

## Guiding kids through transitions

### Schools provide orientation activities

By Dana Ailer • Contributor • August 4, 2010

In late June, Matthew and Mackenzie Halterman stared around the office of Beverley Manor Elementary School, their soon-to-be new school. The twins were clearly excited, but a little more wide-eyed and a little more subdued than usual.

The 8-year-old twins are former Thomas W. Dixon Elementary School students who have moved to the county. During the summer, their mom, Candy Halterman, has done what she can to eliminate the twins' new-school jitters.

"I brought them with me to the school to register," she said, "Just so they could see the school. And I always point it out when we drive by, trying to get them used to the idea that now it's their school."

A large percentage of Staunton city elementary students will be attending new schools this year because of Dixon's repurposing. Teachers and administrators started the transition process last spring after the decision was announced.

Understanding that a fear of the unknown is the most unsettling thing for kids when they make a transition, the staff at Dixon started talking about the change with their students as soon as the plans became official.

As a parent, Halterman said she was thankful for their preparation.

"They talked about it a lot at school — who was going where next year. I think all the kids were ready for it," she said.

Halterman said she knows the transition process is just beginning.

"I'm sure they'll have butterflies on the first day, but then there's also the excitement of having new clothes and new school supplies," she said.

When asked about helping Matthew and Mackenzie

acclimate to the new school after the first day, Halterman said, "I'm just going to play it by ear as school starts, and work any situation as it comes up."

Halterman said she plans to take the kids to the open house.

"I think that's when it will really hit them," she said. "They'll start to get excited about meeting new friends and get nervous about being in a new place."

Most area schools offer an open house or orientation where new students and their parents can meet teachers and see their classrooms.

Shelburne Middle School hosts an annual hot dog supper for students. Assistant principal Robert Craft said the cookout is meant to give students a sense of comfort on the first day of school by making things more familiar. "They find their classrooms and their lockers. Some have never opened a locker before, so they learn how to do that."

Craft explained that the teachers and staff attend the cookout so they can meet with students and parents. While their children tour the school, parents can fill out forms or chat with teachers.

"Meeting the teachers like that makes the parents feel more comfortable about the transition too," Craft said.

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He points out that students might be nervous because middle school is very different from elementary school.

“Not only do we have different expectations for them academically, but the school is just much bigger. This year we still have four elementary schools all feeding into Shelburne,” he said.

One practice Shelburne uses is daily advisory groups. Each group has 12 to 15 students, and they spend the time before their first class each day working on character education and getting basic information about the school from their adviser. Craft explains that this time is important to the kids not just because it’s when they learn how to do certain things, but because they also learn that their adviser has a vested interest in their success; that they have an ally.

“We just want to make as many resources available to our students as possible,” Craft said.

Stuarts Draft High School assistant principal Bryan Huber echoed the importance of the active role of schools in students’ success. “It’s been proven that the more involved students are, the more successful they’ll be in school, and we want our students to succeed.”

Stuarts Draft conducts Camp Cougar each summer for incoming students. The three-day camp offers opportunities for students to meet staff and administration, ask questions about high school and get the chance to know the school building through a scavenger hunt.

One unique aspect of Camp Cougar is that the camp is organized and led by older students. Huber explained, “The leadership students are the most important part of Camp Cougar because freshman students will sometimes feel more comfortable talking to other students about things than they would talking to adults.”

Stuarts Draft has offered its popular leadership class to upperclassmen for the past two years. These 20 students meet for 45 minutes before school every day. In addition to developing the program for Camp Cougar, they learn leadership styles and techniques, organizational dynamics and become more comfortable with public speaking.

“We want to give our students a jump start on these important skills,” Huber said. In this way, Stuarts Draft is helping these students to make a smooth transition out of high school and into the next phase of their lives.



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Serving as peer mentors, juniors Jocelyn Bendrick and Miranda Beard answer questions from rising freshmen while sitting in a circle in a hallway during Camp Cougar at Stuarts Draft High School on July 27. Rising freshmen visited the school last week to talk about the adjustment to life in high school. (Mike Tripp/The News Leader)

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