THE TERREL H. BELL AWARD FOR OUTSTANDING SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

The Terrel H. Bell Award recognizes outstanding school leaders and the vital role they play in guiding students and schools to excellence, frequently under challenging circumstances. Principals nominated for this award are school leaders committed to fostering successful teaching and learning at their schools and who do “whatever it takes” to help their students meet high standards. They are committed to education as a powerful and liberating force in people’s lives.

As a teacher, a principal, a superintendent, a state commissioner of education, the Commissioner of the Office of Education under Presidents Nixon and Ford, and ultimately the Secretary of Education under President Reagan, Bell exemplified educational leadership. While he is perhaps best known for commissioning the landmark education study, *A Nation at Risk*, Bell founded the National Blue Ribbon Schools Program to recognize great American schools and school leaders.

Principals chosen as Terrel H. Bell Award recipients have transformed their schools. Their vision and collaborative leadership styles have produced outstanding results for all their students regardless of race, language proficiency, or socioeconomic status. These principals have shown that with effective leadership and teaching and firm conviction, all students can learn.

Principals are nominated by their school communities during the final stages of the National Blue Ribbon Schools application process. The U.S. Department of Education, together with the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the Association for Middle Level Education, and the National Association of Secondary School Principals, bestow the Bell Award on a handful of principals each year.

Secretary Terrel H. Bell held education as his highest priority, trusting that all students would find it, as he had, their personal key to success. The Bell Award honors Secretary Bell’s memory and celebrates school leaders across the country who are realizing his vision of excellent education for every student.

In Recognition of Exemplary Leadership for the Success of All Students:

Hattie Alexander, Principal
W. H. Council Traditional School
Mobile County Public Schools
Mobile, Alabama

Jennifer Nauman, Principal
Richard A. Shields Elementary School
Cape Henlopen School District
Lewes, Delaware

Jared Jenks, Principal
Sugar-Salem High School
Sugar-Salem Joint District #322
Sugar City, Idaho

Kevin Suther, Principal
Chapman High School
Unified School District 473
Chapman, Kansas

Sheila Harrity, Principal
Worcester Technical High School
Worcester Public Schools
Worcester, Massachusetts

Kathleen Decker, Principal
Walter Bracken STEAM Academy
Clark County School District
Las Vegas, Nevada

Vicki Harmdierks, Principal
Gertie Belle Rogers Elementary School
Mitchell School District
Mitchell, South Dakota
Located in a low-income neighborhood of Las Vegas, Walter Bracken Elementary School was once the scene of frequent police activity and occasional lockdowns. Graffiti marred the walls and community members felt disconnected from the school, one of the lowest-performing in the district. Kathleen Decker arrived 12 years ago and nothing has been the same since.

Decker led the school in its new incarnation as a science, math, and technology magnet school for students from the neighborhood and around the district, who attend Bracken through a random lottery. Within two years Bracken exited improvement status and has consistently earned the district’s highest ranking since. Last year, as engineering and performing and visual arts were integrated into the curriculum, Bracken has become the Walter Bracken STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics) Academy.

From the beginning Decker reached out to the local community, engaging parents and students in painting murals on walls outside the school and enlivening interior hallways with artwork related to careers. Parents came to value the school as a pathway to success for their children and commitment to the school deepened. A host of theme-based activities, such as Mighty Math, Ecological Engineering, Multicultural Field Day, Music Week, Art Week, and Science and Math literacy nights involve the entire staff and community in hands-on learning while teaching students critical skills. Outdoor murals, gardens, and animal habitats and a Lego room and earth science, physical science, and life science labs indoors make the STEAM theme clear.

Teachers rotate through school leadership opportunities to build capacity and ensure full participation. Staff retention levels are high. In 2007, with union, parent, and unanimous staff support, Bracken STEAM received Empowerment School status, earning greater autonomy and full budgetary control, with increased accountability for results. Staff revised the school’s mission, schedule, and curriculum.

Bracken’s embrace of technology is so complete, it is a paperless school. Homework is assigned through online educational computer programs. A computer lab open before, during, and after school allows students without technology at home to complete their assignments. Last year, the Academy implemented one-to-one tablet technology, which has engaged students in online research, math practice, and publishing their own books, which are eagerly shared with classmates. When staff upgraded the school website with more content, such as online homework and upcoming projects, they offered evening training sessions to help parents understand how to use the site. Decker also works individually with parents to set up homework routines.

Bracken has hosted teachers from Columbia, Costa Rica, Japan, and other U.S. states. Bracken staff have also mentored two Empowerment schools in the district.

Kathleen Decker was named the 2013 National Principal of the Year by Magnet Schools of America, the national association for magnet and theme-based schools.