



Leadership Achievers

Center for School Leadership Development
The University of North Carolina

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YOUNG, DYNAMIC, AND COURAGEOUS: MS. JANA RAWLS, PRINCIPAL OF COLUMBIA HS

In 2001, after only one year as an assistant principal intern, Ms. Jana Rawls received an offer to take the reins as principal of Columbia High School in Tyrrell County, forty-five miles west of Manteo.

She turned it down.

“In the first place, I didn’t think I could do the job,” says the 1993 and 2001 graduate of East Carolina University. “It seemed to be way too much responsibility way too soon in my career.”

In the second place, the job was in the county where she’d been born and raised, where she attended school as a child, and where dozens—perhaps hundreds—of members of her extended family lived and worked. “I wasn’t sure I could handle the pressure that comes with that much familiarity,” she explains.

“I’m worried about state reports, but I’m more interested in preparing students for adulthood.”

Tyrrell County Superintendent Nelson Smith, though, recognized a rising education star when he saw one—Ms. Rawls had been named master teacher during her first year at Chowan Middle School—and refused to take no for an answer.

“I was flattered,” Ms. Rawls admits, “and finally accepted the job on the condition that if things didn’t work out, I would be allowed to take another position in the school system with no hard feelings.” Mr. Nelson handed her a contract and she hasn’t looked back.

When Jana Rawls became principal of Columbia High School, 52 percent of its approximately 220 students were learning at grade level. Today that number is a fraction under 80 percent. In 2003-04, Columbia met AYP and won distinctions as both a high-growth school and a school of progress.



Tyrrell County native Jana Rawls (left, with art student Mallory Liverman) began her education career in 1993 as a seventh grade teacher. She lives in Roper, NC, with her husband, Shepherd; nine-year-old son, KJ; six-year-old daughter, Keila; and newborn daughter, Camryn.

Among the initiatives Ms. Rawls has implemented to drive improvement in teaching and learning at Columbia is what she calls the “Afternoon to Excel” program. “One day each month at one p.m.,” Ms. Rawls says, “we send home all of the students who are meeting their academic goals. All others remain at school for intensive tutoring.”

Initially, almost half of Columbia’s students were required to stay. Many resented the program and some of their parents signed them out of school on the designated afternoons, even though, says Ms. Rawls, “We did everything we could to reduce the sense that staying in school was a punishment. We presented the program as an opportunity for kids to ask questions they were too embarrassed to ask in front of other students; we serve snacks mid-afternoon.”

Leadership Achiever Jana Rawls

Today—a year later—only 25 percent of the school’s students are required to stay, and many who are allowed to go home ask to remain to get extra help.

The path to improvement, though, Ms. Rawls admits, has not been easy.

“Many people—including some who are extremely close to me—have been extremely angry with me,” she says, “but I’ve done my best to treat everybody equitably—not equally; there’s a difference—and I’ve discovered that folks just can’t help but respect that. Everybody in this community—students, teachers, and parents—now understands that I play fair.”

As do, apparently, her school board and superintendent.

TYRELL COUNTY AT A GLANCE

Total Population	4,219
White	2,471
Nonwhite	1,768
Unemployment rate	9.3%
Median household income	\$25,684 (NC county rank = 99)
Per capita personal income	\$18,800 (NC per capita personal income = \$27,795)

Source: NC Department of Commerce

Last year, Ms. Rawls felt compelled to warn her bosses to expect a sudden increase in the dropout rate for Columbia High School. When asked why, she explained she intended to scrupulously apply the school system’s

attendance policies. “I said I wasn’t going to accept any more excuses or grant any more exceptions.”

Her superiors backed her and she enforced the rules. “I let everybody know what was going to happen long before it happened,” she says. “I sent certified letters.”

As she predicted, she lost students—eighteen, to be exact, approximately 8 percent of Columbia’s student population. “I’m worried about how those numbers will look in state reports,” she admits, “but I’m more interested in helping kids prepare for adulthood by teaching them to adhere to standards.”

When asked what she would do if she were Queen of Education and could change anything about schooling in the United States, Ms. Rawls replies, “Society is doing a disservice for high school kids. Their world is moving at an increasingly fast pace and yet we still expect them to sit in classrooms for six hours every day. In my opinion, we need to return to the concept of skills-based learning. I can educate 70 percent of my students the way the powers-that-be want me to educate them. The other 30 percent, though, have other needs. If I could have doubled my investment in vocational education last year, I guarantee not only that most of the kids who recently dropped out of Columbia would still be in school, but also that they’d be getting top grades.”

The Principals’ Executive Program is proud to name Ms. Jana Rawls its first *Leadership Achiever* of 2005.

Congratulations, Ms. Rawls, on your energy, fairness, and dedication to excellence.

LEADERSHIP ACHIEVERS

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