

2014 TERREL H. BELL RECIPIENT
Kathy Hunt, Principal

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McAlester, in southeastern Oklahoma, is part of the Choctaw Nation, an area recently designated as one of five U.S. Promise Zones. Edmond Doyle Elementary is the district's highest poverty school, located in a part of town where many are reluctant to send their children. Nearly 90% of Doyle's 141 students qualify for subsidized meals. Some parents are in jail or mandatory rehab, and many students live in low-income housing or with grandparents, legal guardians, foster families, or are classified as homeless. Some come from homes with low academic expectations and school attendance is not a priority. The mobility rate is high; only about 30% of graduating fourth graders had been at Edmond Doyle all four years. A school survey found that half of

students have no access to technology except at school. Limited life experiences have hindered students' vocabulary skills, problem solving skills, and social skills. Limited funds restrict supplemental academic programs, playground equipment, and supplies.

Those are the challenges. Research suggests that the life of every resilient child was shaped by the influence of a significant adult. Principal Kathy Hunt and her staff strive to be those adults, empowering children to know that they can change their circumstances through life-long learning and conscious effort. Every adult in the school, including custodians and cafeteria workers, is seen as important to students' lives; an army of parents, community members, and high school students assist as well. For many students, positive school attention is a counter-balance to their home experiences. Hunt and her team work with local businesses to organize trips across town or to the state capitol and to movies and plays, all first-time experiences for many students. A Character Club and a weekly focus on different character traits prompt students to think about their actions and how they can exert positive influence.

Kathy Hunt is also her school's art teacher. As such, she knows each child personally and understands each classroom's dynamics. Teaching art enables her to stay connected with children, and understand how they think, create, and relate to the world around them. It also enables her to offer teachers a new perspective on students and suggest creative ways to motivate, enrich, and challenge them. Explains a teacher, teaching art allows Mrs. Hunt to "empathize with each teacher while giving her the insight to offer strategies for a successful classroom environment." In Hunt's three-year tenure, test scores have been high, discipline referrals have decreased, attendance has risen to 94%, volunteer hours have tripled, and enrollment has steadily increased. Staff see Mrs. Hunt as a champion who has shifted the school paradigm of thinking and learning so that every staff member is responsible for all of the children.

People call it "Little School with a Big Heart." Lacking funds for support personnel, Mrs. Hunt organizes community members and high school and college students to mentor students in social and academic skills. She and her staff sponsor events such as family nights, guest speakers, carnivals, reading book fairs, computer training for parents, and special breakfasts to create a bridge between school and home. Participation in parent-teacher conferences is 100%, the result of personal visits and scheduling. Family and community support is demonstrated through funds and work to create an outdoor reading classroom and a Monarch way station. Plans are underway to become a Green school and to create a natural playground. Mrs. Hunt's efforts on behalf of her students are legion and include calling absent students daily, transporting students to and from school when needed, making home visits along with teachers, sending weekly newsletters, assisting with medical needs (medication, eyeglasses, trips to the health department), and providing money for gas, food, shoes, clothing, and school supplies. To enhance the school's environment, she painted and decorated the school facility.