

“My Vision Became a Reality”

An Interview with Beverly Hibbler, Principal of the Detroit International Academy

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Photo credit Cetaura Bell

Beverly Hibbler has been involved in the education field for more years that she is willing to admit. Currently, she is principal of the Detroit International Academy, an all-girls school in central Detroit; a secondary school (grades 6-12) that serves primarily African American girls. It is a public school, not a charter school, operated under the authority of Detroit Public Schools. Beverly (shown in the photo at right) shares how her dream came true – to be a principal of an all-girls’ academy.



Ferrara: How did you get to the place you are today – the principal of an all-girls’ academy?

Hibbler: I have worked with Detroit Public schools for a long time and have worked with all-girls’ programs and schools for over 20 years. I was an all-girls’ acting counselor and the assistant principal of Catherine Ferguson Academy, an alternative Detroit public school for teen moms. When I was at Ferguson, we noticed that many students would pretend that they were pregnant so they could attend because it was smaller than the traditional high school. My dream has always been to be the principal of an all-girls prep school. When I worked in central administration for one year, I shared this dream with my superintendent. Before too long, I was sharing my dream at the state capitol in Lansing speaking to legalize same gender education in Michigan. The following fall, my dream came true when the district opened an all-girls’ academy in Detroit and I became the principal. It is truly a blessing to see your vision/dream turn into a reality!

Ferrara: What grades are in the school?

Hibbler: The school opened in 2005 with 95 girls in 9th and 10th grade. We were in a small building, so we moved in the second year to a large high school. In 2007, we enrolled students in high school (9-12). Last year, we added middle school (6-8), and this year, we added K-5. This is especially significant in a city where the population is declining because of low employment. We still are able to move forward despite the fact that Detroit has become one of the poorest cities in the country with one of the highest unemployment rates. Right now, our enrollment is around 530 students. This fall, with the addition of one class per grade in K-5, we expect our enrollment to grow to approximately 700 students. We are the only Detroit Public School that has a K-12 program.

The school is located at 9026 Woodward which is in the center of Detroit. Our school has a swimming pool, a dance studio, and wonderful space overall. We have expanded our program, so we can now include an all-female JROTC battalion. We were able to start our sports program, which includes volleyball, dance, track, tennis, swimming, cheer leading team, and basketball. We are partners with Central Michigan University through the Upward Bound program. This summer, 20 of our girls attended a summer program at Central. The admissions advisor requested that we send transcripts of seven girls who possibly could be admitted next semester.

Ferrara: Is the school population predominately African – American? How are students selected?

Hibbler: At this time, our population is largely African-American. We are pleased that our program is appealing to parents from around the Metro Detroit area, particularly the Bangladeshi population (around 45-50 students are Bangladeshi). One of the reasons is because our school's student population is same gender and that is appealing to the Bangladeshi culture. We also have students who come from the suburbs into the district. Typically, these are parents who work in the downtown area and provide their own transportation. Most of our students come from all over the Detroit metropolitan area. Students are selected based on their GPA (around 2.0); students with a GPA of less than a 2.0 may be selected but they are accepted on probation and have to sign an academic contract. Our school is a Detroit Public School but students from other districts are allowed to attend.

Ferrara: Do students and teachers in your school wear uniforms?

Hibbler: The high school students wear pink and black uniforms. They wear their formal uniform on Wednesday - pink oxford shirt, black vest, and a black and white glen plaid skirt along with black nylons and dress shoes. Students must also wear their formal uniform for every field trip. On the other days, high school students wear a pink oxford shirt, black pants or a black skirt. Middle school students wear black and white and in the near future, the elementary students will wear a glen plaid jumper and white blouse. The entire staff has agreed to wear a uniform – pink oxford shirt and either black pants or a black skirt.

Ferrara: How have the staff and you built a relationship with each other and the students?

Hibbler: This school has been successful because of team building and a shared vision. We keep the vision ever present and clear through various activities. We have different social activities where we celebrate birthdays, births, and retirements, for example. On every professional development day, we do a team building activity for part of the day. Everyone in the school is expected to be a member of the team - the custodial staff, the cafeteria staff, teachers, and counselors. All of our team comes together at least once a year for a holiday meal. We plan it at a time so that students get out early so everyone can come together as a group.

Ninety percent of our staff chooses to be here. They request transfers during the summer to be assigned in the fall. When a teacher is interviewed, I ask each one this question: "Are you willing to work extra hours after school?" If a teacher answers that she or he leaves when the bell rings, this is not the place for that teacher. Our staff retention rate is great! – Since opening in 2005, 3 teachers have requested a transfer – one wanted to go to a high-achieving school. Three have requested to come back; however, we had only one position available. The other teachers either retired or were promoted. All of our retired teachers have agreed to come back and volunteer.

Ferrara: How does the curriculum at the school compare to the district curriculum?

Hibbler: We align our curriculum with the district curriculum. We go beyond, however, and try to dispel the myth that girls do not perform well in math and science. We make sure that they are given additional opportunities to excel in these areas. There are 40 girls enrolled in Robotics (pre-engineering) and 15-20 girls in Lego league, and 20 girls in "You Be the Chemist." Our 2010 Senior Class Valedictorian who happened to be the Robotics captain received a full scholarship (winner of Millennium Gates scholarship) and is presently attending the University of Michigan, majoring in engineering. The middle school students are involved in chess which will soon be available for high school students. We are unique in that we request that all of our incoming ninth graders enroll in Junior ROTC leadership (JROTC) program. This year we created a similar program for selected students in middle school. We also have arts – the citywide dance department, vocal and instrumental, and art. Our art teachers have partnered with Pewabic pottery; they pay our girls during the summer to work 20 hours a week. They must do the assigned work for Pewabic and create an art piece that is displayed in our school.

Ferrara: Describe the type of teacher who teaches at the school.

Hibbler: The teachers share the school's vision. Our school is expanding and the administration interviews the teachers who will be selected. Therefore, we end up hiring only teachers who want to be here. You must have a desire to work in a same gender environment and especially to work with all girls. We are all in this together and have created a magnificent team. Every now and then, a teacher is assigned here and that usually does not work out. Most of the teachers are African-American but we do have a diverse staff – white, Hispanic, Asian, and Indian. Thirty percent of the teachers are male and 70% are female.

Ferrara: What professional development have you provided for specific staff development at your school that focuses on females and their learning style?

Hibbler: Usually at the beginning of the school year, every teacher gets a copy of *Why Gender Matters* by Leonard Sax and we have a book study where we discuss various chapters. This year, we will also include *Girls on the Edge*, Dr. Sax's latest book. We have done this since we opened. We always talk about what works for girls in our staff meetings. We talk about the issues that confront girls – self-esteem, empowerment, bullying, harassment, cell phones, etc.

Ferrara: How do your local partners help you?

Hibbler: Our local school community organization is excellent. They handle the uniforms; they collect donated uniforms from our seniors; and they dry clean them and get them ready for the next year. Fortunately, I don't have to assume the responsibility of distributing uniforms.

We have parents on our school improvement team. The LSCO (Local School Community Organization) chair is on our school improvement team. We also have a designated area in the school specifically for parents called the "Parent Center."

If we did not have partners, our activities would be limited. For example, Chase Bank helps with the robotics team, and Inside Out Poetry. They also help with the cultural activities that are related to education. For example, we actually had the Alvin Alley dance troop do a two-week residency project with our students and over 200 girls were able to attend one of their performances. They also sponsored cultural field trips to the opera and various museums in the metropolitan Detroit area. Chase sponsored a six-week summer work program for 20 students through Pewabic Pottery.

Another sponsor is the Links, Detroit Chapter which is an organization of professional women. They serve as mentors for our students and sponsor all kinds of activities such as field trips, health fairs, and mother / daughter teas. In fact, the Links donated \$5,000 to be used to purchase uniforms for students in need of assistance. The Horatio Williams Foundation donated 100 jumpers and blouses for our elementary students and pledged to continue working with our students for continuous academic and social support. Finally, DTE (Detroit Edison) help sponsors our robotics team and other science-related programs to conserve energy.

Ferrara: What are some powerful stories you can share about your experiences at the school?

Hibbler: Yes it is true that all of the girls and their parents probably have my cell number. I did not give the number out publicly; however, the students must have circulated the number over the years. As a matter of fact, one night I received a call from a student at 11:45 PM. She wanted to know if summer school had been cancelled due to the heat. She apologized for waking me up and said she just wanted to make sure she didn't miss school. Most of the time, parents and students will call for a specific reason and not just to have a friendly or unfriendly chat.

Another student admitted that she never made the honor roll and had always been an average student who just did enough to get by. However, I convinced her that it was possible for her to make the honor roll and even have all A's. When she received her report card she came to my office with tears in her eyes. I asked her what was wrong and she replied that she had earned all A's and a B. She was happy yet disappointed. Since it was the mid-term grade, I told her not to give up that she could probably earn a 4.0. After the final marking, she came to my office with tears in her eyes once again. This time she had tears of absolute joy because she had

accomplished her goal and earned a 4.0. She told me that no one ever believed that she was capable of being successful. By the way, she earned a 4.0 each semester until she graduated.

“Natalie is here!” This is the message I receive from my secretary when Natalie arrives in our office. Natalie usually writes a letter or poem to the administration expressing student concerns. The concerns may include anything from students being disrespectful in the auditorium to complaints about teachers. But, I would like to close with something that happens several times during the year – notes from students. The other day, I was on the phone and I asked a student who was waiting to see me to just write me a note and I would get back to her. Here is what she wrote:

Dear Ms. Hibbler,

I just want to say thank you for everything. I'm glad that I came to DIA because if I hadn't, I don't know where I would be at this point. Now that we are going to have the lower grades, I want my little sisters to come here in the fall so they won't have to be in an environment where people don't care about them. Since I've been at DIA, my grades have improved and I'm looking forward to attending college. Thank you for being there for the students and staff at DIA.

Jerese

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