

INTENTIONAL STEPS AND AN INNER “FACELIFT” HELP MCES ACHIEVE REWARD SCHOOL STATUS

By Ron Barry

[Maury City Elementary School is one of two schools in the Crockett County School District to earn 2023-24 “Reward School” status; the other, Gadsden Elementary School, was featured in a separate story earlier this month.]

Sometimes, says Christine Schwartz, it’s the “little things” that make a big difference to an elementary school student.

The Maury City Elementary School principal, in her third year in the role, says that many of the innovations they’ve made at the school “may not even get noticed by the adults – but the kids see them, and we think they’ve made it a better environment for learning here.”

One entity that has noticed is the State of Tennessee, which recognized MCES as a “Reward School” for 2023-24. The State says that a school is recognized as a “Reward School” when it “demonstrates high levels of performance and/or improvement in performance.”

Only 377 schools in the entire state, across 97 districts, earned the distinction for 2023-24. For the Crockett County School District to have two of them is a tremendous achievement, said Director of Schools Phillip A. Pratt.

At Maury City, Schwartz and assistant principal Kiley Doyle have instituted a school “facelift” designed to be more encouraging to their students, increasing the frequency of the recognition they deserve for their positive achievements.

“We’ve refreshed our hall posters to focus more on recognizing the hard work our students put in,” Schwartz says. “We’ve started a program in which kids may be called to the principal’s office for a positive shoutout, rather than it being the stereotypical place of punishment. We brag on our students over the P.A. system during morning announcements. We’ve worked with all of our teachers on setting goals for their classrooms and for students to reach their Accelerated Reader points.”



Above: Administrators and teachers of Maury City Elementary School display their “Reward School” banner. (Photo courtesy of MCES)

“We added a concession reward each month for good attendance,” Doyle says. “If students don’t miss more than one day in that month, they get to come to the concession window and get a snack.” One of the words that best describes the approach Schwartz and Doyle have taken is intentionality.

“We have tried to be more intentional with a variety of things here,” Schwartz says. “We have Response to Intervention (RTI) groups set up every day, so we can do our best to keep any student from falling behind or struggling too much. But it also helps us to group the higher achievers together, so their progress isn’t limited. And all our teachers get involved in it. If one teacher’s class is at recess, you’ll see that teacher coming in and working with a small RTI group. Our data definitely shows that growth is occurring, and it allows us to set high expectations for our students. We try to evaluate students every four-to-five weeks, so we can make adjustments.”

MCES is also home to the Color Run, the school’s major fundraiser on campus in which the kids run through a course while being powdered, sprayed, chalked, and splashed with all forms of bright hues.

“We get great support from this community,” Schwartz says.

“The businesses around us are super generous as sponsors. And if we really need anything, all we have to do is ask. One or more of them will provide it.”

The school also has special lunch days for grandparents, as well as – coming up this Friday – “Lunch with a Loved One” for Valentine’s Day. MCES also hosts a “Literacy Night,” paired with a book fair, which gives Reading Ambassador Tammy Womack a chance to create her over-the-top decorations.

“Tammy does a great job with these nights,” Schwartz says. “Last year she did a circus theme. She’s done a Glow Night in the past. This year it’s going to be a luau. It’s always a highlight for the kids.” “We know that the kids love recognition,” Doyle says, “so just about anything we can do to let them know how much they’re valued here, we try to do that.”

Sometimes, the “Reward School” administrators get a reward. That came Wednesday, when a retired teacher played a recording to them of a student who rarely speaks – but her voice is loud and clear as she’s reading a book to the teacher.

It may be a “little thing” – but not to an educator. Few things are bigger to the MCES crew.



Above: Fourth-grade teacher Lindsey Massey works with a small group of students to help them understand fractions. MCES uses small group activities to facilitate learning skills. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Many of the hallway bulletin boards are used to challenge and encourage students. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Below: Assistant Principal Kiley Doyle (left) and Principal Christine Schwartz (right) have been intentional with innovations that have produced improvement in several areas. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Right: One of the innovations has been the physical "facelift" of the main office area, refreshing some areas that had not been updated in years. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: MCES uses a "Shoutouts" board in the hallway to regularly recognize student and staff accomplishments. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Left: There's no substitute for quality teachers and staff members, and MCES has those in abundance. (Photo courtesy of MCES)



Left: A beautiful new wall mural graces the entrance hallway at Maury City; you won't forget where you are. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Below: Photos of students in learning mode, taken by music teacher Chloe Lollar, line the halls as an encouragement to keep growing. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Right: Children enjoy playing in the beautiful MCEs gymnasium, which houses many of the school's major activities. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Below: To sustain good attendance -- one of the factors in being a Reward School -- students get to come to the concession stands for treats if they haven't missed more than a day in that month. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Above: MCEs gets great support from the community, as illustrated by the number of sponsors who contributed to the school's "Color Run" in the fall. (Photo by Ron Barry)



Right: This decoration is set up for use in Friday's "Lunch with a Loved One" event, honoring Valentine's Day. (Photo by Ron Barry)

Left: A final reminder to the students graces Lindsey Massey's classroom wall... (Photo by Ron Barry)

