

**A revived John Marshall High School
attracts students to classes in business, computers – and robots**

by Justin Glanville

Photos by Julie Van Wagenen

When Tim Primus was helping create the curriculum for the new John Marshall School of Engineering earlier this year, his colleagues thought he was crazy.

The plan was to combine traditional algebra classes with studies in robotics. Professors from Cuyahoga Community College would lead robotics classes, and students would receive credit from both John Marshall and Tri-C.

“People just laughed at first,” says Primus, founding principal of the engineering school. “They didn’t think we’d have enough time to cover both subjects in one class period.”

A month into the new school year, though, students are clamoring to enroll in the combined classes. Working with robots is fun on its own, and it’s made studying algebra a lot more engaging.

“I guess you could say with kids, robots are an easy sell,” Primus says with a laugh.

The School of Engineering isn’t the only one of Marshall’s three new academies attracting students. The School of Information Technology and the School of Civic and

Business Leadership are also proving to be strong draws. Nearly 1,400 students are enrolled at the new Marshall building, designed to hold about 1,300 students.

Each of the academies, which enrolled only 9th and 10th-graders this year, has its own principal. A fourth principal oversees the traditional high school, which serves 11th and 12th grade and will be phased out over the next two years, and the Marshall campus as a whole.

Students in Cleveland can attend any district or charter school they wish, so strong enrollment suggests that the new academies are resonating with families, says Piet van Lier, director of school quality, policy, and communications for the Cleveland Transformation Alliance.

The Alliance is the nonprofit organization overseeing progress on *Cleveland Plan’s for Transforming Schools*, a public-private effort to ensure every student in Cleveland gets a quality education.



Tim Primus at the John Marshall School of Engineering.

“The challenge for high schools is to engage students so they’re prepared for college and career on whichever path makes the most sense for them,” van Lier says. “Offering different approaches is a way to open up new possibilities for all students.”

Clear expectations

The school’s popularity is apparent in its packed cafeteria, where students sit at round lunch tables doing what teenagers do: Checking their phones, talking to friends, joking around.

Primus spends part of every day here, making himself available for kids if they want to talk and ensuring the horsing around doesn’t escalate. On a recent afternoon, dressed in a dark suit and red tie, he keeps a watchful eye on two boys giving each other playful shoves. The interaction stays friendly.

A less positive encounter awaits in his office. Two students showed up late today after missing detention last night. Primus escorts them to class and tells them to find him at lunch for a longer talk.

“When it’s all said and done, kids are kids,” Primus says. “Wherever I’ve worked, whether it’s in the suburbs or the cities, there are constants.”

The main thing, he says, is that kids need to know that the consequences of their actions – whether positive or negative – are consistent.

“They want to make you proud, but some of them have had a lot of disappointments,” he says. “So my solution is to make it really clear what I expect of them. Then the word gets out to other kids that I’m fair, that I say the same thing to everyone.”

His biggest pet peeve is disrespecting teachers. “I tell them to treat your teacher like your grandma,” he says.

Learning leadership

This is Primus’s second full year in Cleveland, and his first as a full-time principal. A year ago, he left behind a job as a teacher and assistant principal in Durham, N.C. to move here with his wife, who’s from Northeast Ohio and wanted to raise their one-year-old child closer to her family. He’d also worked as a teacher in an affluent suburb of Atlanta.

He spent his first year in Cleveland in the Aspiring Principals Academy, a program of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD).



Eric Gordon, CEO of the Cleveland school district, with students at the John Marshall ribbon cutting on September 24.

The Academy teaches future principals to be autonomous – managing their own budgets, for example, and crafting curricula. They also learn how to mentor upperclassmen looking to define their next steps in life, says Heather Grant, the Academy’s director.

“It’s not just sitting in a meeting learning from a PowerPoint,” Grant says. “There’s role play, discussion – it’s very hands-on. They go through all the same professional development a principal does.”

Empowering teachers and administrators to be more autonomous is another goal of the Cleveland Plan.

Graduates of the Academy aren’t guaranteed jobs, but must apply as any candidate would. That’s how Primus, one of 10 participants in last year’s academy, got his position.

“Tim was receptive to feedback,” Grant remembers. “He brought what he had to the table, but he also had a growth mindset. He was willing to let us mold him.

“He told me he’d never worked so hard for anything. I said, ‘well, then you’re learning the work ethic and stamina it takes to be an effective principal.’”

Collaboration forthcoming

Primus says he’s looking forward to the launch next month of a collaboration with St. Edward High School, a private Catholic school in Lakewood, which has a long-established engineering curriculum.

St. Ed’s students and teachers will come to John Marshall four times in October to work with students there on robotics and computer labs. Marshall students will repay the visit later in the school year.

He says he’s looking forward to the opportunity to bring together students and teachers who’d otherwise probably never meet each other.

“I like the challenge of that – breaking down barriers,” he says.

He glances at his daily schedule, which he keeps on a whiteboard on the side wall of his office.

Then he’s off to go look in on that crazy robotics class.

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