

Eager, nervous youngsters get back to books, learning



Editor's note: These stories continue our "Back to School" coverage for the Farmington school district.

BY TIM SMITH
STAFF WRITER

There was a bit of autumn in the air as book-bag toting William Grace Elementary School pupils waited Tuesday to get the all-clear sign from crossing guard Alice Houwagen.

"Okay kids, go ahead," said Houwagen, who estimated she started directing children across Shiawassee about 20 years ago.

Next came another pocket of eager children and their just-as-eager parents, seeing them off on the first day of the 1997-98 school year.

"Are you new?" asked Houwagen, leaning toward 7-year-old Kelly Collins, one of 266 students enrolled to attend the Farmington district school.

Also standing next to Kelly was her mom, Ann Collins, who was trying to help her child relax before the opening bell. For the afternoon half-day, Collins

drove Kelly, parked along Shiawassee; and walked with her daughter the rest of the way — a pattern followed by other parents.

"You know it's everybody else's first day, too," Collins reminded Kelly. Including William Grace principal Katy Hill, who transferred during the summer from Forest Elementary School.

"It's a real special day," Hill said. "It doesn't matter where you go it's the same. There's the anticipation from the students, the excitement and energy from the teachers and staff."

Parents Lisa Roussey and Jennifer Teddy also chaperoned their children to the building. "I'm happy to have the kids going back to school," Roussey said. "They can be back with their friends, learning and doing different activities."

Teddy said she wanted to move into the William Grace neighborhood, in part, because she attended that school herself. "It's a real nice school."

Students and parents then congregated outside the school, waiting for the doors to open and the year to start. Among them were parent Cheryl Hillier and her 5 1/2-year-old son Joey, new to the district.

"There's a little bit of nerves, but it all ends up OK in the end," said Hillier, formerly of Dearborn.

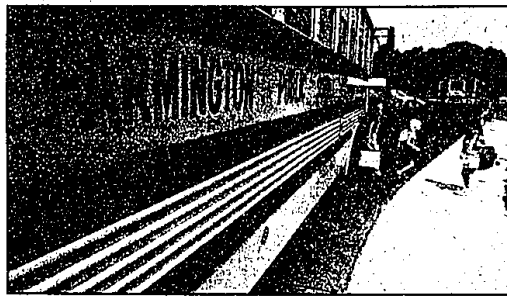
Joey, in teacher Michelle Butcher's first-grade classroom, said he felt good, ready to start. "I'm really excited. It just feels really cool."

Just on the other side of the entrance, in Room 6, Joey met up with his teacher.

"I love what I do so much that I never get nervous about it," said Butcher, beginning her 11th year at William Grace.

Over at East Middle School, principal Eugene Seaborn greeted approximately 760 students on Tuesday. Sixth graders attended an orientation assembly and later toured the building. Seventh- and eighth-grade students followed their regular class schedules, albeit for abbreviated sessions.

Seaborn, an artist in his spare time, looked to his hobby for an analogy to describe the new year. "I look at each year as a new painting. I look for different results."



STAFF PHOTO BY DEAN MITCHELL

Familiar sight: Students unload from a Farmington schools bus for their new school year.

"I'm looking forward to a good year at East," Seaborn continued. "We had a large turnover, there are 11 new teachers. So I'm looking for bright ideas and new enthusiasm from teachers."

One of those new teachers, Beth Rubel, spoke to sixth grade students about goals, teamwork and expectations.

"We are expecting you to be on your best behavior," Rubel said. "This is your school. You'll be here for three years. Respect your desks and the halls. This is your place."

The math teacher instructed students to take home the summary of rules and regulations, for parents or legal guardians to review with them.

One of the newer rules is for East students to not carry book bags in the hallways. Instead, as a safety precaution, they must empty them into lockers at the beginning of the school day.

Just down the hall, science teacher Darlene Egbert-Oliver welcomed students to her classroom, dubbed "Team Emerald City" — complete with a "yellow brick road" taped onto the floor tiles.

But did the Wizard of Oz as stringently warn Dorothy to not break the rules? "If you break a rule once, you get a warning," Egbert-Oliver said. "If you break a rule twice, it's 10 minutes in the penalty box."

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Staff lunch: Assistant Superintendent Judy White knows a good cook has to have a taste, even as she turns hot dogs Monday.



STAFF PHOTO BY DEAN MITCHELL

District's picnic is back-to-school 'reunion' for staff

BY TIM SMITH
STAFF WRITER

Hot dogs, ice cream bars, hugs and handshakes. You'd swear a big family reunion was going on Monday at Shiawassee Park.

The hubbub was the Farmington Public School District's "Welcome Back" picnic. Administrators and school board members grilled and greeted while employees — 1,460 were invited — munched and mingled.

"It does seem just like a family reunion," said Farmington High School principal Jim Myers. "You have relatives you see all the time in your immediate family and others you don't see."

Falling in the former category would be FHS media technician Ken Hirsch, waiting in line to snare some hot lunch. "I think it's a great way to get a bunch of people together, not just from one school, but from the whole district. It'll help out a lot."

Standing not far from Hirsch was Power Middle School teacher Jerry Ross, a 22-year veteran in the district.

"It's a nice gesture," Ross said. "It gives us an opportunity to get together and talk to people we don't see that often."

According to Kristin Kilner, new kindergarten teacher at Wood Creek Elementary School, the picnic added to what has been "a great kick-off. Everybody should be pumped up and ready to start."

One by one, employees hugged or shook hands with Superintendent Bob Maxfield on their way to through the hot dog line.

"People don't usually see each other," Maxfield said. "As you can see, just by the way people are mingling, that this is a great way to get started. We may have set ourselves an annual tradition

here."

Concurring was Forest Elementary School teacher Kathy Koperski. "It just makes everything start out well."

Besides food and hello's, employees participated in a raffle, sang a rousing version of "Happy Birthday, Johnny" to Farmington High School assistant principal John Barrett and waved purple "T.E.A.M." pennants, standing for "Together Everyone Achieves More!"

They also enjoyed an opening performance by the Farmington High School Marching Band. The only downer of the whole day was the fact that the band was without critically injured 16-year-old Melissa Garr, part of last year's color guard.

"We're missing something right now," said FHS Principal Myers. "It's sort of a saddened feeling knowing she'd be here participating."

Several school board members, some who had been put to work, liked the idea of starting the year off in such a unified way.

"We work together," said board member Priscilla Brouillette. "So to celebrate together is important, too. Clearly, we're successful. It's important to take the time to celebrate that success."

Brouillette and board colleague Jack Inch agreed that the picnic might generate enough employee enthusiasm to boost the bond issue publicity drive. Voters, on Tuesday, Sept. 16, will decide a two-part proposal totaling \$93.1 million.

"Absolutely," said Inch, polishing off a Good Humor ice cream bar. "I think it makes the personnel have a greater pride and feeling of belonging."

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the district's general fund budget.

Cowan said class size projections for the district were set last spring. He noted that a late influx of students into the William Grace attendance area, including a brand new subdivision at 10 Mile-Inkster roads, contributed to the unforeseen problem.

"The projections worked out

well elsewhere," Cowan said. "All of a sudden we had an influx of 12 kids" in the third and fourth grades.

Usually, the district prefers waiting a week or two after the start of school to determine if additional teachers are needed.

"The last thing you want to do is jump too soon and have 10 no-shows," he said.

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