

# Academy of Excellence

## Building Futures

*Produced by Eric Gunn & Written by Rebecca Czarnecki*

The Academy of Excellence (AOE) is a dream realized for Ms. Brenda Nelson, a woman with a desire to impact the lives of young people. AOE is a dream Nelson built brick-by-brick starting in 1998; now the school has two campuses – one in Phoenix, Ariz., and one in the more rural Coolidge, Ariz. – and serves at-risk youth throughout the area.

Nelson remains a cornerstone of the school, exhibiting her strong presence as a board member, instructional coach and special education teacher. However, the current active director and principal is Eula Saxon Dean, who believes she found her calling in her work with the school.

“I had a chance to do consulting work with a company that had done some financial work with the school,” recalls Dean. “They asked me if I’d come to this school, an inner city school, and it was one of my first chances to see the children and the needs that were part of their

lives. And from the first day I felt it was fitting, I had the heart and the desire.”

Dean’s background reflects the population the school now serves. One of 13 children, she grew up in a home where neither her mother nor father obtained a formal education. But like so many parents, Dean’s mother and father had bigger goals for their children, and Dean eventually attended college with a full scholarship from Cornell and completed a law degree. When Dean connected with the school she realized that she could serve as a strong model for students because she could show them what was possible to achieve with hard work. Dean’s passion for the work is palpable, and she comments:

“This is the work I’ve done that has involved the greatest integrity, due diligence and heart you have to put in every day ... but if you can be consistent every day and seek to provide the best opportunities



possible it can make a difference in their lives. You must encourage them to want to learn, and to do their best and see themselves successful and begin to dream, and eventually they will give back to a community. They need to see there is a great place for them, a fit for them.”

### Planning for Tomorrow Today

One of the AOE’s main goals is teaching its students to be life-long learners. Rather than promoting a sense of “graduating” from each grade, each year is treated like preparation for the next. Additionally, the staff regularly talks to the students about what they envision for themselves. Dean says, “We have these conversations daily to discuss what they can become in the morning meetings. It’s a time they can express themselves, discuss what could happen for themselves, what they are thinking and feeling, and we can give them positive encouragement.”

When Dean first started at the AOE it was struggling, but she knew it could do better. The team at the school sat down for a serious evaluation and called to ask for a consultation with someone from the Department of Education. That, along with gaining a coach to help layout a plan for the school, set a new course. Eula is thrilled to report that the school, “followed the plan to a ‘T’ and this year we were performing plus,” she continues, “We are already implementing strategies to move up student performance, because it’s our desire to become an excelling school.”

AOE has numerous programs in place to help the students succeed. One such program is titled “Power Up” and helps encourage enthusiasm in math. It helps solidify the important basics of the subject, and, Dean says, this reinforcement is needed so that “[the students] don’t have to use fingers to figure out two plus three,” for example.

The school also assesses each student so that the teachers can write specific instructional goals. Eula admits that it is time consuming, but she reveals that the benefits are great:

“It helps that teachers are focusing on individual students; not individualized learning, but making sure everyone can work toward their goals. And we will continue our reading program, coaching the children in reading at the various levels.”

### Built By and For the Community

In the words of the Beatles, “We get by with a little help from our friends.” For AOE this is certainly true and community assistance has been vital. The school requires uniforms and some of the

children come from families who are unable to provide them. The school has found a savior in Tanner Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church, where a Women’s Missionary Society has provided underwear to outerwear for students. As Dean points out, “Without the clothing they stay home, and if they are home we can’t make a difference.”

*“It helps that teachers are focusing on individual students; not individualized learning, but making sure everyone can work toward their goals. And we will continue our reading program, coaching the children in reading at the various levels.”*

— Eula Saxon Dean,  
Director and Principal

Additionally, a team of Wells Fargo employees comes to the school weekly to provide tutoring services. Other community members give time to assist children with reading. Dean says that the volunteers generally serve as a good reliable adult presence for those who may not have it at home. The sorority Alpha Kappa Alpha has also been very supportive. The local chapter in Phoenix has served as mentors to girls grades six through eight, and are excellent models to those considering going on to college.

While AOE hires teachers from outside traditional settings it works to identify what support each teacher needs. As Dean comments, “Once you walk in and realize it’s your room all by yourself and you realize the diversity of learning in that classroom, and the diversity of experience from the home environment, it can be overwhelming.”

When selecting teachers there is a lot AOE pays attention to: how a person describes children, how they teach a lesson with staff role-playing as students, and what teaching experiences they have previously had. As Dean reveals, “We observe them in the classroom, and I believe the level of evaluation goes deeper ... it’s coaching. And to be honest the flags come early.”

In terms of what the future holds for the Academy of Excellence, Dean talks about how funding continues to be a burden. Arizona doesn’t provide funds for charter school facilities and Dean finds her greatest pain lies in not being able to pay teachers what they truly deserve. She states, “It’s all contingent on enrollment, so if that’s low it weakens your ability to get additional support.”

Regardless of the difficulties, the school is looking to expand slightly. However, Eula stresses that she only wants this growth if the school can do it well. Her words leave no doubt that the Academy of Excellence will continue to have a lasting impact on the students it is able to serve.

“I feel on track now. We’ve got a plan now. I know we’re critical enough in our evaluation of knowing the right people to hire. I have a Phoenix location and [one in] Coolidge. And Coolidge could accommodate 150, but integrity means so much to me. Before any race the runner must prepare, so we have to do some preparation. We’re getting the support and we have no doubt we can step out and do the job in the future.”