

2012 National Blue Ribbon Schools Ceremony:
*LESSONS FROM A TOP-PERFORMING
MIDDLE SCHOOL*



Piedmont Middle School has been through more re-inventions than Madonna. Named a National Blue Ribbon School for the first time in 1991, the school flourished as a nationally recognized Arts/English Learner /Open Enrollment Magnet school for many years. As new magnet schools emerged and student assessment data assumed center stage, Piedmont staff discovered serious gaps in achievement among student groups. While working to close those gaps, they confronted a host of challenges, including changes in student demographics, loss of special programs, the transformation from a magnet theme school to a full International Baccalaureate Program, new district mandates, and budget cuts that affected staffing, resources, and student transportation.



Piedmont Open Middle School, located in downtown Charlotte, NC, is part of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District. Photo: Nancy Pierce



Principal Dee Gardner addresses the 2012 National Blue Ribbon Schools representatives. Photo: Paul Wood, USDE.

By 2011, Piedmont was once again a National Blue Ribbon School awardee, and its principal, Dee Gardner, was awarded the 2011 Terrel H. Bell Award for Outstanding Leadership. In 2012, Piedmont received further recognition from the National Middle School Association as the National Middle School of the year.

Intuitive Leadership

Gardner, who gave a talk on “Intuitive Leadership in a Data-Driven World” at the 2012 National Blue Ribbon Schools conference, said that Piedmont’s numerous awards demonstrate they are doing things right. And while Gardner has championed rigorous professional development, professional learning communities, and extensive training in data use, those practices are only part of the story.

Even as Gardner and her colleagues immersed themselves in data analysis and intensified reading and math instruction to close achievement gaps, they ensured they met students' emotional and social needs as well as academic ones. "It's that sense of safety, that trust, which allows genuine learning to take place," Gardner said.

Gardner described intuitive leadership as "reading between the lines," seeing what others sometimes do not see. Intuitive leaders look at data holistically, she said, and draw connections that help others see a situation from a different perspective. Gardner used the analogy of the iceberg to describe sensitivity to "things that are out of sight that we bump into, unseen things that cause problems and get in the way of learning." Intuitive leaders enable staff to "get to the root of the problem" and truly meet students' needs.

Watch an [audio slideshow](#) featuring Piedmont's creative embrace of the Common Core standard of argumentative literacy.