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Little Milligan School excels through community and caring for students

By [Jason R. Mullins](#)

In an era where education in the United States has embraced value-added test scores, standardized testing and the policies of the No Child Left Behind Act, administrators and teachers at one Carter County elementary school are achieving success through unconventional methods.



J.R. Campbell

Nestled along a section of mountain byway on U.S. Highway 321, Little Milligan Elementary School is located in one of the most rural sections of Carter County. The K-8 school, which has a present enrollment of 155 students, prides itself on a strong sense of community and family.

J.R. Campbell has been principal at LMES for the past 11 years. A native of Carter County and the Little Milligan community, Campbell makes a point of speaking to every student, teacher and support staff member as he walks past them in the hallways of the school.

The LMES principal said the school was recently asked to develop a mission statement. “More important than standardized test scores or value-added numbers is one simple fact,” he said. “I want every person who walks down this hallway to feel like the most important person who has ever walked through this school.”

Ray Don Markland is the Assistant Principal and an upper grade reading teacher for LMES. A 19-year veteran of Little Milligan, Markland believes the success of the school and what makes it a special place can be attributed to a “sincere concern for the students. We know all of the kids by name. I have several kids who are the children of my former students. We know the kids. We know their families. We know the community,” Markland said.

Suzette Markland, 5-8 English teacher, has also taught at the school for 16 years. “The ultimate difference in being able to teach a child is not how much education they have. It’s not about where they’re from or what gender they are. It’s not about any of those things. It’s 100 percent about loving the kids and being concerned about them as people,” Markland said.

Both Marklands commented that Campbell, who is also a third grade teacher at LMES, demonstrates his concern, his compassion and his caring for every student at the school on a daily basis. They believe his success as principal and as a teacher can be attributed to his genuineness. “He truly likes people. He has the ability to make everyone feel special,” said Mrs. Markland.

Campbell recently learned that he was named as one of 18 individuals in Tennessee to be recognized as one of the most effective principals in the state by the Education Consumers Foundation. He earned Third Place in the East Region. Unlike most education awards, the foundation noted the contest is entirely based on objectively measured achievement gains.

The top three elementary schools from the Volunteer State’s three Grand Divisions were chosen based on their average achievement gains from the last three school years. The Education Consumers Foundation excluded schools with principals who have served less than five years at their current school.

Little Milligan Elementary School will receive a \$1,000 cash prize as part of the award. The foundation stresses that the money is given to each winning school “with no strings attached.”

The school will be able to use the money in the way they best see fit to improve educational services.

The 18 educators named as the Principals of the Year will be recognized in a special ceremony on Monday, May 14, at the Tennessee Supreme Court in Nashville. Each principal will be presented with a certificate, a flag and a check at the event.

Campbell said he is honored to receive the recognition. He admits, “I don’t know much about value-added. I don’t know much about the different categories. But I do understand what it takes to have a good school. I think that’s why we were selected for this award. I really do have the best job in the State of Tennessee. Last year, I had only one student who was sent to my office. That’s because he told me he had to have the last word. I told him I had to have the last word,” Campbell joked.

In addition to Campbell, LMES teacher Melissa McClain was also recently honored by the Worth Ave. Group’s “Teacher of the Year” contest. The company specializes in providing insurance for consumer electronics, including laptops, desktops, iPhones and many other types of products.

McClain said the winners of the contest were selected by online voting. She noted, “When the faculty first learned about the contest, we felt as if there was no way to compete with the larger schools and systems all over the nation. Through prayers, emails, word of mouth and social networking, the contest grew and grew.”

As the contest progressed, McClain said she was amazed by the number of students, teachers and community members who went online to social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, to

ask for support. "I received notifications from students and emails from friends and family telling me about the people who were voting for us. It was almost as if the contest took on a life of its own," she said.

When the voting period ended and the votes were tallied, McClain learned she had finished in second place for teacher of the year. Worth Ave. Group will award Little Milligan Elementary a \$1,000 technology grant. McClain will also receive a new Apple iPad. "To come in second place in the entire nation in voting is a great accomplishment for Little Milligan," she commented. "I am truly honored by the support shown for Little Milligan, and for myself. This is a great thing for our school, and we are pleased to have been a part of the contest."

Staff members at Little Milligan commented that despite the challenges created by the number of economically disadvantaged students, they work together as a family to prepare students to succeed throughout their lives.

The Marklands commented that they also believe the rural location of the school is one of its greatest strengths. "In some ways," said Mrs. Markland, "the values are from a different time. We don't have the problems with discipline that a lot of other schools have. We can leave the room for a minute and the students don't go wild while we're gone."

Campbell said Little Milligan Elementary is a special place because of the community, the teachers, the students and its location. "This is truly a great place for kids to go to school," he said. "School and church are a lot alike. You bring them in. You show them love. Everything else is easy. If you want a kid to learn, you have to love them."

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