

OPINION

At New Bridge Middle, the culture for learning is palpable

When Emily Kelly, an eighth-grade science teacher at Jacksonville's New Bridge Middle School, called requesting a tour of The Daily News for 10 of her students involved in a school program called "Design and Discover," I had no idea that encounter would be such an eye-opening experience.



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However, while the students did leave with a greater appreciation of how a newspaper is created, it was I who got an education on what is occurring inside their school near old downtown.

Until last Monday, I was unaware of New Bridge's mission. But because of the mature manner in which each student presented herself to me while walking through the various offices at the newspaper and the intelligent questions they raised, I sensed there was something unique about these young ladies and also their school.

On a side note, when I polled the group as to how many read The Daily News,

I was happily surprised to learn that seven out of the 10 students' households subscribed to the paper.

I contacted Dr. Christopher Barnes — a home-grown Onslow County educator and, for the past two years the principal of New Bridge — and stated how impressed I was with his students during their visit. In an e-mail, he replied: "What you experienced has everything to do with our amazing kids, the structure and professionalism of our teachers and quite a bit of support from high-quality parents. I would be happy to give you the inside look at New Bridge."

I took him up on his offer and visited his school last Wednesday.

New Bridge is a magnet school located at 401 New Bridge St. in Jacksonville. Its student body of 534 is comprised of sixth, seventh and eighth graders, 70 percent of whom gained admission through a lottery with the remaining segment coming from within the school's neighborhood boundaries. Students travel from every corner of Onslow County to attend this incubator for learning.

If I could turn the hands of time back to when I was of middle school age — it was called junior high school in Allentown, Pa. — and my family lived in Onslow County, I'd want to be a student at New Bridge.

This public school's focus is on science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics or STEAM. The concept for New Bridge was spawned in 1998 inside the old schoolhouse that was built in 1941 and served as Jacksonville Senior High and Junior School and later Jacksonville Middle School. The hallways and stairways, with their brick and marble appointments, harken back to another era when students came to school to learn and be on their best behavior, and teachers and administrators were held in high esteem and were pillars of their respective communities.

Though its architecture may remind some of a bygone era, what is being taught inside its classrooms by more than 40 teaching professionals is preparing our next generation of Americans to be competitive and productive citi-

zens. Computers were present in nearly every room I entered. I learned that 19 students are engaged in foreign language courses, studying the romance languages including Latin, as well as Arabic, Japanese and Chinese.

In another area of the building, science projects lined a hallway window sill. They displayed the imagination and ingenuity of young minds, upon which this country will depend to keep America moving forward and staying competitive in the world. The designs varied from contraptions used to propel, float and photograph.

As we walked by classrooms with students and teachers engaged in the daily lesson plan, I noticed a high level of controlled energy emanating from each room. Never did I see a student or room full of pupils sitting idle at their desks, seemingly bored or in a stupor. These children were involved and the energy was palpable.

As Principal Barnes and I left the library, I asked the seasoned educator what motivates him to come into work everyday. He simply replied: "The children —

and besides, it's fun."

Barnes is an educator but he is also a parent who happens to have his 13-year-old daughter, Chandler, enrolled at New Bridge. I can only imagine how Barnes feels about being his daughter's principal, but I know first hand how Chandler feels; my father was my high school principal — and it is a wonderful and comforting feeling.

Our children are our future, so it is imperative that we do all we can do as a society to give them the opportunity to learn and be responsible, successful adults. Schools such as New Bridge are a fantastic environment for any child that enters its hallway.

It would be nice if more magnet schools were created; it would be especially nice if a magnet school for high school-aged students was in place so when an eighth grader from New Bridge moves up to ninth grade, they'd continue matriculating in the magnet school culture.

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