

2013 TERREL H. BELL RECIPIENT

Kathleen Decker, Principal

Walter Bracken STEAM Academy

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Located in a low-income neighborhood of Las Vegas, Walter Bracken Elementary School was once the scene of frequent police activity and occasional lockdowns. Graffiti marred the walls and community members felt disconnected from the school, one of the lowest-performing in the district. Kathleen Decker arrived 12 years ago and nothing has been the same since.

Decker led the school in its new incarnation as a science, math, and technology magnet school for students from the neighborhood and around the district, who attend Bracken through a random lottery. Within two years Bracken exited

improvement status and has consistently earned the district's highest ranking since. Last year, as engineering and performing and visual arts were integrated into the curriculum, Bracken has become the Walter Bracken STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and mathematics) Academy.

From the beginning Decker reached out to the local community, engaging parents and students in painting murals on walls outside the school and enlivening interior hallways with artwork related to careers. Parents came to value the school as a pathway to success for their children and commitment to the school deepened. A host of theme-based activities, such as Mighty Math, Ecological Engineering, Multicultural Field Day, Music Week, Art Week, and Science and Math literacy nights involve the entire staff and community in hands-on learning while teaching students critical skills. Outdoor murals, gardens, and animal habitats and a Lego room and earth science, physical science, and life science labs indoors make the STEAM theme clear.

Teachers rotate through school leadership opportunities to build capacity and ensure full participation. Staff retention levels are high. In 2007, with union, parent, and unanimous staff support, Bracken STEAM received Empowerment School status, earning greater autonomy and full budgetary control, with increased accountability for results. Staff revised the school's mission, schedule, and curriculum.

Bracken's embrace of technology is so complete, it is a paperless school. Homework is assigned through online educational computer programs. A computer lab open before, during, and after school allows students without technology at home to complete their assignments. Last year, the Academy implemented one-to-one tablet technology, which has engaged students in online research, math practice, and publishing their own books, which are eagerly shared with classmates. When staff upgraded the school website with more content, such as online homework and upcoming projects, they offered evening training sessions to help parents understand how to use the site. Decker also works individually with parents to set up homework routines.

Bracken has hosted teachers from Columbia, Costa Rica, Japan, and other U.S. states. Bracken staff have also mentored two Empowerment schools in the district.

Kathleen Decker was named the 2013 National Principal of the Year by Magnet Schools of America, the national association for magnet and theme-based schools.