

Denson: West like any other middle school

Catisha Marsh
Sentinel-Voice

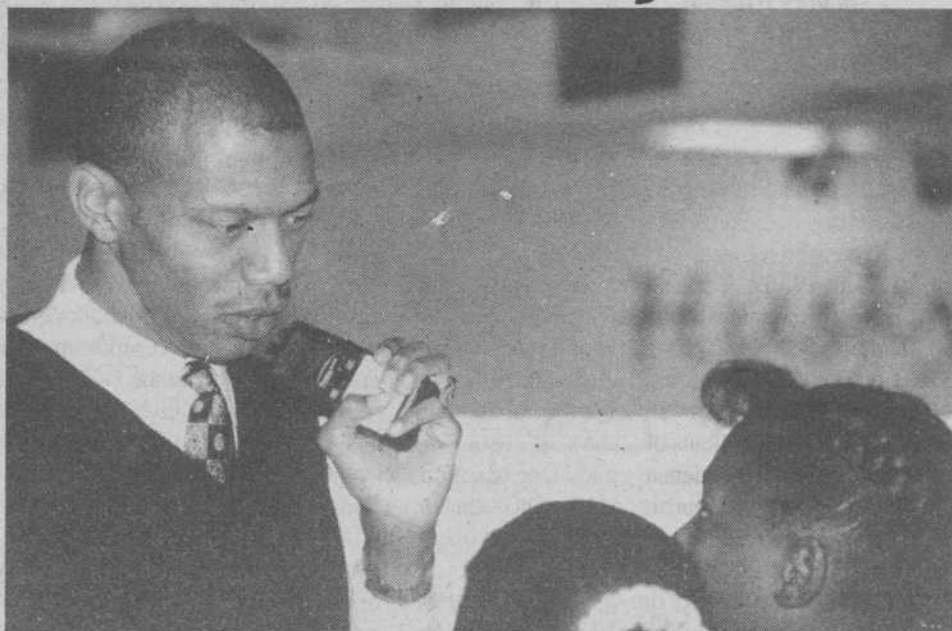
Charles I. West. For many, the name conjures up images of the pioneering Nevada physician who broke down racial barriers.

For others, the name elicits an image of his namesake school, the first middle school in West Las Vegas and a school some say resembles schools in movies like "Lean on Me" or "Dangerous Minds" where rowdy students hold teachers and administrators captive.

Local media has done little to combat what many say is an undeserved, exaggerated image. Instead of an "unruly army" as one newspaper labeled the school's 1,700 pupils, Dr. Andre Denson, the school's acting principal, sees a school with problems and with great potential.

Denson, who was an assistant principal at Cimarron Memorial High School before coming to West and has taught math in Canada and Indiana, recently spoke to the Sentinel-Voice about his vision for West.

SV: What do you think of the Las Vegas Sun article that equated West students to



Las Vegas Sentinel-Voice photo by Ramon Savoy

Andre Denson, acting principal at Charles I. West middle school, talks to a student recently.

AD: I try not to think about it. I met with the editor and reporter to express my total dissatisfaction with the article. How they told me they would portray us was not how they wrote it. West is just like any other middle school. People think it's an abnormal place. It's not.

SV: What's the makeup of your school?

AD: I'd estimate it's about 60 percent to 65 percent African-American, 20

percent Hispanic, 15 percent Caucasian and 5 percent Native American, Asian, Pacific Islander, etc. There are 500 sixth graders, 700 seventh graders and 500 eighth graders.

SV: What are your plans for West?

AD: The teachers got together for Staff Development Day in October, and drew up a school improvement plan. My job now is to facilitate that.

We already have a strong

curriculum, including an occupational education program that gets students thinking about and preparing for different careers, especially in the computer field. I'm a strong advocate for technology.

We also have four mentoring programs, eight partnerships where people donate funds, time and resources, and a safe haven program run by Ricky Watts that gives the kids things to do after school. We're

building these programs so that there's no reason for a young person in this community not to succeed.

SV: West has been open for one year. What was the teacher turnover rate last year?

AD: Nineteen of 55 left. We hired 24 new teachers this year.

SV: Do you think teachers should have to stay a minimum amount of time at one school?

AD: Definitely. Teachers should have to stay at a school a minimum of three years, especially at at-risk schools. When teachers are constantly changing (schools), it's difficult to establish a tradition.

The students need stability with teachers who run programs and follow through to the end. I wish that the school district and the teachers' union would give teachers extra pay and compensation for teaching at at-risk schools. It's harder.

SV: Where do problems with the children start?

Academically, most parents help their children remain focused on their studies, but for some students,

no one is making them focus. I've also seen situations when parents work their butts off, but the child still doesn't succeed.

I've also observed that most people, children and adults, don't know how to study. It's a complex concept for them.

As far as behavior is concerned, there are a lot of factors. Sensitive teachers and staff who understand that their jobs are like parenting, help keep behavior problems to a minimum.

SV: What's the difference between working with high school and middle school students?

AD: Maturity is the biggest difference. These kids play more. I've always been in high schools. Here, the children are not as mature, and I have to deal with them differently. I'm still honest, direct and firm, but my delivery is different.

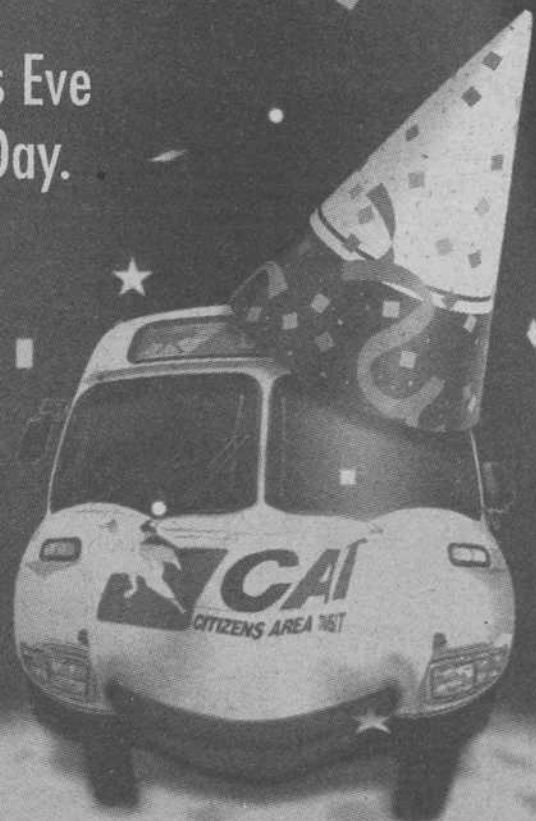
SV: Do you have many truants?

AD: One truant is too many. Actually, we don't. I'm amazed and proud about our high attendance rate.

SV: What do you do away (See Denson, Page 15)

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