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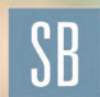




# Connecting

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Julie Couch,  
Julie Couch Interiors



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CONNECTING WOMEN TO THEIR COMMUNITY

like. I was curious to see how teachers would respond to a child who had been homeschooled. My initial feeling, when he walked out that first day, was curiosity."

So far, she's been pleasantly surprised by the support of the administration, the professionalism of the teachers, and the academic rigor of curriculum. This summer, their 15-year-old son Jack completed an internship with Vanderbilt University's College of Engineering thanks to Stratford's Interdisciplinary Science and Research program.

And STEM developments aren't the only changes the Northeast Nashville school has seen lately. Over the next two years, Stratford will undergo a much-needed \$20 million renovation, outfitting the building with HVAC, a state-of-the-art camera system, more collaborative workspace, and a brand new library complete with a reading deck.

Utley attributes much of her satisfaction to the school's teachers and its principal, Michael Steele. When Steele arrived at Stratford in 2010, he says teachers had written more than 4,800 referrals the previous year. In his first year as principal, that number dropped to 1,200.

"We put a stop to the nonsense right away," Steele says. "Ever since that first day, you'll find 99.9 percent of students in class, doing what they're supposed to do. We still have a handful who need more attention than others, just like every high school does. But today, more than anything, Stratford is just a great place to go to school."

Steele says the number of scholarship dollars earned by Stratford students has risen from \$1 million to nearly \$5 million in four years. The number of students scoring a 21 or better on the ACT has increased fivefold. And while the schools composite ACT score is still a lackluster 17, Steele says he's proud that those numbers have increased every year since he's taken the reins. But the greatest testimony Steele says he can give for Stratford is that his own children are graduates.

"People say that I have an unfair advantage, because I was here at school every day, and that's true," he says. "But it