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LEADERS

Building on History

Central High School President has 'best job in the city' leading Philadelphia educational treasure

Tim McKenna has an understated way of describing his job leading Philadelphia's Central High School. To the veteran educator, leadership of Central is "a pretty good job." How good? Consider that since Central opened in 1836 - when Andrew Jackson was U.S. President - the nation has had 38 Commanders-in-Chief. McKenna is just the 14th leader in the school's history, where the principal is traditionally referred to as "President."

"The gentleman I replaced led Central for 28-and-a-half years," said McKenna, a Neubauer Fellow in Educational Leadership who still has 22 years to go to match that record. "The position doesn't become available very often. It's the best job in the city. It's a special place, a special school."

The facts bolster his case. The historic school (the nation's second-oldest public high school) is the second-largest in Philadelphia; it has been designated the "most diverse" school in America from more than 24,000 contenders; it is the only high school in the country, as approved by an act of the Commonwealth's Assembly in 1849, to grant academic degrees to its graduates. Its notable alumni include federal judges, Nobel Peace Prize winners, U.S. congressmen, professional athletes, actors, historians, CEOs - even one of the Three Stooges (Larry Fine, Class of 1910).

There are about 2,300 students enrolled in the school serving grades 9 – 12 this year. The school received more than 4,900 applications for admission to this year’s freshmen class. Yet, the accolades and the history do not erase the challenges faced by many public schools: Finite resources.

“The toughest challenge I have faced has been dealing with budget issues the past four years,” McKenna said. Like all schools in the city, the Great Recession hit the school hard resulting in limited resources needing to stretch even further. The school has had “to adjust and work to create the best educational experience for our students.”

The Itch to Teach

McKenna draws on a diverse background to make things work, one that did not start in education or direct him to Central. A Philadelphia native and resident, who left only for a detour to New York City for undergraduate work, said that Central has been on his radar his entire life, even though he attended a rival high school and initially launched a far different career path.

“I earned a degree in business administration from Fordham University. Upon graduation I worked for a Fortune 500 company. What I quickly came to realize is that I just wasn’t happy. It wasn’t fulfilling,” he said. “I would reflect back to my time of doing mission work at St. Joseph’s Preparatory School, when I spent a summer in Mexico City. That service made me feel fulfilled. I realized that giving back to the community and helping people was what I wanted.”

“My mother was a teacher and my aunt was a principal. I was coaching local soccer and wrestling teams, and I liked working with students.

I decided to make a big change and enrolled into an educational graduate school program to become a teacher. I started as a second grade teacher. I got the itch to teach.”

A fortunate mentoring experience expanded that itch to school leadership aspirations.

“My principal saw something in me that I didn’t see. I was 25. He started giving me leadership opportunities,” McKenna said. “Those experiences grew into more involvement in leadership. I was selected to be a participant in a [program] to train aspiring leaders; it was a great opportunity and I learned the nuts and bolts of running a school. That made a significant difference in my career.”

McKenna’s first assignment as principal was at Philadelphia’s Willard Elementary School in 2006. He then assumed leadership of Furness High School two years later. There McKenna learned “how to run a high school and manage more employees,” and he honed his “instructional leadership skills by supporting teachers across content areas.” McKenna was named President of Central in 2012.

Maintaining High Standards

The lessons learned as principal at Willard and Furness schools prepared McKenna well for his leadership role at Central High School.

“Most of our students come here prepared for our academic program because their parents are engaged in their lives,” McKenna said. “We have an incredibly supportive and active home and school association. They have created a ListServe for parents to improve communication.

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For students whose families are first generation, we utilize translation services to help answer their questions. The parents are involved in our hiring process for teachers. We create teams for each department so that our parents have a voice and are involved in our community.”

In addition to overseeing the business of running one of the nation’s most honored high schools, McKenna strives to keep in touch with his students and learn their individual stories.

“I try to be at our security scan for 2,300 students every morning. Those brief conversations keep me connected. If an officer is out, I’ll run a security machine,” he said. “I interact with students as they build sets and rehearse for musicals. I try to get to games. I conduct formal and informal observations in classes; participating in classes helps build rapport.”

McKenna stresses his reliance on parents and especially his teachers to maintain Central’s high standards, and expresses frustrations about how the limited resources have greatly impacted the school. “People need to stop talking about how underfunded Philadelphia is and start working to balance the inequities,” he said.

McKenna practices what he preaches by seeking development opportunities for the school and professional development for his own practice. He and his wife, Stephanie Stover McKenna, were in the first Neubauer Fellow in Educational Leadership cohort. Stover McKenna leads the General George A. McCall School, a K-8 school in the School District of Philadelphia.

“I met Joe and Jeanette [Neubauer] the year before the program started. We talked about [the Fellowship], and it sounded great,” McKenna said. “I applied when it came up and I was so pleased to be included. The quality of the professional development has been just outstanding. To be working with some of the brightest and innovative minds in educational leadership is powerful. We were treated like professionals and we don’t always get that respect. It’s special.”

Whether through the Neubauer Fellowship or the other ways that McKenna seeks to hone his skills, the students and staff at one of Philadelphia’s historic gems benefit from a President who continues to grow as a leader. ●