennifer Harwell, say of the fourth grade student at Brentwood Magnet Elementary School. “This leads to re-builds and amazing structures. Stephanie also likes to take apart things to see how they work, and also to figure out how to fix something if it is broken. You can see that she is putting the engineering approach to work for her.”

That’s why Brentwood and its engineering magnet theme has been a perfect fit for Stephanie and hundreds of students like her. Walt is the older brother Brentwood teachers use hands-on projects to help lessons come to life and encourage students to work together to solve problems.

READY FOR THE REAL WORLD

Stephanie gave the example of working with her peers to build a knee brace. Her teacher set up the project with a backstory about how a boy fell and hurt his knee, and his friends had to use available items such as cloth to construct a brace for him.





“I think it helps us get our minds get into more of a real situation,” Stephanie says.

Indeed, that’s the overarching goal at Brentwood, to help students see how their learning applies to the real world. Teachers integrate science, technology, engineering and/or math (STEM) in their lessons. Just one example: Students were challenged to design a skyscraper for downtown Raleigh. They used math to design the specs of the building, and social studies to consider the benefits of the building to the community.

“Brentwood’s magnet theme emphasizes ‘instruction by design,’ meaning that students learn by engaging in creative and complex work in which they inquire, design, and build from the ground up,” says Principal Rob Epler.

“Students explore their own approaches to solving problems. By developing rich skills in collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity, Brentwood students prepare for future challenges and college and career readiness.”

‘TEACHERS WHO REALLY CARE’

As much as Stephanie’s parents love the hands-on curriculum at Brentwood, they’re just as pleased with its supportive, close-knit environment.

“It is a smaller school with great teachers who really care,” the Harwells say. “The teachers and staff get to know the kids and look out for them. Brentwood has given Stephanie and her older brother Walt a great foundation as they go on to middle school and beyond.”



PARENT TIP

If your child is a hands-on learner, you may also want to explore the new Entrepreneurial Design theme at Conn Magnet Elementary School. Entrepreneurial Design encourages students to exhibit innovation, curiosity, and perseverance as they connect what they learn to the world around them. Conn extends their learning beyond the classroom in partnership with businesses, organizations, and the start-up community. Every CONNtrapreneur has ready access to learn with a computer or tablet (even 3D printing), project-based learning sharpens science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) skills, and Focus Areas emphasize their creativity and collaboration.