





Oscar F. Smith Middle School

One Extra Degree

When Principal Linda Scott exclaims, “Oscar F. Smith Middle School is *hot!*” to visitors, she is not referring to the inside temperature of the bustling school of grades 6–8 located in the historic South Norfolk borough of Chesapeake, VA. She is referring to the school’s belief system, adopted from Sam Parker’s motivational program and book, *212°: The Extra Degree*—212° refers to when water goes from hot at 211° to boiling at 212° to make steam, which can power a locomotive. The message is everywhere: in the foyer, the hallways, and the classrooms; on pens and pencils, notebooks, wristbands; and on the lips of staff members, who are always encouraging students to make that extra degree of effort to go from “good to great.”

The Smith neighborhood is home to a diverse community where numerous houses, many more than 100 years old, have been converted to multifamily dwellings. Several government-subsidized apartment complexes can also be found in this locale. Eighty-four percent of the students are on the free or reduced-price meals program, a figure that continues to rise because of the recent closure of a local factory where many of the students’ parents and grandparents were employed.

Smith is a challenging school. Seven years ago, a positive climate and culture—as well as an acceptable level of academic performance—were sorely lacking. As the lowest-functioning school in the district, Smith suffered from a dreadful reputation; it was commonly accepted that “nobody wanted to go to Smith.” With the appointment of Scott, an experienced Chesapeake Public Schools principal, the seed for a school turnaround was planted. Armed with the determination that although the staff and students might be required to work in an deteriorating facility, “it will be clean and it will be safe,” Scott first went to work on sprucing up the building, moved on to addressing the highly disruptive student behavior issues, and then targeted the goal of improving student achievement.

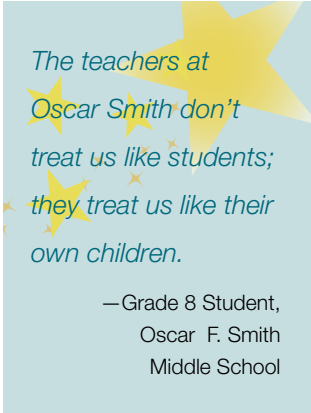
The result? Smith has received state accreditation for five of the last six years and has improved Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) pass rates by 24 percentage points

in mathematics. Now a data-driven school, staff members followed the progress of the 2008–09 grade 6 cohort through to grade 8, documenting the students’ steady growth in reading; the same group of students moved from a 76% to a 91% pass rate over three years. In addition, with new expectations for discipline and behavior in place, the current student body is in class on time, respectful of themselves and others, and energetically involved in their own learning.

Adding to excitement of such progress, in September 2009, the school community moved into a new state-of-the-art facility on the same property, making it one of the most technologically and environmentally advanced schools in the state. It is wired for the most up-to-date computers and other 21st century equipment, a feature wholeheartedly embraced by the entire school. The use of ambient lighting and a state-of-the-art rainwater catchment system, along with energy-efficient materials throughout, help make Smith one of the greenest schools in the region. As a final touch, in fall 2011 the school dedicated its impressive new athletic fields, which are on the site of the school’s former building.

Scott refers to the unique population at Smith as approximately 950 “at-promise” students. She passionately describes the challenges for the staff because of the large learning gaps created by poverty and the lack of parental involvement. Many of the students come to the school as below-level readers, who have limited access to technology outside of the school environment. Those issues are complicated by the fact that students often make inappropriate behavioral choices as a result of the negative influences in the community.

In Scott, the school division found the right leadership for Smith. Her vast experience in the field of education



The teachers at Oscar Smith don't treat us like students; they treat us like their own children.

—Grade 8 Student,
Oscar F. Smith
Middle School



Oscar F. Smith Middle School

CHESAPEAKE, VA

PRINCIPAL

Linda Scott

GRADES

6–8

ENROLLMENT

910

COMMUNITY

Suburban

DEMOGRAPHICS

Black/African American.....	66%
White.....	23%
Hispanic.....	5%
Asian/Pacific Islander.....	<1.0%
American Indian/ Native American.....	<1.0%
Other.....	5%
Free or reduced-price meals eligible.....	84%
Special education.....	25%
English language learners.....	2.5%

Note: Demographic data provided by school in spring 2011.

prepared her to work with the diverse population. Scott looks at it this way: “As a classroom teacher, I taught ‘at-promise’ students at both the elementary and secondary levels. My experiences as a psycho-educational diagnostician and a special education coordinator provided me with opportunities to identify strategies to help students succeed both educationally and emotionally. Additionally, my years as a principal at the elementary, middle, and high school levels provided numerous opportunities to collaborate with teachers and administrators to develop and implement strategies to address the needs of adolescent students.”

The principal’s past experiences also helped her guide the staff in crafting a new direction for Smith that is firmly grounded



Principal Linda Scott

in middle school best practices. The vision has been captured in language everyone can understand and implement:

The mission of Oscar Smith Middle School is to provide a quality education for all students by setting high academic standards and providing diverse instructional, social, physical and cultural opportunities with the support of students, families, staff and community in an inclusive, safe and caring environment.

The teachers, who are committed to this mission throughout the school day, also volunteer their time after school hours and on weekends to ensure the mission is implemented with fidelity.

Meeting Individual Needs

Serving the academic needs of such a diverse population, including a 25% special education enrollment, requires looking at all of the facets of middle school students in a new light. The teachers at Smith are strong believers in differentiation; they have been trained to disaggregate data, spot trends, and home in on specific skill deficits. Their ability to analyze data helps them identify students who need additional instruction and support, and they use that information to provide differentiated instruction in the classroom.

That effort also forms the foundation for the work of their Enhanced Student Assistant Team (ESAT), which guides a tiered instructional/intervention model used as their response to intervention process. They have developed a literacy model by which they examine the results of a multiple intelligences survey given to each student; study the results of the Scholastic Reading Inventory, which is used as a universal screening tool; and review individual SOL English assessment data. Stu-

dents who perform below the 50th percentile receive instruction and intensive skill work based on their specific needs. Such programs as System 44, READ 180, and SOAR are used to aid in this instruction. Students who score above the 50th percentile also receive differentiated instruction and enrichment opportunities on the basis of their individual data. Other supports include reading logs, book talks, word walls, and double-block English classes. Another plus, Smith is one of the few middle schools to offer Junior Great Books in the regular curriculum.

For differentiation in mathematics, a data review of the math SOL and the results of the Scholastic Math Inventory universal screen are used. Students then benefit accordingly from an algebra readiness program, equity tutoring, and SOL remediation. Additional strategies—such as warm-ups, word walls, vocabulary development, and tiered instruction—are used in math classes. Common assessments are employed, and an extra math teacher helps reduce class sizes.

Through the adoption of a user-friendly lesson plan template, teachers easily design lessons that address state standards, ensure best practices in instruction, assist in monitoring daily assessments, and use research-based teaching practices. The lesson plan template, designed by the ESAT, makes it easy for teachers to reflect on how to adapt and adjust instruction for students who may need more individualization.

Flexible scheduling is also used to support the individual needs of the students. The continuum for special education services accommodates the full range of students' needs, from those who need the most structured environment to those who need the fewest interventions. Creating such a schedule for one quarter of the school population requires collaboration and input from special education teachers, regular education teachers, and other members of the student's IEP team. Students may be self-contained for one subject even if the remainder of their schedules reflect cotaught or monitor-consult classes. Students also have the opportunity to take honors classes in subjects where they excel and the flexibility of taking general classes for other subjects.



Equity of student participation in challenging courses is a priority at Smith. Although it varies from grade to grade and course to course, on average, nearly 25% of the students are enrolled in an advanced course. As an example, 20% of the eighth grade is enrolled in a foreign language, a high school credit-bearing course. In addition, to promote confidence for underachieving students, eighth graders who are enrolled in the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program prepare for and take the PSAT, averaging scores between 1070 and 1080 over the past four years.

Professional development plays a key role in the achievement of students at Smith. Emphasis is placed on ensuring that teachers have the essential knowledge, tools, and training to be successful in the classroom and are given the extensive support necessary to help develop their proficiency in applying best practices beyond a superficial level. As a result, the strategies are applied in the classroom to assist individual students and groups on the basis of their specific needs, in support of the school's philosophy of differentiation of instruction in all classes. According to the leadership team, "Professional development plays a vital role at our school in our efforts to fulfill our motto of differentiated instruction and high expectations. It begins with a professional development plan that is responsive to teachers' needs and suggestions, research vetted, rigorous, progressive, and specific to the requirements and characteristics of our students and setting. Our professional development is focused on

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Mentoring and Community Connections

Mentoring programs are an important, coveted, and essential part of the daily life of an Oscar F. Smith Middle School student and include academic, athletic, and social-based options.

Athletics and academics. “The roar in the halls today will be the thunder in the world tomorrow,” is the motto of Tomorrow’s Thunder, a character development basketball program designed to encourage excellence in academics and citizenship. The program consists of coed team competitions held in the gym once a week before school. Teams score points for success on the playing field, but to compete for championship honors, team members must earn points in the classroom as well.

Teachers evaluate participants each week in the areas of attendance, promptness, behavior, homework, and class work. The ratings are converted to a numbered scoring system and added to the points earned from athletic competition. The program is structured so that the participants must practice teamwork, discipline, hard work, responsibility, and respect for others to succeed. This popular program, created by Todd Nelson in 1989, has had a significant impact on the social, behavioral, and academic success of its participants.

Mentoring. “I pledge to live my life with purpose. I pledge to set goals that will move me one degree higher” is a statement that resonates with students at Smith. Each grade level boasts a separate mentoring program for young women. Girl Power, designed in partnership with the Chesapeake Community Services Board for girls in grade 6, stresses developing positive interpersonal relationships, learning to recognize and avoid harmful and risky behaviors, and acquiring habits that promote school success.

In grade 7, the Pink Ladies program works on instilling such characteristics as dignity and pride through fun activities that help the girls develop positive self-images. The DIVAS (determined, involved, volunteering, aspiring students), a program for girls in grade 8, aims to enrich the girls’ lives through mentoring, involvement, and community service. The Gents is a club for young men from all three grades with similar mentoring and character-building components.

Empowerment. The Chesapeake Commonwealth Attorney’s Office chose Smith to host the Girls & Young Women’s Empowerment Conference for several years. The conference promotes self-empowerment and determination in young women and features motivational speakers and classes for parents and their daughters. **[AU: the October 2011 conference was held at a church and the theme was “Be Positive Assertive and Confident,” according to the city of Chesapeake website and an online video. Do you know which years the conference was held at the school and which year the theme was Pathway to a Positive Future? Is it for 2012?]**

In response to a flood of community requests after the success of the girls’ conferences, a Boys Leadership Conference, “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize,” was held in 2011 with an emphasis on promoting positive behavior and choices in adolescent boys. Funding for the conferences is provided by Project Safe Neighborhood and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention grant programs, both federal initiatives.

training in programs and strategies that directly affect student learning and produce both immediate and long-term results in student achievement. Training occurs in three specific areas: instructional strategies, featured programs, and identification and documentation of individual student needs.”

One exciting outcome of Smith’s professional development program is that much of the teachers’ learning is immediately shared and adopted by their students. For example, after the teachers become proficient with a specific type of technology, they teach it to the students, who then incorporate it into projects, performances, and authentic tasks. The reciprocal learning continues as the students demonstrate techniques and methods to maximize the use of technology in innovative ways. In another example, AVID teachers are trained to ask students analytical and evaluative questions. After practicing how to develop these questions, the students construct questions for themselves and their tutorial groups.

Several years ago, Smith implemented student-led conferencing as a way to engage as many of the stakeholders as possible in monitoring students’ progress. Those portfolio conferences offer students, parents, and teachers the opportunity to have a sustained and focused conversation about learning. At the conference, students demonstrate their knowledge about their accomplishments and have the opportunity to set goals to address the areas that challenge them. The portfolio itself becomes a valued collection of work samples that shows growth and expertise in a variety of areas, connecting content, concepts, and skills from the disciplines in an integrated manner.

The staff believes that “by granting students an active and meaningful role in assessing and interpreting their own learning, we provide an authentic context for self-evaluation, a context that fosters accountability and the honest appraisal of both success and challenges. Student-led conferences enhance student learning and differ from the traditional parent-teacher conference by promoting real-world skills of responsibility, reflection,

self-assessment, and goal setting.” At Smith, students facilitate conferences by presenting their portfolios of work and discussing their classroom behavior. At the conference, feedback is presented from all the student’s classes, including PE and electives. The inclusion of the teachers is an important feature often missing in many conferences.

According to the Smith staff, the benefits of the program are tangible and measurable: “First, there is increased input from noncore teachers in the student’s success. Second, we have seen improved student ownership of their academic performance and behavior. Finally, student-led conferences encourage students and parents to communicate by providing the structure to do so.” The team appreciates the rise in parental interest and involvement in the student’s academic growth. Most importantly, they note that the student is the “cornerstone of the process.” As a result, the students have a greater commitment to academics and the classroom experience.

Academic and career planning is an important part of students’ growth at Smith. Beginning in seventh grade, this process is introduced by the grade-level guidance counselor. At that time, students are encouraged to articulate their career goals and exposed to specific information that can help them expand their interests. The postsecondary education or training required for their career choices is spelled out, and students are given suggestions regarding which courses they should enroll in for the next two years. Counselors also work with all AVID students who may be faltering, helping them develop a course of action to get back on track and continue in the program. AVID students are encouraged to be part of a “lunch bunch” that keeps them connected to their counselors and on a positive academic and social track. AVID students research colleges and produce high-interest “edu-mercials” that are shown over the school’s closed circuit television system once a month during morning announcements. Those short videos highlight the importance of postsecondary education and training options for the entire student body.



Earning Knowledge Capital

Smith is an educational community built on a strong middle level foundation of collaborative leadership; personalization; and an effective curriculum, instruction, and assessment plan. Well schooled in NASSP’s *Breaking Ranks* Framework, Scott is dedicated to ensuring that despite the many challenges the school and community face, the faculty and staff members will continue to work together to guarantee that each student receives an individualized education to meet his or her unique educational, social, and emotional needs. Scott believes that “through the large wealth of ‘knowledge capital’ our students earn while here, we are confident that we are moving in the right direction to break down the barriers that prohibit our students from excelling in advanced courses and obtaining the necessary skills to succeed in postsecondary education and training.” As seen in their actions and interactions, it is evident that the rest of the staff and community believe it as well, working together each day to provide one extra degree of collective effort that can make the difference between success and failure for each student. **PL**