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Since then, the AJC has cleared out its archives, so it is now only available in the form in which I originally submitted it to Maureen Downey's Get Schooled education blog.

Great Georgia Teacher Bettina Polite Tate, Marketing, Johnson HS, Savannah By Peter Smagorinsky

Sol C. Johnson High, located on Savannah's east side, is known as the Atom Smashers when it takes to the sporting fields. Perhaps this moniker follows from its original name, the Powell Laboratory School, when it was founded in 1959 under the administration of Savannah State College (now University). Presently a public school described as "urban" in character, Johnson High uses "Not to Equal but to Excel" as its motto. Such an ambition can only be achieved through the efforts of great teachers like Bettina Polite Tate, a marketing teacher and International Baccalaureate Business and Management Instructor, who was named Savannah-Chatham County Public School System's 2011 Teacher of the Year.



Bettina is a Johnson HS alumna and graduate of Savannah State University, with a bachelor's degree in business administration and master's in public administration. She's a ball of fire, dedicating herself wholeheartedly to the lives of young people enrolled at JHS, especially in her provision of multiple pathways for entering the business world. She is not of the "Greed is good" persuasion that seems to govern much commerce, if Wall Street excess is any indication. Rather, she sees work in business environments as stimulating, healthy, and good for both individuals and communities.

What makes her a great teacher? Like most who achieve greatness in the classroom, no single facet of her career distinguishes her as exceptional. Rather, she brings a varied skill set to her teaching that enables her students to work at levels previously not expected of them. I'll next describe what those assets are and how she puts them into play in her broad-based work as a public educator.

The first quality is possibly the most controversial, yet I suspect is the most fundamental to her sense of mission in education. Bettina is a devout Christian. Like many teachers, she views teaching as a calling that gives her life meaning not available in strictly fiduciary careers. She worked in the insurance industry before launching her teaching career in 2005. A pivotal point for her came when she read Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life* and began to talk with her family about what might provide her with a fulfilling means through which to combine her quest for a higher purpose with her hopes for a robust career. These conversations led to her decision to become a teacher. In spite of taking a sizable cut in pay in departing industry for the classroom, Bettina feels enriched by her decision: "I help people obtain what they need, I negotiate for successful futures, and I am wealthy with respect, love, and knowledge."

I begin with Bettina's faith with some trepidation, given the controversies surrounding the separation of church and state (including school) and my belief in pluralistic communities. I am not promoting Christianity itself here, or urging prayer in schools; my own belief system is not based on religious faith of any kind, so I'm not one to push that agenda. As a resident of the South and Southwest for most of my life (Virginia for my first 16 years, and Oklahoma and Georgia since 1990), and as a Bible Belt teacher educator for 22+ years, I have come to know many teachers who found their vision of education in Biblical notions of good works. This profound commitment to the public good is surely a good thing, no matter what its origin, and I have seen a similar dedication following from teachers with adherence to Jewish and Muslim faiths.

If Bettina is any indication of how a faith-based belief in the potential of young people can inspire extraordinary teaching in a secular setting, then I'm all for it, even as I recognize that many great teachers excel without relying on a foundation of religion. Undoubtedly, the higher purpose that she has found as an educator provides the spirit behind her extraordinary dedication to helping young people find vigorous and rewarding ways of succeeding in mainstream society. I have met many such teachers in Georgia whose faith communities inspire them to regard teaching as a profession that enables them to employ their heartfelt compassion for others in service of academic and professional opportunities for young people.

So, what does that work look like in practice? When Bettina began teaching at Johnson HS in 2005-2006, the school's business offerings were slim. She launched the marketing program with 3 sections of Marketing Principals, and at the outset, the enrollment per section was under 20 students—all in a Class AAAA school of considerable size. Meanwhile, the school's Distributive Education Clubs of America (DECA) chapter included only 14 students. Her dedication to building the school's business curriculum produced astronomical growth and success: By 2010 the program employed 3 full-time marketing teachers, enrolled 212 members in DECA, increased its DECA advisory board tenfold, and provided enough courses in marketing to develop Marketing Management and Marketing Promotions & Communications pathways. As a program builder, Bettina has been incomparable in identifying a need, instituting a plan, enduring early setbacks, and investing her considerable passion and energy into its rapid growth into one of her school's most dynamic academic units.

Business courses can be taught out of books, and I suspect that a bookish approach would not result in the dramatic levels of interest that Bettina quickly engendered among JHS students. In contrast, she has emphasized real-world engagement as part of a business education. Bettina's efforts follow from her belief that an outstanding teacher "identifies students' strengths, talents, and abilities and provides them with real-world opportunities to enhance and perfect their natural interest and attributes." Like many other great teachers, Bettina does not view the classroom as an enclave discreet from the rough-and-tumble of the world outside. Indeed, among her great achievements in the classroom is that she has built a sturdy bridge from her instruction to authentic business opportunities in the world without.

To help Johnson HS students relate school to authentic work, Bettina instituted the student-run Smasher Marketing Firm, through which students gain experience in a variety of roles in offering

marketing assistance to local small businesses and non-profit groups in Savannah. She is also the faculty supervisor for the student-run Smasher Stop and Shop school store, which is embedded in the curriculum to enable students to learn effective marketing strategies involved in operating a real business, all for academic credit. To help institutionalize her business program and provide additional means of engagement, she supervises a variety of student activities, including the DECA student affiliate and the [Gulfstream Student Leadership Program](#).

That just isn't enough for her, however. To help her students link their school-based learning with real-world business practices and to provide a clearer pathway from high school to college, she developed a partnership with Savannah State University's College of Business so that her students and the SSU students work together on projects of national interest, such as the FBI Employee Recruitment Marketing campaign. Johnson HS students can also use an internet platform to take college-level marketing courses through SSU for college credit. To expand the business curriculum, Bettina trained in the International Baccalaureate program so that she could include the IB Business Management and Marketing course, also available for college credit, among her students' opportunities. Bettina further instituted the Market My Company & Product project, which requires students to write a business plan, develop a product, and market it successfully, with funds helping to finance the many initiatives that she has begun at Johnson HS. Her work has taken Johnson HS from having a bare-bones business program to one that has earned the state's and nation's top rankings for its DECA chapter.

Bettina's interest in making school an authentic learning experience has moved her to become active, along with her students, in community service. She is heavily involved in JHS's programs for recycling, [Teachers as Advisors](#), Christmas for the Elderly, and [SCJ Mega Fest](#), Johnson HS's year-end event in which such themes as "Celebrating Success" are realized in student organizations' booths and activities designed both to reward achievement and recruit new students to the good clean fun available in worthwhile school involvement. After initially bootstrapping Mega Fest into existence, Bettina now presides over a gala event that draws 1,500 participants who benefit from the updraft that her programs enable for students who, just 7 years ago, had no such opportunities available.

Bettina says that her "commitment to the community shows youth and fellow educators that we all have a far-reaching responsibility and can make our community better by being intimately involved in it." She is heavily involved in community functions, including two honor sororities, [Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority](#) and Iota Phi Lambda, both of which provide young African American women with pipelines to achievement and prosperity. She has also founded a pair of service organizations, the Youth of Elite Community Organizations and [Fully Armored Teen Camp at Con-Ed Family Resource Center](#). Other partnerships include the relationships she established between Johnson HS and [Economic Empowerment](#), a program sponsored by 100 Black Men of Savannah, Inc.; a partnership with the WTOC Channel 11 Marketing & Media Career Explorer Post; and an affiliation with the Savannah Sand Gnats Baseball Team.

This community involvement includes more extended charitable efforts. In 2005-06, Bettina's marketing students raised over \$15,000 to offset the medical bills for an injured Johnson HS student athlete. She has also coordinated the school's Hurricane Katrina Relief effort, a school-wide clean-up and recycling program, and the annual school drive to collect canned food, toys,

and blankets for indigent community members. In her spare time, I guess, she is also helping the school develop a student-run newspaper.

Oh yes, she's pretty good in the classroom, too. As a teacher, she says, "I model what I expect. I discuss my interest, career, and academic goals with students and I share the behaviors that I enact to accomplish them (the goals). In turn, I encourage students to discuss their goals with me. Then, I work as a facilitator to help them take actions to be successful." I have never been in her classrooms, so can't personally attest to what she's doing on a day-to-day basis. But in the aggregate, there appears to be consensus on the fact that she does it pretty well, given the following recognition just in the last few years:

- Johnson High Class of 2008 Best Teacher Ever Award
- Johnson High CTE Teacher of the Year 2009
- Johnson High Teacher of the Year 2010-2011
- WTOC Top Teacher May 2009
- GMEA Teacher of the Month April 2009
- SCCPSS district Teacher of the Year 2010-2011
- Finalist, Georgia Teacher of the Year 2010-2011
- Georgia Marketing Educators Association Marketing Teacher of the Year 2010-2011
- Iota Phi Lambda Sorority Outstanding Educator Award 2009, 2010
- Georgia Marketing Teacher of the Year 2010-2011

Great teachers are often involved in professional leadership, and Bettina's appointment to Nathan Deal's Education Advisory Board and the Georgia Professional Standards Commission (Ethics Committee), along with her recognition as an Outstanding Georgia Citizen by the Secretary of State, suggests that her star is rising at the state level. And she's not nearly done yet. She continues to increase her wealth of knowledge by completing her Specialist degree in Educational Leadership in May 2010 and pursuing her Doctoral degree in Educational Leadership from Mercer University.

Like the other great Georgia teachers I have profiled, Bettina is a multiple-tool star. She works well above and beyond her job description to make school relevant for her students. She is a dynamic program builder whose efforts have created untold opportunities for JHS students. She has built bridges from JHS to a variety of local businesses, services, and postsecondary outlets through which students may develop positive life trajectories. She's one great teacher, and we are mighty lucky to have her on our side.