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## USA's top principal could teach CEOs a thing or two

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Enlarge By Stephen Morton for USA TODAY

"Power does not emanate from position," says top principal Molly Howard. "It emanates from relationships that we develop with our stakeholders."

There are few leadership positions more challenging than high school principal, especially if the school has a history of underperformance. **Molly Howard** is the 2008 Principal of the Year selected by the National Association of Secondary School Principals and MetLife. Her Jefferson County High in small-town Louisville, Ga., has increased graduation rates, raised test scores and believed enough in students — 80% of whom live in poverty — to eliminate remedial courses. Howard, 52, spoke to USA TODAY corporate management reporter **Del Jones**. Following are excerpts, edited for clarity and space.

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**Q: There are 48,000 secondary school principals. What distinguishes you?**

A: All finalists had similar strengths: passion and commitment to higher expectations for all. Every child who walks through that door is of value. Their social-economic background and previous educational success, or lack of, does not determine their performance at this high school.

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**Q: Passion and high expectations. Is that the sweet spot of leadership in general?**

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A: Yes. Passion and a can-do attitude. You can't lead if you can't see where you're going.

**Q: If a Fortune 500 CEO were lucky enough to have lunch with you, what leadership lesson could you teach?**

A: Power does not emanate from position. It emanates from relationships that we develop with our stakeholders.

**Q: What would you want to learn at that lunch?**

A: I'd like to know what strategies they use to persuade and get commitment from people.

**Q: I thought you might ask them how come they make so much more money?**

A: (Laughs.) I knew what the salary range was when I started. There are a lot of perks to being an education leader. Taxpayers don't pay the CEO's salary. I want that money to go to funding schools.

**Q: Many successful CEOs have suggested that schools adopt competitive practices such as school vouchers.**

A: I can appreciate the business community wanting to strengthen schools, and they have a right to ask for accountability. But in competition there is a winner and a loser. If parents send their students to a higher-achieving school, what about the children left behind with the stigma of being the loser? It's too simplistic of a solution.

**Q: Losers must improve or go out of business. What's wrong with that model?**

A: Companies can pick and choose the raw materials. Public education accepts all. We are a zero-reject business. That's a big, big difference.

**Q: So business leaders should shut up about schools?**

A: I hate to tell the business world to shut up. It's a symbiotic relationship for sure. No one wins if we teach about

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computer software that's already becoming obsolete. We've got to stay in touch, but it's more complex than some business leaders and policymakers understand.

**Q: You must spend most of your time dealing with unhappy people: parents, teachers, problem students. That's something business leaders can relate to. At the end of the day, what gives you satisfaction?**

A: Parents have entrusted us with the thing they hold in highest regard, their children, and so I do hear complaints. Once they learn to trust me, I don't have angry complaints, I have questions. My reward is in finding win-win solutions. I believe in (Stephen) Covey's "Seek First to Understand, Then to be Understood" (Habit 5 of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*). When someone complains, leaders don't have to agree, but they must understand.

**Q: As more jobs are created in the service sector, the boss can't be looking over every shoulder. How do you get the most out of your teachers when you almost never see them in the classroom?**

A: Teachers don't get to decide to spend the entire semester on World War II because they like it. There are standards and checkpoints and accountability. I look at the data to make sure it's happening. You have to inspect what you expect. But Big Brother is not watching, so the main way to ensure teacher performance is to get buy-in.

**Q: How do you accomplish buy-in?**

A: Teachers have to see themselves as empowered leaders. A leader is not just a position of title like principal, assistant principal or department chair. There are teacher-leaders. It's all (William Edwards) Deming's stuff.

**Q: You're a Deming disciple?**

A: I'm somewhat knowledgeable about TQM (total quality management), and there are certain aspects that are very applicable to education. Having buy-in is a lot more powerful than any directive I could send down.

**Q: Getting back to your high expectations of students and teachers. How do you pull it off without being overly demanding?**

A: You have to model it. I'm visible at extracurricular things, and I put in 75 to 90 hours a week. Second, we must understand what we have control over. We don't have control over the homes the children come from in the morning. But we do have control over our beliefs. We believe that all children can learn to high levels, and we look at practices we employ that are contradictory to that. Sometimes it's not a matter of what you implement, but what you stop doing. We eliminated dual-track, where children could take a watered-down curriculum. When a child turns in an assignment that doesn't meet or exceed the standard, the teacher says, "Do this again. This is not acceptable work." We don't give zeros. The power of zero is astronomical. It destroys motivation. Just don't accept less than people are capable of doing.

**Q: Do high expectations apply to your teachers?**

A: Absolutely. There is no room for a marginal teacher. If a teacher doesn't work at a high level, intervention and support increase and intensify. We all hear in the media that we must raise the bar. Well, if you just raise the bar it doesn't mean people are going to jump higher. You must build steps and structures and a scaffold. Then teachers and students can reach the highest mark.

**Q: Is it impossible to fire a bad teacher?**

A: We're not unionized and don't have tenure. But it's very time consuming and you must document, not only ineptness, but what was done to try to develop and support the teacher.

**Q: Do you wish you could award bigger pay raises to your best teachers?**

A: Not just merit pay, but it would be nice to reward those who take on extra duties and responsibilities. I'd love that flexibility. There is a lot of power in recognizing the work they do and give them more responsibility, opportunities to create, take risks and be involved. I try to ask teachers in the hall about their families. Let them know that I care about them personally and professionally.

**Q: Business thrives on data, but they complain about information overload. With all the student testing, you must have a lot more data these days. Is it overwhelming?**

A: It can be. We can be data-rich and information-poor. The key is to ask the right question, and then turn to the data for an answer. If you look first at all the numbers and ask what they all mean you would get overwhelmed.

**Q: Over 30 years, you've seen many students grow up. What qualities separate students who go on to become leaders?**

A: They are usually future-oriented and goal-focused. They tend to be service-oriented and have a community mind. However, I've seen students start off slow. Sometimes it takes life experiences to mature. You can't pigeonhole kids. I've seen valedictorians who didn't graduate from college.

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kfaircloth wrote: 23h 31m ago

Molly Howard is a wonderful principal whose personal and professional passion, each day, is to "operationalize" success for EVERY student who walks through the doors of Jefferson County HS! I am proud of the way she is representing our state as the NASSP/Met-Life HS Principal of the Year. There is not a more deserving soul in America!

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tsq77 wrote: 1d 4h ago

Vouchers for private school? Really! Private schools do get to select their clientele. They filter for mental retardation and social misfits. Public schools don't have that luxury; they take all comers. Voucher funding siphons funds from already financially strapped public schools. The falacy of voucher justification would seem a "no brainer". Try a charter school instead. Also from within the belly of the beast; "Just don't accept less than people are capable of doing." Tough words and even tougher work, but this concept is the Holy Grail of achieving the highest possible performance from students. I'd sign up to work in Ms. Howard's school in a heartbeat.

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EddieJ wrote: 1d 5h ago

Q: Many successful CEOs have suggested that schools adopt competitive practices such as school vouchers.

Good article! I liked many of her responses. The answer to the above question should of been that CEOs don't care about schools and education. They just want another "business opportunity". But she has to be politically correct, I don't.

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MagEakaWebutante wrote: 1d 6h ago

Vouchers will help kids who would not be able to afford a private option to get out. Maybe competition will give public schools and incentive to be better without the intense focus on testing

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