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Adams, Berrian principal pioneering 'learning communities' in QPS



Berrian principal Chrissy Cox stops in Katie Crawford's 3rd grade class on her morning rounds and chats with Kaitlyn Brown about her story book. Cox is serving as principal of Adams and Berrian schools this year. She's the "guinea pig" for the new learning communities for Quincy Public Schools. Adams and Berrian were grouped together as a transitional learning community. | H-W Photo/Michael Kiple

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By Deborah Gertz Husar Herald-Whig

Posted: Nov. 25, 2016 12:01 am Updated: Nov. 25, 2016 11:29 pm

QUINCY

There's a certain similarity to the start of each school day for Chrissy Cox.

She recites the Pledge of Allegiance, makes announcements and listens to students respond "yum, yum, that sounds good" after hearing the lunch menu -- three days a week at Adams School and twice a week at Berrian.

Cox splits her time as principal of both elementary buildings, pioneering the K-5 learning community model Quincy Public Schools will have in place for the 2017-18 year.

"It's been a really easy transition because of the amazing staff at both schools," Cox said. "But I'm not going to lie. There's been a lot of growing pains with both schools, mostly because Berrian is such a small school, and Adams is basically two Berrian schools. I really rely upon my staff, more than I ever had to, and they've risen to that challenge as I knew they would."

QPS will open its first of five new K-5 buildings at the Monroe site for the 2017-18 year, with Brian Trowbridge as principal, and have four transitional schools, or "learning communities," while construction continues on the remaining four buildings.

Under the plan, Adams and Berrian began this school year as the learning community for the school at a still-to-be-determined site on Quincy's southwest side with Cox as principal.

"There's a lot of things you don't think about through this transition that have popped up along the way. I should have been making a list," Cox said. "My colleagues getting ready to go through this transition have relied on me."

For 2017-18, Washington and Dewey schools serve as the learning community for the North 12th site with Cindy Crow as principal, Baldwin for the 48th and Columbus Road site with Melanie Schrand as principal and Madison and Ellington schools for Baldwin with Jim Sohn as principal.

Although staff assignments have yet to be made for the new buildings, "what we do know is there will be staff members that need to be brought together," Cox said. "We started the year with a little social. Certified staff are starting to network and build a team between the two schools. Our Christmas party will be a both-staff party. We're really trying hard to make it feel like a community even though we're in two buildings."

Cox spends Tuesdays and Fridays at Berrian and the rest of the week at Adams, with Assistant Principal Richard Pugh following an opposite schedule in the buildings.

Already familiar with some of the Adams staff and all the Berrian staff, "an easier part is just knowing the school's in good hands if I'm not there," Cox said. "We have a lot of great people in both buildings that love kids and love the families of those children."

Work has been done to align systems between the buildings from Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, or PBIS, and "first responders" to deal with curriculum and social-emotional issues to establishing a daily morning meeting at Adams, similar to Berrian's Rock the Den.

Nearing the end of the first semester, Pugh sees things "solidifying" in the two buildings.

"We're settling down to where we have a system in place," said Pugh, who was hired in July and is becoming acclimated to working with elementary students after previous experience with middle school and high school students. "It is working well. It's still about the students, still about meeting their needs, regardless of the situation."

Travis Dinkheller, who went to Adams School when Irving closed after the 2007-08 year, said it's been a positive transition.

"It really feels very comfortable still. It still feels like Adams, so I think the next transition will be adding those kids and those staff members to be physically all together," Dinkheller said. "The kids are super-resilient. After a day or two of different staff members here or there, they have gone on and done what they've always done."

Cox makes being involved with student families a priority at both buildings, and blocks out time to work with teachers, students and families.

"As the process changes for all schools to work in learning communities, I think a principal kind of gets to decide what your priorities are, and you build your day around those priorities," Cox said.

Still, there's no such thing as a typical day for Cox. She may spend time in informal observations of classroom teachers, meeting about the next step of the Lighthouse process for Berrian or checking in with a group of students at lunchtime to get her daily "student fix."

Students in the Berrian setting have noticed the biggest change.

"I was in their classrooms once or twice every day. They would say they notice a big difference and 'we miss you,' but we're making it work," Cox said.

Emphasizing the end goal of the process helps handle all the change and the uncertainty.

"This is so about kids. This is going to be so exciting for kids. It makes it a little less stressful," she said.

"Sometimes I ask myself, 'how did I get here,' but I think there's a reason for this change," Cox said.

"You have to trust in that with change, good things will come."