



Pennell Honored

Head Cougar is Principal of the Year

By Hilary Snow
Staff Writer, State Port Pilot

When he became the principal of South Brunswick High School nearly four years ago, Vann Pennell didn't make any promises.

He didn't rush relationships with students and teachers. He wasn't quick to make changes, and improvements didn't happen overnight.

He may have started out slowly, but Pennell finished ahead Friday when he was selected as the 2008-09 Brunswick County Principal of the Year during a recognition luncheon at the Progress Energy Media Center.

Pennell, Supply Elementary principal Dwight Willis and West Brunswick High principal George Kelley were nominated for the title this year by teachers and fellow principals.

A panel of his peers – including retired local educators and teachers and administrators from other districts – then selected him from among the nominees.

“Vann Pennell has taken on South Brunswick High School at a slow pace,” Brunswick County Schools superintendent Dr. Katie McGee said during the luncheon Friday. “Year one, he didn't promise anything. Any strong leader won't promise anything. Year two, the vision of the principals and the teachers were blended. We started to see an incline, but it was small. By year three, we started seeing things breaking right wide open.”

The pay-off for Pennell's careful approach, McGee said, has come in a recent decrease in dropout rates, an increase in student involvement in extracurricular activities and steady improvements in end-of-course test scores. For the last two years, the high school has been among the best in the state for tenth-grade writing test results.

What his approach boils down to, McGee said, is investing time in finding long-term solutions, not looking for quick fixes.

That investment, she added, is why Pennell has been such a successful school leader throughout his career.

“His number-one focus in everything he has ever done is caring for people and building relationships. It takes a leader with the ability and the willingness to put in more than eight hours,” McGee said.

Pennell came to South Brunswick High School from Camden County High School, a school that under his leadership was one of the top ten in the state.

On paper and “in his heart,” McGee said Pennell has what it takes to be a top contender in regional and state principal of the year contests.

He has been a teacher, a coach, a principal and an assistant superintendent. He is a former teacher of the year and regional principal of the year.

“What he has got on his resume and in his heart, I know, will put him in line for regional and state principal of the year,” McGee said.

Still, Pennell told the other Brunswick County principals in attendance Friday that he was embarrassed to be standing before them.

“It’s not about me and never has been about me,” he said.

And, stressful though it may sometimes be, Pennell said being a principal wasn’t such a difficult job to do.

“If you love kids and respect kids, and they find a way to love and respect you, then it’s an easy job,” he said.

Pennell received a plaque from Brunswick County Schools. Communities in Schools (CIS), which co-sponsors the annual principal of the year luncheon, presented Pennell with a gift basket.

“In a positive way, I am sort of envious of you,” attorney Jim MacCallum, who is chairman of the CIS Board of Directors, told principals at the close of the luncheon.

“Look at the lives you touch every single day.”