



# Leading with Love

## ECG AND THE LEGACY OF ITS FOUNDER

In honor of ECG's 20th anniversary, The Phoenix reached out to inaugural principal Dr. Tony Lamar Burks II. Read his remarks as he reflects on the inception of the school and what it was like to be an ECG student in 2002.

"I'm not going to take off my shirt to show you," Dr. Tony Lamair Burks II said. "But right here on my arm is a tattoo of the logo of the Early College at Guilford."

His peers told him that his project – the first early college school in North Carolina – would fail, likely within a few years. That's when Burks and three of his colleagues made a promise.

"We said if the school made it past its fifth year, we would get a tattoo," Burks said.

Twenty years later, ECG is not just still around, but it is the number one school in North Carolina, and among the top in the nation.

"[Despite] the idea that people thought we'll get shut down," he said, "we survived. We thrived."

For Burks, it was an "opportunity to create something out of absolutely nothing." He approached the creation of ECG as a chance to apply what he had

learned from being principal at his previous school—an elementary school outside of Nashville, Tennessee.

"I left a community where Dolly Parton's house was a half mile down the street," Burks said. He taught "the children of Tennessee Titans, football players, various country music artists, R&B artists, you

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name it."

However, coming to Greensboro, North Carolina wasn't too much of a culture shock.

"Students are students are students," he said. "The kind of principal I was at the elementary school is the kind of principal I was at the Early College."

At his old school, Burks fought to host an assembly every Wednesday with all 800 students. He continued

this practice at the Early College, arranging the schedule to ensure there was a free period every morning from 8:00 to 8:45.

There would be a different use of this time each day. Fridays were dedicated to a class called "Explorations," where students, teachers and parents would be able to teach life skills from coding on a calculator to

cooking to crocheting.

One day a week, Burks would address the entire student body. During this time, he allowed students to give feedback on how the school was run.

"[Starting from scratch was an] opportunity to listen to students and their families and to build a place that they loved," Burks said.

ECG became a school where students played an active role in its development. "Every

student at the Early College had my personal cell phone," Burks said, but he didn't give it to parents. He allowed students to call at any time, any hour of the night, to give him feedback or advice, to air their grievances or just to vent.

"I had two students who killed themselves," Burks said. "And that experience taught me that I would rather have someone call me at midnight with something that I might say, this is completely crazy, than to have them decide to end their life."

He listened to students describe "unrequited love...the pain of a death of a grandfather...the hurt of an impending divorce." One student even called to share with Burks the "exciting news of his first time."

Burks was a principal who gave students a chance to control what happened with their education. He structured ECG to align with its original mission statement: "To graduate confident, ethically responsible,

lifelong learners who are prepared to succeed in higher education and in the changing world beyond."

One way Burks worked to achieve this mission was through allowing students to control the disciplinary process. He designed a student court where 10 students selected from all grades would convene to decide on punishments for students. If someone "violated the Honor Code or the handbook, that student would come before peers on the Court, share what was done, and the peers would weigh in on the consequences," Burks said.

The Student Court was one of Burks' key achievements. Its efficacy and completely student-driven nature was a key contributor to the culture of early ECG.

In one case, the Court had to decide what to do about a student who had confessed to repeatedly plagiarizing multiple essays in many of his classes. Burks took a step back from the deliberation process and allowed the students to make their own decision.

The Court ultimately decided to reassign him to his home school.

Across the entire time the Student Court was active, Burks said he only overturned their decision "once, maybe twice, but not more than that."

"There are grown folk who want to simply have students who comply," Burks said, and even if they claim to "want students to think and do and be and have, [they] instead want them to be lockstep and follow the rules on every single thing."

By contrast, Burks fostered an atmosphere that served to empower students, encouraging them to speak their minds-- even if he had to deal with backlash.

"We had students who would speak before the school board. Some would speak in support of Early College, some would speak against decisions that were being made by the school board," he said.

Another thing Burks allowed students to do was choose the colors of their robes for graduation. Sometimes the senior class would choose gray or green, and one year, "they decided they wanted to have rainbow colors," Burks said.

That year, a male student chose pink.

"Some parents pitched a complete fit and you know it ultimately got to the superintendent," Burks said. "The superintendent called me on the carpet: 'How dare you...you need to go in and fix this.'"

Two weeks before graduation, Burks

encouraged students to be actually empowered beyond the surface level of other schools. He was an incredibly popular principal, even winning Principal of the Year for Guilford County Schools in 2005.

And then, in 2006, he was in a car crash.

"I was driving a Chrysler 300--big car--and this little Nissan hit my car with such force that it spun it around in a 180," Burks said.

While no one in the car was injured, Burks said he walked away, called

Superintendent Dr. Terry Grier, and told him, "I want to do something different."

"As much as I love Early College, I want to leave on the up and up. I want to leave on a very positive note. I want to leave like Michael Jordan, want to walk out when I'm at the

High, served as ECG's second principal 2006-09.

"Ultimately, what the founder of any organization has to do for the organization to survive, is to leave it," Burks said. He maintained contact with the school, checking in weekly for the first six weeks, then once a month for the next semester.

However, this meant he had to watch many of his policies be dismantled. Within a year of his departure, the School Court had been dismissed.

"It was disconcerting and disheartening and, if anything, a slap in the face," Burks said.

Burks left Guilford County Schools in 2008. Today, he lives in Atlanta, Georgia, where he is the Chief Learning Officer of LEADright, an organization that consults with schools and businesses to train leaders.

However, without the work of Burks--along with the original teachers, students and many other figures operating behind the scenes--the Early College might have been shut down.

"A lot of people said that the Early College became a very safe space for students of all kinds of backgrounds," Burks said, who is gay. "I was determined for it to be that even without disclosing it."

Upon this 20-year anniversary of ECG, Burks says he has been reminded of ECG's mascot, the phoenix.

"I have had experiences where I have been figuratively burned alive and renewed, like the phoenix," Burks said. "That's what Early College, at least for me, has done. It remains a very special place in my heart."

*Written by Caroline Boone, Class of 2025*

*Photo taken from leadrighttoday.com.*

**"Starting from scratch was an opportunity to listen to students and their families and to build a place that they loved."**

delivered the news to the students--everyone would wear black robes.

"My students called me out and they said, 'This isn't you. It's not that you're letting us just willy nilly do things you give us framework; you talk us through things. But you're being forced to do this,'" Burks said. He consoled the students and explained that it wasn't his decision, that it had come from above, but as a leader, he had to take it in stride.

While walking back from the campus to the George White House after giving the seniors the news, he said, "I'd gotten a call from the superintendent's office saying, 'Oh my goodness, call off the students. Please tell them they can wear whatever color they recently decided to wear.'"

ECG under Burks had become a unique learning environment that

height of my career with this school," Burks said.

Grier promoted Burks to director of the magnet and choice program, giving him control over the choice programs in 44 schools across the county.

Grier also instructed Burks to pick his successor--and to write down all the information he had learned during his six years as principal.

"He told me about this whole notion of founder driven organizations," Burks said. "There are things that we [as founders] do because we just know the right thing to do for the institution. And it's all in our head. All the things, the ideas, thoughts, the whys, are in our heads."

Burks created a total of 105 files for his chosen successor, Charles Blanchard, to read. Blanchard, who is now principal of Chapel Hill