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North Community High School has seen its fair share of changes, struggles, media frenzy, and various principals in a short time period along with a decrease in attendance.

During the 2012-13 school year, however, there are individuals who are not only working to alter the perception and outcome of North High, but who are also making first-hand efforts to remake the image of the 124-year-old institution. That includes Shawn Harris-Berry, principal of Academy of Arts and Communications and David Branch, principal of the Senior Academy Program.

Prior to the taking the position at North, Branch was on staff at Lucy Craft Laney Elementary for five years. Lucy Craft was known as a "turn-around school" – one identified as chronically under-achieving or under-performing. These schools receive additional resources and support through a grant.

This federal grant is known as the Student Improvement Grant, a key component of the department's blueprint for helping states and districts turn around the nation's lowest-performing schools.

"North is identified as a high priority school for similar reasons," said Branch.

Branch volunteered for the open position at North that a lot of people were not too eager to fill. "Part of my responsibility with this program is to see that Senior Academy Students grades 10th –12th, are phased out with the class of 2015," said Branch.

This program will make way for the Academy of Arts and Communication initiative Dr. Harris Berry heads.

The outcome of the two academy programs stems from the confusion surrounding the

announcement by Superintendent Bernadeia Johnson during the 2010-11 school year that North High would close its doors due to decreasing and below standard enrollment.

"To be honest North did have some struggles," said Branch.

Shortly after Johnson's announcement was the development of the North High Advisory Council. It worked with district leadership, which created a partner called the Institute for Student Achievement (ISA), to help turn North around.

"Basically we are a turn-around school without the funding," said Branch.

The task to provide students with the best education comes with challenges. "As the program shrinks, resources also shrink. I have done my best to leverage resources from my end," said Branch.

With a number of students behind on credits, Branch has put together an idea of "contract for credit."

"If (a student) did not pass a class, (the student) can enter into a contract with (a) teacher to make up missing work. Some students are one or two assignments away, so we give them an additional opportunity to earn that credit," said Branch.

Another initiative Branch instituted is the Positive Behavior Enrichment Supports program, targeting students who do not get suspended or receive behavior referrals with positive reinforcement. To celebrate such achieving students, a barbecue was held in October for students who had good attendance or who were on the honor roll.

"A lot of our attention goes towards the students that are struggling and we forget the ones who are doing well. We have to celebrate our good students," said Branch.

Branch said North gets a bad rap, though some criticism is deserved.

"If we have not done our job in terms of improving and increasing graduation rates, we should be held accountable," said Branch. "However, there are also things (for which) we get overlooked." Branch pointed to the Polar Producers – students who write, produce and perform on the air with the Jazz 88 KBEM program and enrichment programs for advance placement students.

"People do not hear these stories," said Branch.

The Senior Academy program has 200 students – grades 10-12, but will reduce to 150 next year while the Arts Academy will increase with a new freshman class.

"I came in to establish new expectations for all stakeholders; students, teachers and parents," said Branch. "Families need to have support to help us change behaviors for the children who are struggling."

Branch is very familiar with the sentiments from the students regarding stability.

"When you have so much change in a short amount of time, the expectations get screwed up. Students have asked me the first day in, 'How long are you going to be here?' If you look at the number of assistant principals since 2008, it has been even higher than the amount of principals. It is a legitimate question."

Overall, Branch is optimistic for the new direction of North High. "As much as we have struggled here the last four or five years especially, we know there is a powerful history of strong graduates," said Branch.