



School Shuts for New Opening: Teachers Reflect on Briarfield Elementary's Closing and the Future of the Building That Housed It.

By Angela Forest, Daily Press, Newport News, Va.

Jun. 27--NEWPORT NEWS -- When the kindergarten student began crying during last week's award ceremony, Briarfield Elementary teacher Karol Johnson knew something was wrong. Was he sick? Did he want his mother?

It turns out the tears flowed because the child knew he could not return to the school known as Briarfield anymore.

"He was just sobbing, poor baby. I felt so bad for him," said Johnson, who, like her colleagues, will scatter to schools inside and outside the division next school year.

The building that houses Briarfield will undergo renovations in coming months. The building that opens in 2007 will no longer be Briarfield but a new middle and high school for An Achievable Dream Inc., which now educates academically at-risk students in kindergarten through eighth grade.

"The kids are having mixed emotions about it, even though it's a good thing," said special education teacher Carolyn Montier.

Last week, Briarfield teachers, staff and administrators held parties, showed slide shows of the school's history and invited alumni to gather for final goodbyes.

"It was sad to hear it was closing," said Dawn Quinn, a fourth-grade teacher, named the school's top teacher this year. Newport News Public Schools made the decision to close Briarfield and work with An Achievable Dream Inc. and the city to renovate it for a secondary school because Briarfield's test scores did not meet federal academic standards and Achievable Dream wanted to expand.

Employees at Briarfield learned of the change about a month after the year-round school started classes last July. Johnson said news of the closing hurt morale at first. But then, everybody at the school came together, for the children and themselves, said teachers and Principal Chris McLaughlin.

Nearly all teachers and staff have been reassigned to schools throughout the district for next year, said McLaughlin, who will work in the central office next year dealing with federal school funding. When Briarfield opened in 1951 in southeast Newport News, it served the children of white, working-class families who lived in the area, said School Board member Teddy Hicks, who grew up nearby and now represents the South District. Black students began enrolling at Briarfield in the late 1960s. By the time the school closed, it was more than 90 percent black.

Joan Saunders has good memories of attending Briarfield between 1955 and 1960. She supports

turning the building into a secondary school. "Yeah, you know things change," she said. "But it will always be Briarfield."

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