

Head of the 'family'



Professional Academies Magnet at Loften High Principal Bill McElroy talks about the success of the automotive academy at the Gainesville school on Monday. McElroy was named one of the state's top principals by the nonpartisan research organization Florida TaxWatch. [ALAN YOUNGBLOOD/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER]

Professional Academies Magnet at Loften High principal wins statewide award

By Sarah Nelson
Staff writer

Since middle school, Bill McElroy believed his destiny rested in dental school. But during his second year, he realized — while working on his first-ever patient — the field wasn't for him. He raised his hand mid-procedure and asked his professor to finish the job.

"It was that drastic," McElroy said, laughing. "And I felt so bad for this patient that I couldn't go on. This poor girl."

He quit dental school at the University of Florida's

College of Dentistry and decided to pursue teaching after a good experience in high school tutoring younger students in math.

Tutoring kids in math made him happy, he said: "It was then that I really caught the bug."

Now he helps students discover their own passions at the Professional Academies Magnet at Loften High School, where he was recently named one of the state's top principals by the nonpartisan research organization Florida TaxWatch.

The annual Principal Leadership Award is aimed

at schools with higher percentages of at-risk students.

Principals are selected through a data-driven process, specifically, data that measures student progress in reading and math. This year, data from the 2013-14 school year through the 2016-17 school year was analyzed.

McElroy is one of nine chosen principals. The winners will be recognized at a TaxWatch meeting in May.

"These are principals who have a very difficult job and don't get a lot

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recognition," said Bob

Nave, TaxWatch's vice president of research.

With a headcount of roughly 270, students must choose to attend Loften High School and can decide between five

career-technical education options: automotive technology, gaming and mobile apps, graphic art and design, robotics and engineering, and fire and emergency medical

services.

Shae Feagle, 19, graduated from Loften last spring and said her love for the school pushed her to come back and help the art teachers.

"I really love the school, that's why I want to stay here," Feagle said. "Mr. McElroy is amazing. He makes a point to know the students."

While editing a short film for class, students William Johnson, 16, Mark Bryant, 15, and Izzy Swarts, 17, agreed the school feels like a "big family."

"He takes a lot of pride in his work which is what I really like," Johnson said.

Before coming to Loften in 2012, McElroy also served as a principal in

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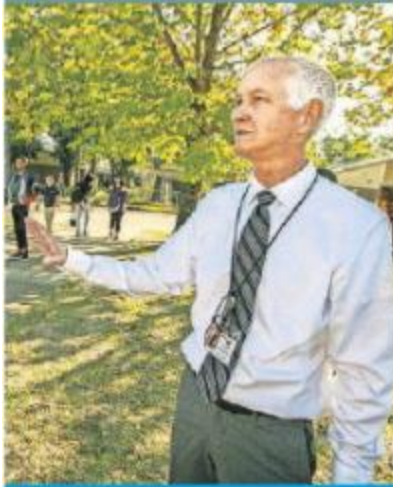
Charleston, South Carolina, and as an assistant principal at Fort Clarke Middle School and Gainesville High School.

At Loften, he is known for his knack for memorizing names. He likes to stand in the hallways when the bell rings as students hurry off to their next class, greeting each passing person.

By every Labor Day, he tries to know every incoming freshman.

For McElroy, the Tax-Watch award reflects the school's success more than his own.

"If they've looked at our school and we were picked completely on what we do and what our data is, then that's a school award," he said. "This is an award for Loften because we all contribute to what goes on here every day."



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**LOFTEN
PRINCIPAL
MCELROY
WINS AWARD**