

Principal's influence extends far beyond school walls

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North Shore K-8 School has a new, state-of-the-art facility; a Micro Society Magnet allowing students to run their own "town" with a mayor, city council, judges and businesspeople - and teachers who take pride in their students' achievements.

And perhaps the biggest cheerleader for the school and students is the principal, Deirdra McDowell-Sutton.

Four years ago, I met McDowell-Sutton, then vice principal at Ribault High School. She spent only a year at the school, but I learned a lot about her. She has a strong passion for education. She also makes decisions in the best interest of the students she serves. I became fond of her because she ensures students are treated with both dignity and respect.

McDowell-Sutton is proof that education and work pay off. She understood this from the time she was a teacher in Tampa to her teaching days in Duval County and even to her time spent as cadre coaching first-year teachers and as district standards coach training principals and teachers.

She became opening vice principal at Kernan Middle School and then director of elementary programs. She has developed an extreme wealth of knowledge and educational practices helping her affect the lives of numerous students.

As she walks the hallways of North Shore, many of the teachers and students will stop to greet her with a warm smile and sometimes a hug. She gives a thumbs-up to teachers as she peeks her head into the doors of classrooms for brief observations.

Not only is McDowell-Sutton a principal, she is a mentor. She opened North Shore's doors to more than a dozen Teach For America teachers and a few beginning teachers. She works with them by training them to become world-class instructional leaders.

McDowell-Sutton is an inspiration. She motivates students to never give up and to try harder the next time. I witnessed her talk to a student who was very upset about a conflict, and at the end of the conversation, he was smiling and eager to get back to learning in his classroom.

I cannot say enough about McDowell-Sutton and her influential contributions to not only the field of education, but to the teachers, principals, students, parents and community members she has served throughout her career. In 2006, the University of North Florida named her an outstanding alumna, indicative of the excellence she exemplifies throughout our community.

As her former student, I know she made an extreme impact on my peers and me. It inspired some to achieve great things. It even inspired some to watch and model her.

When asked about the greatest part of her job, she told me: "I get to work with children every day ... and I go home at the end of the day knowing that my job has meaning." That alone proves her impact will live in the hearts of many students for years to come.

As Ruth Stafford Peale, the famous American writer, editor and speaker said, "Find a need and fill it." McDowell-Sutton has indeed found an essential need of our society: quality educations. By

her dedication to public education through dynamic practices, more and more students are receiving the educations they deserve, thus fulfilling that need.

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