

Learning curve

Being the 'temp' principal brings challenges, rewards

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Eldon Allen, interim principal at Woodside Elementary last year, knew he had a learning curve ahead of him at the start of the year when a student who bit someone on the playground landed in his office.

Allen gave the student -- who sat very quietly -- a talking to. He told the secretary afterwards: "I don't think he heard a word I said."

"He doesn't speak English," the secretary said.

Allen had just come from the Stanwood-Camano School District, made up of 98 percent white students, he said. Woodside has more English language learners and minority students.

He retired two years ago after 24 years as a principal and administrator there, but by state law can work as an administrator on a temporary basis.

This year, he's interim principal at Heatherwood Middle School, a position he will leave soon when Greg Gelderman returns from leave.

Allen's next job is assistant principal half-time at Penny Creek Elementary and half-time at Cedar Wood Elementary for the rest of the year.

It can be hard enough to be a temp in an office, or the substitute in the classroom, and being the "temp principal" brings its own challenges -- and rewards.

It takes time to learn the culture of a school and its routines, Allen said. In the meantime, students can try to push boundaries, he said.

For example, at Heatherwood there's a rule that students can't go to their locker at lunch, and an adult stationed at the lunchroom door makes sure students don't wander off. A girl in the lunchroom told Allen she'd left her money in her locker and needed to get it. Allen walked with her to her locker.

As they left the lunchroom, the student told the woman stationed there: "I told you he would let me."

However, Allen doesn't take long to get his bearings -- maybe a few weeks or a month. In the meantime, people are helpful, and Heatherwood is such an organized school that things take care of



Enterprise/CHRIS GOODENOW
Heatherwood Middle School interim principal Eldon Allen (center) sits down to talk with eighth-graders Taylor Pirnke (facing camera, from left), Erick St. Onge, Sean Roe, and Chris Austin (bottom) during lunch, Monday, March 5, in Heatherwood's cafeteria.

themselves, he said.

"I was fearful people would say: 'He's only here for a year, we don't have to do what he says,'" Allen said. "That's not the case."

What's helped him settle in faster, and be a more effective principal, is his ability to form relationships with students, he said. He's out and about, even at lunch, striking up conversations and sitting down with kids.

When Allen began work at a school in Stanwood years ago, a teacher there observed him for her master's thesis.

"She said the difference (between him and other administrators) was I initiated contact with the kids, I don't wait for them to talk to me," Allen said. "She felt that was a real strength."

But what makes you effective -- getting to know the students --also makes it hard to leave.

"I thought it'd be easier to come in and do it, but you develop relationships with parents, students," Allen said.

Leaving Heatherwood two-thirds of the way through the year will be especially difficult, he said.

Allen's interim job hasn't left much room to change the school and its policies, but he did leave a small legacy at Woodside. He created a new approach to the science fair that lines up with WASL science standards. WASL science scores rose at the school last year.

But if Allen stayed at schools longer, there are things he would change, he said.

And he sees some rules as unnecessary -- for example, the rule against open-toed shoes at Heatherwood.

"They say it's a safety issue," he said.

When confronted with problems, he tries to think of ways he can turn them into a win-win for student and administrator.

"You accomplish both what you want and what they want," he said.

Schools are often run by routine, and sometimes sticking strictly by the rules in every case can be counterproductive, he said. Deciding to walk the girl who needed her money to her locker allowed her to get lunch and prevented her from wandering the halls, Allen said.

"Sometimes school folks turn it into a win-lose," he added.

He's used the same approach with teachers as well. When he came to Woodside, for example, Allen had a more flexible approach to teacher schedules than his predecessor.

"I think there were some things they didn't tell me, like, 'Let's see if he remembers,'" Allen said. "They saw it as an improvement."