Fostering Opportunity

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—Robert Jennings, Jr. ’77

he Dr. Arthur F. Sullivan Middle School (SMS) reflects some of the interesting challenges that exist in the Worcester school system. Most of its 800 students come from families that live below the poverty level, and nearly 75 percent come from an array of cultures and countries. In addition, 25 percent require special education. Robert Jennings, Jr. ’77, the principal, views his role as creating an environment where each student has the opportunity to learn and achieve the American dream.

“My expectation is that our teachers will do their very best every day, in every class with every child,” said Jennings, who has principal since 2005. “We create a rigorous classroom experience that encourages each child to achieve more than he or she thought possible.”

In Jennings’ opinion, the commitment of his staff and students has created “the best school in the city in terms of camaraderie and mutual respect.” It is a situation that must constantly be nurtured and the standards clearly defined. It is not a quick fix in any school – he started as assistant principal at Sullivan Middle School in 2000.

SMS has four academies that are geared toward the needs and skills of its various students. All the academies practice the same essential instructional approach to create consistency throughout the school and Jennings regularly observes classes to maintain a strong presence in the school.

“Our greatest challenge is to fulfill needs that are not being filled outside of school due to a lack of resources – such as financial, food or time on task,” he said. “This is difficult, but we do what we can for the benefit of our students, their education and well-being.”

Jennings draws upon lessons he learned at Assumption to deal with challenges. “When I came to Assumption, I learned how to process information and think for myself,” he recalled. Professors encouraged him to do the research to find answers. That’s a skill that remains important as he considers new approaches to the issues at SMS.

The importance of leadership and commitment also were reinforced at Assumption. A political science major, Jennings was challenged by professors such as Pat Powers, Jack Crutcher and Ken Mounihan AP’64 and influenced by Professors Paul Douillard ’70, Roberta Schaefer and Fr. Gerard Messier, A.A. His athletic experiences through track and with the basketball team and coach Joe O’Brien ’57, helped shape him.

Today, Jennings understands the influence of being visible and accessible. By collecting trash from the students at lunch with fellow employees, he keeps his fingers on the pulse of school. Students feel comfortable telling him about potential problems. “The kids like it at Sullivan because it is safe; the teachers care and everyone steps up to take care of what needs to be done.”

Having been a 7th grade teacher for eight years, Jennings recognizes the devotion and excellence of his faculty and staff. He also has great pride in the Assumption graduates who work with him; including Head of Guidance Kathleen Noponen ’79, G’84; Guidance Counselor Ryan Connor G’08; Special Education Teacher Aldona Pauliukonis ’79; and School Clinician Rita Haley G’10, a recent hire.

Jennings didn’t go immediately into education after graduating from Assumption. He began his career as mutual fund distributor before landing a position in residence life at UMass-Amherst. There he earned a M.Ed. and honed his instructional skills as a substitute teacher. While serving as director of housing at Worcester State he was encouraged to become a teacher and “took a pay cut but became a happier man” as a 7th grade history teacher at Worcester’s Forest Grove Middle School. “It was the highlight of my working career because the students are so much fun,” he said. “You can tell when they’re learning something because they almost want to apply it immediately.”

Encouraged by Worcester Superintendent of Schools Dr. James Carradonio, Jennings completed a two-year program to become an administrator. On the day he earned his license, he was hired at Sullivan Middle School.

His commitment to the community extends beyond his role in the school system. Jennings was a high school and college basketball referee for more than 30 years and coached basketball at Girls, Inc. for several years. He has also been an umpire, a volunteer with the United Way and is involved in numerous leadership and mentoring activities through Sullivan Middle School, which he finds highly rewarding.

Family is a solid grounding for him. His wife Marcela is assistant dean/director of the office of Multicultural Affairs at Worcester State University. “Without her all that I’ve achieved probably would not have happened,” said Jennings. They reside in Worcester with their daughters Cheyenne (17) and Kiana (15).

A native of Springfield, MA, Jennings parents were his heroes. “I always wanted to be like them. My dad was a dedicated community servant and my mom worked with kids. They paved a path that I could follow and choose what I wanted to do. Now, I want to help others find their path.”

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By Troy Watkins