

# PRINCIPAL FOCUS

## Getting to Know Principal Michael McAlister

(Part 2 of 3)

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- Michael McAlister, Principal, Northgate High School



### **Tell us about your teaching and administrative experiences prior to Northgate. What did you learn from these experiences?**

I started teaching in 1993. As mentioned, it was at my alma mater, Stanley Middle School in Lafayette, and I had the good fortune of teaching U.S. History to 8th graders for two and a half years. I was then hired to teach government, economics, AP comparative government and psychology at Acalanes High School. At Acalanes, it was all seniors, all day. Pretty amazing experience and more fun than you could ever imagine. After 15 years in the classroom, I decided to take a job at Miramonte High School as one of their Vice Principals. I was worried that I'd miss the classroom and hate the administrative grind but, on the contrary, I enjoyed the job a great deal. I mean I will always miss the classroom, but I truly enjoy looking for ways to improve education from the ecosystem level. In administration there is always an opportunity, in other words, to engage systemic change that can better the experience for every stakeholder in a given school community. Every day I lean on the experiences I had in the Acalanes Union High School District both as a teacher and for those three years as an administrator before coming here to Northgate. I had great training there in a number of ways and I'm glad to be able to share what I've learned with this school community.

### **Is it true you have a background in theater and improv? Tell us about that.**

It is true. I had this great apartment in East Harlem that I shared with two other college friends. While they worked on Wall Street, I tended bar, and spent a fair amount of time on stage. On a dare, I started doing some stand-up comedy and decided my prospects were good enough to move back to California where the opportunities, at that time, were still pretty decent for fairly funny guys with receding hairlines. Those were some good years. I was nearly penniless but I made life-long friendships and wouldn't trade the experiences, both on stage and off, for anything.

### **What is your philosophy of education?**

I believe that high expectations are the key to learning. This applies, however, not only to the student but to the teacher, the administrator and the parent community as well. We should expect each other to continually do what's possible to bring our A-game for the sake of all concerned. With this said, sometimes our A-game suffers. And this is okay. It merely means we have to rely on each other to maintain the overall health of our efforts. So rallying around the high expectations we set for ourselves and others so that we can continually support learning and growth can't help but make the world a better place. And that's why, I believe, we are here to make the world a better place. High expectations lead us into a place where we can support each other and our kids to continually become better people, better citizens, better stewards of the planet, better partners and better parents.

### **Common Core is a controversial national program. Where do you stand?**

At first, it appeared to me that the Common Core effort was just another push at reform that wouldn't amount to much. I've been in the education business long enough to know how movements like this come and go. But as I started to look into the philosophical underpinnings of it all, it became apparent that something valuable was unfolding. To give an example, when I started teaching, there was broad autonomy in terms of how one might teach a class. Academics argued that this free-for-all is part of what led to our nation being at risk

educationally and, to a large degree, I see this as accurate. Then the standards movement arose in educational circles, holding everyone accountable to agreed-upon standards for each grade level. The trouble was that it was difficult to hit all of these marks without often turning teachers and students into automatons. No Child Left Behind pushed this a step further, in some cases positively, but the fact remained that students still appeared to be losing ground when compared to other kids around the world. The Common Core came about as a response to this gap. But all it really does is scaffold and integrate the skills we want to see demonstrated by our kids into an already existing curriculum. If you look at the great educational success story of Finland, for example, you can see Common Core's inspiration. So here's the question that Common Core (now simply called, California State Standards) seeks to answer: How do we get kids to be good thinkers? I see this orientation to be both appropriate and exciting. No teacher is being told what they can or can't teach. Rather, they are being asked to use existing curriculum to support the kinds of skills we all want to see our graduates master. Every student at Northgate, for example, should learn how to effectively communicate, how to think critically, how to create, how to collaborate and how to connect with the world. We call them the Five Cs: communicate, critically think, create, collaborate and connect. Emphasizing this will help each of our students be successful as they enter college and build their careers.

**Your mantra is developing happy, healthy, and innovative kids. What do you mean by that?**

It's more important that we teach kids how to be good people than it is to teach them how to be good students. I was recently in Hong Kong visiting classrooms and I was amazed at how the students, who tended to outscore most of the world in the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) and TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) assessments, appeared to be good students but not necessarily the best thinkers. Their teachers backed this up suggesting that getting kids to score well on tests is easy, getting them to think requires bucking a great deal of cultural influence. As a side, there is no group on the planet that appears to be able to think as innovatively as American students. With this in mind, I think we serve our students and ourselves when we add to the quantitative ethos that looks for measurable success with qualitative goals that support good lives. Numbers matter, to be sure. But so does being happy, healthy. So does being innovative. Balancing this external drive for quantifiable excellence, with the kinds of interiority that brings smiles and deeper peace to one's self and to others makes for the kind of world I hope future generations can inherit.

**Thanks for bringing this up. You seem very concerned about kids developing an internal sense of who they are, not just their test scores. Explain.**

I had the good fortune of spending a morning with a group of HGSE (Harvard Graduate School of Ed.) faculty who were talking about this. Keep in mind, these are the very people who pushed the Standards movement, looking for accountability and measurable outcomes about twenty years ago. Among these professors was Dr. Bruno della Chiesa who told the group that his research is showing again and again that our push for numbers has led us to a place of what he calls quantophobia, where schools around the world have lost the art of teaching internality and have succumbed to ONLY teaching things that can be measured. SATs, ACTs, GPAs, and CAASPP tests, while important, only tell us part of a student's story. There is more to being a success, he said, than ones measurable stature, be it scores, degree or income. He then mentioned to this group of academic lions, that U.S. students are missing interiority, which was met with sounds of agreement from the panel. The topic of Mindfulness training then came up and, to a person, agreed that teaching stillness showed amazing promise in terms of student health as well as academic achievement. The most brilliant, jaded, seen-it-all-before experts on the subject of education all agreed that Mindfulness training, where internal peace is cultivated, was among the most promising developments the field of education has seen in the last century. Which is why I'm so thrilled that our PFC is supporting it at Northgate. My sense is that, over time, this will have a profound impact on students, teachers, parents and the culture of this great place.

**You often talk about excellence for and from all students. How do you think Northgate is doing in achieving excellence?**

I am continually impressed and heartened by what I get to see each day. I've got, after all, a front row seat at a very exciting contest, so to speak. The challenge is to see if we can deliver our best effort at every opportunity. This goes for, as I've said, all of us: students, teachers, administration, staff, coaches and parents. Since my arrival two and a half years ago, we've seen scores increase and graduation rates increase. We've improved the physical site with new lockers and a beautiful pool, with more on the way including a new turf for our stadium field, a remodeled atrium, and a new, marquee out front. What's most impressive to me is the quality of people that are working to make these things happen at Northgate. It's intangible and it can't really be measured, but in my entire career, I haven't seen a better, more engaged, dedicated and gifted group of people in one building. I've worked at some of the best schools in the state and yet I think we are approaching a level of performance that surpasses anything I've yet seen. We've got lots of things we can improve, to be sure, but it's not an exaggeration to say that we are fast becoming one of the best schools in the state.