


# Principal Leadership



**Nathan McCann**

**2010 NASSP/Virco National  
Assistant Principal of  
the Year**

## **On Your Best Behavior**

**Mechanisms to Manage  
Classrooms**

**Student Engagement Equals  
Improved Climate**

**Schoolwide Positive Behavior  
Supports**







# Always What's Best for Students

**Nathan McCann**, the 2010 NASSP/Virco National Assistant Principal of the Year, points to connections with students as a way of fostering their success and building a positive public reputation.

**P***Principal Leadership:*  
In 2008 Flowing Wells High School committed to the 100 Percent Initiative, meaning that all students will engage in some postsecondary education or training. Why is this initiative important?

**Nathan McCann:** The 100 Percent Initiative is important because a high school diploma is not sufficient and hasn't been for quite some time. Truthfully, Flowing Wells was late getting into the game from this perspective. The school delivers outstanding customer service, and for years we did a fantastic job of giving students what they wanted. But with the 100 Percent Initiative, school leaders made a conscious decision to change that mind-set. Today we focus on giving our kids what they need, rather than what they want. Don't get me wrong, the customer service is still there, but we look at all we do through the lens of, How will this help to prepare students for postsecondary success?

**PL:** What role have you played as an assistant principal?

**McCann:** My role has been multifaceted. Any high school that is truly committed to preparing students for postsecondary success must have a high-functioning counseling department. Flowing Wells has made considerable strides in this area. I directly supervise the counseling department, and we transformed our model from one that was largely based on working with students who self-selected to use our counseling services to one that proactively seeks out every student on campus.

One strategy we use is the "Fast Five," which requires counselors to go out on campus and meet with students outside the classroom for five minutes. The discussion is guided by a worksheet we created, and counselors talk with their students about current academic performance, future course planning, and postsecondary interests. This strategy has been beneficial for several reasons. First, it minimizes the





▲ *Spending time in the cafeteria provides opportunities to connect with students in a friendly way.*

amount of time students are out of class. In addition, it has really helped our counselors keep the conversations focused on academics and dramatically increased the number of students they are able to meet with. Finally, a pleasant unintended consequence has been the increased visibility of our counselors. The Fast Fives require them to spend a considerable amount of time out of their offices, working one-on-one with students. Faculty and staff members have noticed this activity, and it has enhanced their perception of counseling services and helped maintain daily awareness of the 100 Percent Initiative.

Another change is that data is used to a much greater extent. Previously, we kept an aggregate record of the approximate number of students who saw counselors monthly. Currently, we disaggregate counselor activity by multiple factors, including grade, gender, label, purpose of meeting, and the like. I can now say with certainty that counselors made 5,832 individual contacts with students during the first semester. More importantly, we know that we are achieving equity with our student visits. For example, 11.8% of our students receive special education services and 11.4%

of all visits were with special education students. We use this data to ensure maximum activity and improve our decision making.

**PL:** How does this initiative filter into the entire culture of the school?

**McCann:** Like many schools today, we focus on rigor, relevance, and relationships. What I think makes Flowing Wells unique is the unrelenting focus on establishing relationships. Building Connections has been the theme of our school for the past five years and everyone on the campus is aware of this, including the students. So the answer to this question is simple: it is about having the same expectations for our students as we do our own children. If taking a course load that prepares him for entry to the state's four-year universities is a nonnegotiable for my son, then I need to hold my students to those same standards. That is the unique factor at Flowing Wells.

**PL:** What do you do if teachers don't really believe that all students can be successful?

**McCann:** Cynics might roll their eyes, but I really don't believe we have any teachers at Flowing



Wells who doubt that all students can be successful in their postsecondary pursuits. Part of this is because we defined postsecondary educational experiences broadly—and I believe fairly—to include trade schools, the military, and apprenticeships that lead to certification, in addition to traditional schooling at colleges and universities.

The adults who work on this campus are committed to doing what is best for kids. The district has very high expectations for instruction and an extensive in-house professional development program that supports instruction. Administrators frequently visit classrooms, and teachers talk regularly about the art and science of instruction. We work very hard to assist and support teachers who are struggling. However, in the end, if the fit is not right, we deal with the situation directly.

**PL: How do you contribute to students' and teachers' successes through curriculum and instruction?**

**McCann:** This is an area in which I take great pride. For starters, I work hard each year to create a master schedule that gives students maximum flexibility to choose the courses they want to take. We have a disproportionately high number of singletons for a school our size and a fair number of constraints as well. So building the schedule takes a lot of patience, but the impact that a well-prepared master schedule has is undervalued until and unless teachers and students are left working with one that is poorly conceived and constructed.

I also spend a lot of time visiting classrooms and talking with teachers about teaching and learning. This is the core business of schools, but too often administrators spend a disproportionate amount of time focused on peripheral operational issues, such as facility and maintenance concerns. Over the years, I have greatly expanded my knowledge of the curriculum. It was through regular visits to classrooms that I noticed that our special education students might benefit from supplemental curriculum. This led to discussions with teachers about the possibility of incorporating Study Island and eventually the introduction of the program.

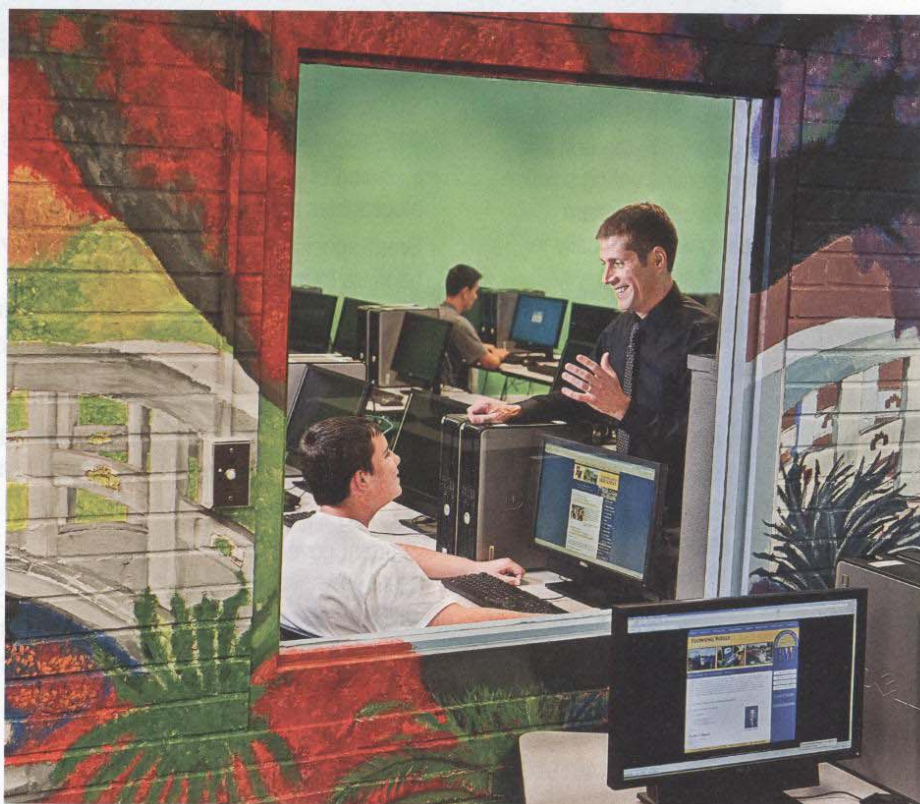
During the past year, I also worked closely with our incoming math department chair to develop a program where every freshman at Flowing Wells High School will now be enrolled in first-year algebra as a minimum. That process began early last fall when I researched the academic

record of every student who had enrolled in our remedial math class four years earlier. The data were startling. Only a handful of the 178 students who had enrolled in the remedial course—what we call Algebra A-B—were still enrolled at Flowing Wells and on track to graduate.

Armed with that data, I began talking with math teachers about enrolling every freshman who had not already taken algebra in grade 7 or 8 in algebra and developing a math support class to assist those learners who had additional needs. We got very creative with the master schedule and developed a concept where students who would normally have been placed in Algebra A-B will now enroll in Algebra 1-2. Their first-period class will be an algebra support class with the same teacher. The teachers have worked to develop a curriculum that includes math remediation, access to Study Island to help prepare for the state test, and ample opportunity for one-on-one instruction. I am excited to see the results.

**PL: One goal of NASSP is to develop and support assistant principals' capacity to be strong school leaders and help them prepare to move into the principalship. What do you believe are some of the best practices to ensure that**

▼ *One-to-one communication is a hallmark of Flowing Wells philosophy.*





assistant principals are well-rounded school leaders?

**McCann:** Too many assistant principals find themselves relegated to the tasks of discipline, plant maintenance, and the like with little regard for their professional development and growth. Every assistant principal needs to play some role in the core business of the school—and that is teaching and learning. At the secondary level, where there are often multiple assistant principals, I would recommend that the principal rotate some duties yearly so that assistants can enjoy a diverse set of experiences.

I would also strongly encourage assistant principals to look for ways to continually reinvent the jobs they currently have. That requires a willingness to take risks and look critically at the school's performance to determine areas for improvement. I can think of few better experiences to prepare for a principalship or central office position than championing a new program from conception through implementation. It requires working with multiple stakeholders, developing consensus, securing funding, and finding a way to fit the new program into the context of the whole school.

**PL:** What is the most important practice at Flowing Wells to share with other educators?

**McCann:** I think it's making decisions that are based on what is best for kids. Every school considers the needs of adults to at least some degree, but more so than any school I've been associated with, Flowing Wells puts the needs of students first. It is at the core of our culture. For example, we have state-recognized teachers teaching freshmen level courses; placing your most skilled instructors with freshmen is the best freshman transition program I can think of. The department chairs also lead by example by taking on additional preps, and the norm is for teachers to arrive early or stay late to provide tutoring opportunities for students before and after school. I think that is what has given the school such a positive reputation and why students and staff members are so fiercely loyal to the school. **PL**

*Jan Umphrey is the editor of Principal Leadership magazine.*

*Nathan McCann, the former assistant principal at Flowing Wells High School in Tucson, AZ, is the 2010 NASSP/Virco National Assistant Principal of the Year. He recently became the superintendent of the Altar Valley School District in Tucson, AZ.*

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