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Mahnomen Elementary School (MN)

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Voices of Women in the Field

Can You Top This?

Ramona Miller

Starting school and closing the doors, all within 21 days! Certainly this must be a mistake, but the truth is, it did happen in our school district during September of 2005.

Starting school in the fall is always an exciting time for educators and students. The excitement for the staff of 11 was high and the building was ready to welcome the students back to school. By nine o'clock, on the first day of school, there were only two students. Three days later there were four students. Where were the other 70 students who were enrolled in the school in May? They were registered at the Charter School that was one mile away!

The School Board was committed to keeping the public school open, for at least one year, "so that everyone could work with the changes." The question, however, came very fast, "Can we keep a building open for four students?" Would more students enroll in the next couple of weeks? The reality of the situation was that it was not financially sound to keep the current staff and the building open for four students.

Seven days into the school year, the School Board made the decision to transfer the students to another school within the district that was 22 miles away. The parents and students had four days to make decisions about enrollment options for their children. At the same time, the teachers were attempting to keep the school routine as normal as possible. How do you integrate students into a new school and classroom? Three of the students would be going to the district school and the other student would transfer to a neighboring school district. We planned a day for the receiving classrooms to take a field trip to the school that was closing. We felt that it was important for the receiving students to understand what the other school was like. The staff planned some of the typical end of the year activities for the students that included a picnic/field trip to the Mouth of the Mississippi River. It was very necessary for the staff and the students to be able to put some closure to a very short school year.

About the Author

Ramona Miller is principal at Mahnomen Elementary in Mahnomen, MN; rmiller@mahnomen.k12.mn.us. She has had more than 30 years experience working with children from generational poverty in many settings. She is a graduate of Utah State University-Logan and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln

The staff, in my opinion, has had a harder time with the closing and transition to the other school in the district than the students have. The closing was difficult because the teachers typically do not change schools during the year. Students move more freely during the school year so the transition for them was much easier. The Board gave the staff one week to pack the supplies, books and other school items. The question that still is unanswered is, was the week too long or too short for staff?

It was more difficult for staff to make the transition for many reasons. Although we talk about being flexible and able to deal with change, it is hard for teachers to deal with change of this magnitude in such a short time. One of the teachers was assigned to a new classroom that was formed because of the number of students, once the transfer was made. For the second time in a month, he was starting a new classroom, new grade level and in a new school. Four of the teachers became special teachers either in Title 1, Title 7 or a combination of many different assignments. Some staff resigned their positions or were placed on unrequested leave of absence.

The start of a charter school in a district can be a positive or negative influence within a district. It is important that the communication lines stay open so that everyone can work for the betterment of the students. Keeping the lines of communication open depends on many different situations but when parents have many different options for educating their child, it becomes even more important. The communication lines were blocked in our district and it created additional issues for everyone.

Needless to say, opening and closing a school within a 12 day time span is not recommended. The time span of a year is often not long enough. Closing the chapter is a very difficult task—particularly if you are the principal.