



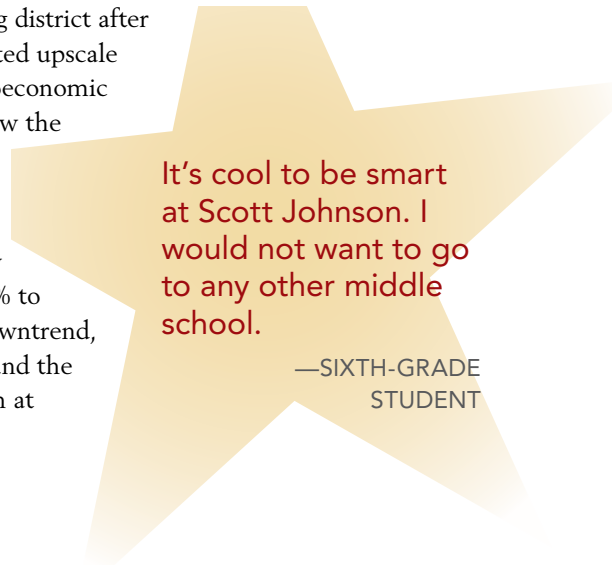
SCOTT MORGAN JOHNSON MIDDLE SCHOOL

Personalization Leads to Unlimited Success

The well-known lyrics may be “The eyes of Texas are upon you,” but at Scott Morgan Johnson Middle School in McKinney, TX, it’s definitely the “eye of the tiger” that sets the bar for Tiger PRIDE (perseverance, respect, integrity, determination, and excellence). Those ideals have been infused throughout all aspects of the school and breathe life into their mission to “empower all students to problem solve, embrace their uniqueness, and become life-long learners.” At Scott Johnson, the students, the teachers, the staff, and the parents work together to positively affect the successes and educational experiences of individual students, with each teacher taking personal ownership in the failures or successes of each student.

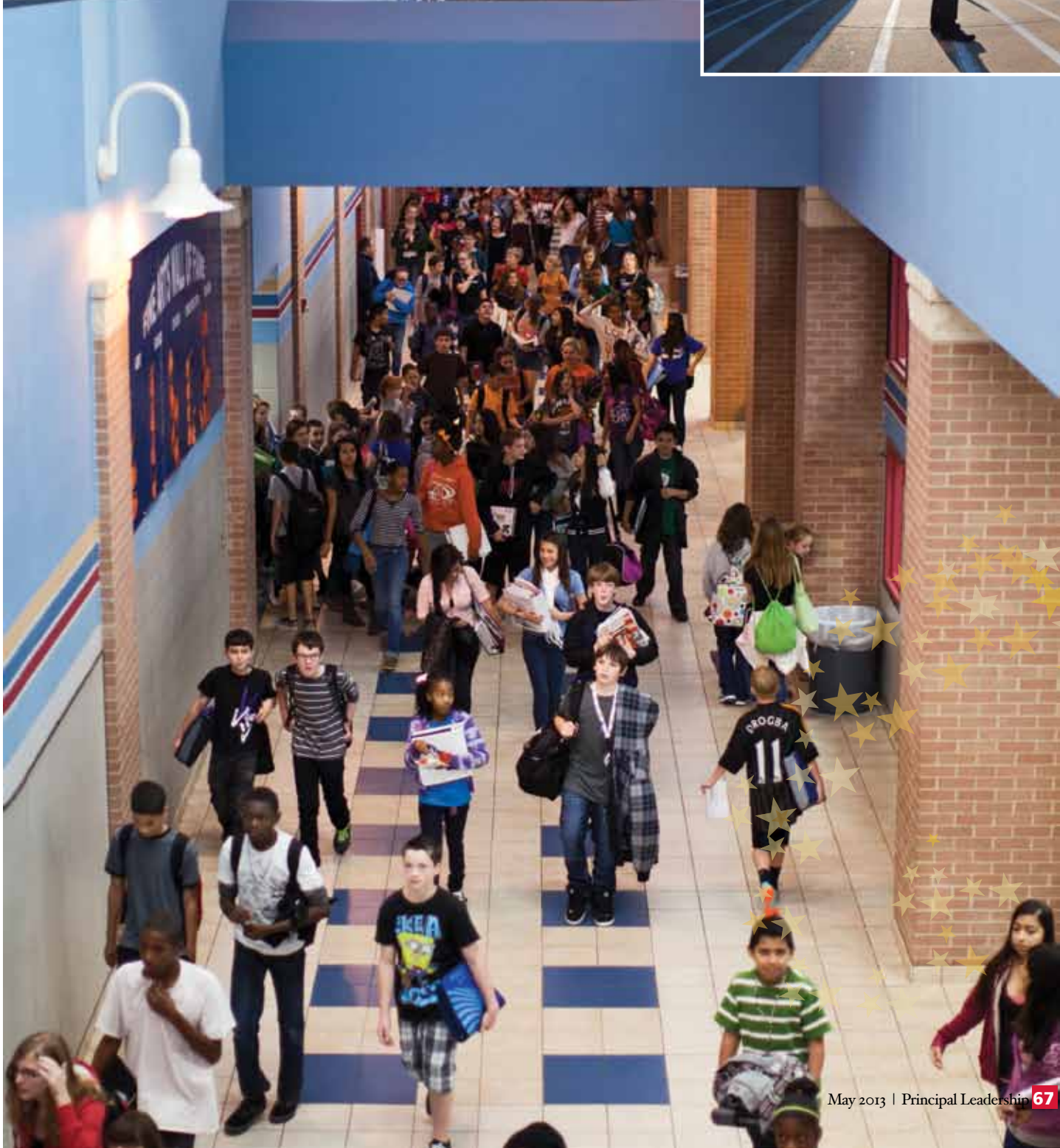
At first glance, it seems unusual to find a high-needs middle school in such a place. The town is a fast-growing community on the northeastern edge of the Dallas–Fort Worth area; has a thriving economy; and in 2012, CNN’s Money Magazine ranked it second on their list of the best places to live in the United States. But to understand Scott Johnson’s success, it is first necessary to understand the changes that occurred five years ago when the McKinney Independent School District opened a new middle school.

At that time, the principal and many other school leaders were moved to the new school, most students living in the higher socioeconomic areas were rezoned to that school, and the newly hired principal left for a neighboring district after school was dismissed for the summer. Because an anticipated upscale residential development was predicted to restore the socioeconomic balance in the near future, the district decided not to follow the equitable student distribution policy previously applied to McKinney schools. Seemingly overnight, the community at Scott Johnson had to adjust to new cultural norms and to a population where the percentage of economically disadvantaged students ballooned from approximately 20% to more than 40%. In addition, when the economy took a downturn, the planned residential development did not materialize, and the number of students receiving free and reduced-price lunch at Scott Johnson continued to rise.



It’s cool to be smart
at Scott Johnson. I
would not want to go
to any other middle
school.

—SIXTH-GRADE
STUDENT





Today, led by Principal Mitchell Curry, the leadership team has met the challenges resulting from those changes by employing such strategies as focusing on relationships, committing to open communication, and developing strategic educational support systems. And those strategies are working—Scott Johnson is not only the district school with the largest number of high-need students, but according to state assessment data, it is also the highest-performing school in the district.

We're All About Relationships!

The staff believes that strong teacher-student relationships are the key to academic success. Assistant Principal Dave Warren proudly proclaims, “We’re all about relationships,” and Assistant Principal Stewart Herrington adds that, “Teachers work to know their students as individuals.” Those sentiments are echoed when talking with staff members, students, and community members. The respect and caring that those groups have for each other, the school, and the students is an observable, integral part of the school culture.

Staff members regularly go above and beyond to help their students be successful. One staff member was emphatic that they were not a “7:15 a.m.–3:45 p.m. staff” and shared that the parking lot is full of cars well into the evening and often on the weekends. Collectively, they hold the mind-set that each student can reach high standards and that it is their responsibility to do all within their ability to help each student meet those standards, beginning with building positive teacher-student relationships.

Students are equally enthusiastic about their teachers, and time and time again “teachers” was the answer to the

question, “What’s the best thing about Scott Johnson?” Students from all grade levels felt that their teachers care for them, and one student said, “Our teachers start out giving us trust and it never goes away unless we break trust with them.” Building relationships with parents is also a high priority. Curry believes that “if you can get a parent in the school 10 times, they feel welcome and like they belong.”

A Two-Way Street

Student voices at Scott Johnson are heard loud and clear. Curry has three advisory groups, one per grade level, that meet with him on a regular basis. The students at all levels concur that “he listens to us.” When asked for a specific example, one student said that students requested that music, rather than bells, be used to indicate the passing periods. And sure enough, when the period ended, a college fight song was broadcast over the loudspeakers—but students were quick to comment that it was college awareness week and usually they heard country or popular music.

The school has also committed to personal, meaningful communication with families. Phone calls are regularly made, not just for beginning-of-the-year greetings, but for expressing expectations, providing personal updates, and answering questions. These regular dialogues allow families to communicate back to the teachers and to affect the classroom and school. Electronic communications are also popular; recent data showed that out of 800 e-newsletters sent to families, 650 were opened—an amazing 81%. Enhancing communication also means inviting parents to campus for showcases so that students can demonstrate their progress directly to family members.

A Collaborative Approach

Scott Johnson's student support systems are based on teacher collaborations that encourage a team approach to success. By collaborating in such processes as response to intervention, teams of teachers help track student progress, collaborate to design cooperative interventions, and allow for the flexible grouping of students to better meet learning needs. Additional support is provided through the use of instructional specialists, pull-out tutorial programs, tutors, learning camps, awareness weeks, contests, and extracurricular opportunities. The Peer Assistance and Leadership Skills student mentoring program (Tiger PALS) pairs struggling students with teacher mentors who provide guidance in personal and academic matters.

Student success is also supported through family and community involvement. The parent-teacher organization (PTO) implemented a "dad's club" to establish visible male role models on campus. Families that don't speak English are invited to campus to learn about school success opportunities that are statistically underutilized by English language learners. This effort in particular has helped increase their numbers in advanced classes, the AVID college-bound program, and extracurricular activities. A community mentoring program for at-risk students also provides support for students in need.

All of those efforts are woven together to create a schoolwide network of support for the individual needs of each student. The approach has proven successful over



Scott Morgan Johnson Middle School

MCKINNEY, TX

Principal: Mitchell Curry

Grades: 6–8

Enrollment: 888

Community: Rural

Demographics:

White	39%
Hispanic/Latino	35%
Black/African American	19%
Asian	3%
Other	4%
Free or reduced-price meals eligible.....	51%
English language learners	8%
Special education.....	11%

Note: Demographic data was provided by school in spring 2012.



time and has endured because of positive feedback from students and families.

Whatever It Takes

Hired during the summer to replace the new principal who left unexpectedly, Curry saw working at Scott Johnson as an incredible opportunity. He describes his leadership style as collaborative and a reflection of the thinking of several of his favorite authors: Jim Collins, Mark Sanborn, and Stephen M. R. Covey. The philosophical approaches championed by those writers have helped him maintain a cooperative team and unified vision. He also credits the school's success to their use of the strategies and recommendations in the *Breaking Ranks* Framework.

Curry believes that building the performance capacity of staff members and students is the key to student success and encourages the teachers to demonstrate a "whatever it takes" attitude. The staff is willing to take risks because he is quick to forgive all good faith efforts that may miss the mark and practices Southwest Airline former CEO Herb Kelleher's view that "we will forgive anything as long as our employees are trying to help the customer."

By coupling Covey's "speed of trust" with Kelleher's culture of forgiveness for risk taking, Curry has helped create a powerful climate for an incredible learning environment for students. This atmosphere provides the foundation for a carefully cultivated, common curriculum that is as diverse as the students. Teachers consistently monitor and adjust the curriculum, instruction, and assessments to improve student performance. By placing the right people in the right seats on the bus, Curry has developed a high

Connecting the Classroom to the Real World

“Why are we learning this?” and “When will we ever need to know this?” are typical questions asked by middle school students. In Scott Johnson Middle School science classes, students are learning the answers to those questions thanks to strong partnerships that have been built with community businesses and organizations. The partnerships give students opportunities to work with professionals from varying science backgrounds and to explore science in ways that make it relevant to their lives.

Engineers from the Raytheon Company teach lessons that review physics concepts and spend time in math classrooms through the Math Moves U program. This year, the school partnered with Raytheon to develop and implement the LASER (Leadership and Science Ensures Results) curriculum in the sixth-grade science classes, a project-based learning curriculum that includes four modules that focus on 21st century leadership skills.

For three years, the Chemistry Student Association at the University of Texas–Dallas has developed and taught lessons using a crime scene investigation in which students perform labs to collect clues to solve a mystery.

Frito-Lay supports the science fair by providing guidance on project improvement and sending employees to judge the entries. They also teach sustainability lessons to give students insight into the engineering and chemical background involved in the production of products.

The Heard Natural Science Museum & Wildlife Sanctuary provides a seventh-grade field trip to give students experience with hands-on data collection in a wetland environment and gives AVID students a firsthand opportunity to learn about human impact on nature through camping and canoeing experiences.

Chick-fil-A partners with science classes to donate food for the science fair judges, sandwich and ice cream giveaways for the school’s science camp, and lunches for students who travel to the district’s elementary schools to put on chemistry shows.

The Collin County Master Gardeners Association has worked with Scott Johnson for four years to help seventh-grade science students master learning objectives about organisms’ effects on the environment and ecosystems. The group does two major presentations to the school, the first focusing on vermicomposting and the nitrogen cycle. The second presentation integrates science, history, and English to teach about native Texas plants, including what makes those plants adaptable to their environment and what various legends have been passed down about each plant.

level of professional autonomy within the school, which motivates professional growth.


Curry believes that the school’s climate and culture have resulted from a grassroots approach because of authentic input from multiple sources including the faculty leadership team, the PTO board, and the student leadership team. Involving the entire community in the development and reshaping of the school climate has been vital to the school’s operation. And those efforts are clearly noticed by the community. Judge Paul Raleeh of Collin County, TX, remarked that within the justice system, Scott Johnson has the reputation of being a school that focuses on “compliance rather than punishment” and works tirelessly to get students back in school. He also commended the school for its ability to get parents involved with their children’s education.

Collaborative leadership, a personalized school environment, a monitored curriculum, and assessment procedures have helped the school focus on the core business of education and make connections to the larger purpose, fostering student success and breaking negative cycles of poverty and low achievement. To this end, the teachers have actively participated in organizational transformation. They expect excellence from one another as they push their students toward improved academic achievement. They generate emotional and intellectual connections to one another and the community and are continually striving for improvement in the quality of their relationships among themselves and with parents and students.

Curry proudly credited the academic successes of students at Scott Johnson as a direct result of team efforts and said, “Our students recognize their good fortune to experience such an environment and contribute as well.” In talking with staff members, students, and parents, it becomes obvious that the climate and culture reflect a sincere belief that each student deserves a safe place to receive an individualized educational experience that will result in academic growth. Curry strongly believes he is “fortunate to work here, at this place, at this time.” And Scott Johnson is equally fortunate to have him as the leader.

A Personalized Approach to Learning

The school staff believes that all children can learn, but they recognize that not all children learn on the same day or in the same way, so they are dedicated to designing learning experiences that meet the differentiated needs of individual learners. Students are more engaged and successful because of the variety and choice in the learning and assessment process and collaborative lesson design.



Instruction is active, participatory, and engaging. Whether conducting lab experiments in science, manipulating symbols or pictures on interactive whiteboards and iPads, performing in a musical group, or preparing for the heated debate of a mock trial, the instruction is designed to appeal to a variety of styles and modes of learning. Detailed analysis of individual students' performance data helps teachers and students work together to develop academic goals and plans of action that include differentiated approaches to exploring content to develop mastery. Strategies used in the school's AVID program have been expanded into other classrooms to encourage higher learning for all students, and teachers make a concerted effort to challenge all students to perform at increasingly higher levels.

For example, nearly 40% of all eighth graders will be enrolled in Algebra I for the upcoming year (up from 30% in the previous year), with 74% of all AVID students enrolled. The participation of ethnic and socioeconomic groups in higher level classes is closely monitored and mirrors overall enrollment percentages as well. The school was recently named an AVID demonstration school, and that achievement further emphasizes a commitment to high expectations and effective learning.

Professional learning communities at Scott Johnson consist of subject-area teachers who meet between three and five days each week. In those meetings, teachers evaluate and design responses to data, share best practices, and discuss implementation of new technologies and strategies. Increasingly, cross-curricular planning is taking place with an emphasis on writing in all core content areas. Through recurring themes across subject areas, students are exposed to the application of knowledge and skills in real-world situations. A commitment to providing students with relevancy in their learning is also evident in technology electives designed to promote pre-engineering (along with a campus robotics club and regionally recognized rocketry club) and in science partnerships with local businesses and national brands, such as Frito-Lay.

Teacher collaboration across content areas is also demonstrated in the school's assessment practices. Students are expected to demonstrate mastery, often through a medium of their choosing or through differentiated instructional interventions and retesting opportunities as needed. For example, performance-based demonstrations are no longer confined to athletics and music; students now have the option in their math classes to design or choose a performance or demonstration of their learning in lieu of or in addition to traditional paper exams. In addition, more and more often students are given a menu of choices from which to se-



lect their work product, scored by a rubric as opposed to a multiple choice scanner. In some instances, students are not permitted to take a test unless they have previously met performance criteria during the developmental stages of learning. The use of common formative assessment drives the pace of learning and the experiential opportunities for our students. The staff firmly believes that student failure is not an option, and students who do not meet the standards of high expectations will receive additional instructional interventions before moving on.

A commitment to student engagement is seen in the number of students authentically participating in classroom activities that allow for freedom, choice, and differentiated approaches to learning. In other words, at Scott Johnson, it's not just the environment that has been personalized, it's the learning as well.

A Can-Do Attitude

When the changes in the student population at Scott Johnson occurred, it would have been easy for the staff to continue to teach to the population of students they'd served in the past; they also could have complained that the boundary shifts were unfair and they were now the only secondary school in the district to be eligible for Title I funding. But they didn't. Instead, they accepted the challenges and adopted, in the words of McKinney ISD Superintendent J. D. Kennedy, a can-do attitude.

Scott Johnson exemplifies the belief that if you surround students with high levels of emotional and academic support, they are capable of unlimited success. Tiger PRIDE is alive at Scott Johnson, and the traits of perseverance, respect, integrity, determination, and excellence are exhibited in the beliefs and practices of the entire school community. In the words of a student, "At this school, the teachers have your back; they encourage us and spur us on." **PL**