

Monday, June 6, 2005, 11:17 a.m.

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RI schools: 1 is closing, 1 is moving, 2 are restructuring

Ann McGlynn

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The handwritten letter, in pencil on notebook paper, detailed plans for an upcoming school talent show and an exchange of photographs with each other.

It arrived at Crystalnie Blanch's desk on the third floor of Grant Intensive Basic School in Rock Island, a pen pal project with Lincoln Elementary students to ease the transition for Grant kids. Their school will close Friday.

"She has glasses just like me," Crystalnie said as she pointed to her own silver frames. "We have something in common."

Crystalnie and her pen pal also will attend the newly structured Rock Island Intermediate Academy, presently Lincoln Elementary School, together. They are two of hundreds of students facing big change next fall as Grant closes, Hawthorne-Irving and Lincoln elementaries are transformed with a new curriculum and several new teachers, and the Thurgood Marshall alternative high school moves from its home in an old factory into the shuttered Grant.



Jeff Cook/QUAD-CITY TIMES Students arrive at Grant Intensive Basic School in Rock Island. Next school year, they will attend one of two restructured schools.

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Closing Grant will save the district \$132,000.

All of the schools serve mostly low-income, racially diverse student bodies in Rock Island. They also are four of the lowest-performing schools in the district.

The new primary academy, at Hawthorne-Irving, will be the school for students in prekindergarten through second grade. The intermediate academy will educate third- through sixth-grade students.

"The most important thing to me is helping these kids find success," Grant Principal Darryl Taylor said.

But the fact remains: it is painful to shut down a school, he said.

"This is like moving from home for some of these kids," Taylor said. The closure has been especially difficult for many staff members and parents, too. A federal lawsuit was filed to fight the closing.

To prepare the children, Grant students toured their new schools. They practiced lining up for and riding the buses that will pick them up at Grant each morning next year to take them to school.

Some of the students have pen pals, writing them back and forth about favorite colors, favorite television shows and favorite things to do outside of class.

A gathering of past and present Grant students will be held from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday. Organizers, including school secretary Stephanie Akers and parent coordinator Lachelle Guy, are calling the event the "Grant Family Reunion."

Teachers continue to focus on learning, while answering

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questions from students about what will happen next year in the new schools, Taylor said.

Meanwhile, the teachers who will be leading the classrooms in the two academies next year are preparing. They will undergo extensive training over the summer and into the start of the new school year on concepts for schools with high poverty and a high percentage of minorities.

Jay Marino, assistant superintendent, said the concept focuses on five main characteristics: high student achievement, focusing on the basics, frequent assessment, an emphasis on writing and teachers working together.

The schools will examine how they spend student time, and exclude programs that do not focus on achievement. They will zone in on language arts and math. They will test students as a way of determining strengths and weaknesses. They will spend a significant amount of time on writing, with research showing a strong link between student success and good writing skills. And teachers will spend time with each other, talking about what quality work looks like, he said.

The schools also will become a place where families can access social, medical and other services, Marino said.

"The teachers we have selected for this building have a real passion for the concepts we want to incorporate and have been successful in their previous positions," Marino added.

Liz Byczynski will work in the intermediate academy. The vice president of the local teachers' union admitted that she volunteered to serve on a committee examining how to structure the schools with a specific idea in mind.

"I went in there with the attitude of protection. It started to change

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to understanding," she said. She will be working with the school's special education students, as well as all student behavior.

On one hand, the change is hard, she said.

"The people who I have worked with at Lincoln are the most dedicated people. Every teacher here has given every single bit of themselves. To see us split up is very sad," Byczynski said. "The buildings that are going to be receiving the teachers are going to be blown away."

Then, she said: "Change is good. Changes comes."

"I am inspired and energized, and found the passion I had for education a long time ago again," she said.

Change also is good for Thurgood Marshall students, who will move from an old factory building without basic amenities like hot water and a cafeteria, into the soon-to-be-closed Grant School.

The plan is to create a more comprehensive program for the junior high and high school students who attend there, with fine arts, vocational and work-study programs, Principal Robert Mason said.

Last week, he visited Grant to look at the rooms that his students will occupy next year.

One of the rooms is where Crystalnie Blanch learns, writing pen pal letters to the girl who will be a new classmate next year.

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