

New principal takes wide view of education

BY CATHERINE BAUM STAFF WRITER

[Originally published on: Thursday, September 13, 2007. This story appeared in 'The Summit' - A weekly section for Easthampton, Southampton and Westhampton]

EASTHAMPTON - Every weekday morning Robert Orlando, new principal of Center and Neil A. Pepin elementary schools, stands in the hallway to welcome the children.

He smiles and says "Hello," attempting to make school a friendly place.

As principal of two schools, Orlando rotates his schedule so that he spends equal time in both buildings. On Sept. 4, the first day of school, he spoke to every fourth-grade class. He told fourth-graders they are role models for younger elementary school students.

"They look forward to being the big kids on the block," Orlando said.

For fourth-graders, being a positive role model means making good choices on the playground, handling problems with other students right away, and, when waiting in line for art class, keeping the line straight and quiet.

"Buddy reading," fourth-graders reading to kindergarten students, also sets a good example, students told Orlando. He plans to look into other ways students can get involved with the school and community.

"If they feel like a part of the culture, they will be more motivated to learn," he said. "Coming to school isn't just learning to read, write and solve math problems."

Student council and community action groups allow students to apply what they learn to real-life situations, according to Orlando.

"In a state like Massachusetts we're so bound to how kids will do on a test that we've lost extracurriculars," Orlando said.

Orlando, 34, applied for the principal position after seeing an opening listed in the newspaper. A resident of Easthampton, Orlando was vice principal at Meadow Brook School in East Longmeadow when he applied.

"There was desire to work in the town where I lived and give back to my community," he said.

The job transition was easier than most, he said, as he had previous experience in the district: He took a job as behavior interventionist for Center and Pepin schools in 1999. Two years later he became interim assistant principal at Easthampton High School. He then returned to Center and Pepin for another two years as behavior interventionist before moving to East Longmeadow.

Orlando earned his undergraduate degrees in history and education from Boston College. In 1999, he earned his master's degree in special education from Simmons College in Southborough. While working for his master's, Orlando worked at the New England Center for Children, a private school for children with disabilities. Orlando said his experience supervising "highly self-injurious" children broadened his perspective of education. Overnight shifts were "very intense," with a one-to-one or one-to-two student-teacher ratio.

"It's sort of a 24/7 job," he said. "It's quite different than working in public schools."

The children, who sometimes needed three- or four-person restraint, presented an every day challenge for Orlando.

"All the kids were unique in their own way and I learned a lot from them and about myself," he said.

Orlando gained perspective on creative means of dealing with challenges, problem-solving, and educational needs that extend beyond books.

"You're making decisions all day," he said. "There's more to education than just test scores. There's educating the whole person."

Orlando was the first to fill the Meadow Brook vice principal position, which was created to help administrate 640 children and approximately 100 staff members. There was no history of the position for him to abide by, only a job description.

"By the time I left I developed some definite structure in the position and I see some of those things lasting," he said.

Besides being the principal for 371 students, 196 at Center and 175 at Pepin, Orlando enjoys attending every Boston College football game, and spending time with his family: wife Karen, children Samantha and Donald, pug Stanley, mut Chloe, and cats, Bubba and Sally. He's also planning a summer trip to Rome and Venice. His "six-changer" CD player holds Ben Folds Five, Cat Stevens and Van Halen. A person who likes to connect with kids, Orlando is a fan of Harry Potter books.

"I've read them all," he said.

Visits for parents

The Easthampton Public Schools hold open house sessions next week.

* All elementary schools, Sept. 19, 6:30 to 8 p.m.

* White Brook Middle School, Sept. 18, 7 p.m. (Middle School band rental sign-ups are that night at 6:30.)

* Easthampton High School, Sept. 20, 6:30 to 8 p.m.



CATHERINE BAUM

Robert Orlando, the new principal of Center and Neil A. Pepin schools, returns to the district after several years in East Longmeadow.

[This story appeared in 'The Summit' - A weekly section for Easthampton, Southampton and Westhampton]