Pickens students, staff face changes

Consolidation relocates some

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A.R. Lewis and Holly Springs elementary schools will be lonely places on Tuesday, as for the first time in generations they won't be filled with the laughter of children on the first day of school.

Meanwhile, Hagood and Ambler elementary schools will have grown a new student body, with about 400 displaced students from the two "mountain schools" north of Pickens swelling their ranks. Pickens Elementary also is gaining some of those displaced students, who enrolled there under the district's school choice program.

It will mean back-to-school to a school they've never been to before for students and teachers affected by the consolidation plan approved by the Pickens County School Board as a cost-saving measure five months ago.

Parents of those kids who turned out at school board meetings were almost unanimously opposed to closing the two historic, small schools, and some of them are wary as to how things are going to go now that the new order has arrived.

Students should see plenty of familiar faces, however, along with lots of unfamiliar ones.

Twelve teachers from A.R. Lewis, almost the entire faculty, are moving to Hagood, which now serves students living in what used to be the A.R. Lewis area.

Last year's principal at A.R. Lewis, Melissa Terry, will be around Hagood some, too, in her role of transitional principal – although she will be taking over full-time as principal at Six Mile Elementary within a few weeks.

But some parents are concerned about the increase in traffic, and the loss of the small-school atmosphere, not only of what they enjoyed at the closed schools, but also at the schools that will be growing because of the consolidations.

"I believe the teachers will be fabulous," Deana McAnulty said in response to a request for comments on the Pickens County News' Facebook page. "However, the students are not best served by the consolidation."

"Ask this question after the first day of school and see how much hostility comes about after us parents experience the car line," she added. "How can 400-500 cars get their children off safely in a 30-minute time slot?"

Elizabeth Mosely, whose child attended A.R. Lewis, said she was hoping that her grandchildren would be able to attend the same school that her children went to.

"The new school (Hagood) is so much bigger with lots more kids," she said. "I'm hoping my child can adjust to the move after five years in the same school with the same friends."

Ambler Elementary, which had been considered for closure but ended up taking half of the Holly Springs student body and some from A.R. Lewis on school choice, isn't the same this year, either, according to Stephanie Nix, whose granddaughter goes there.

Nix took her granddaughter to a meet-the-teacher event Thursday.

"That close knit feeling was gone," she said. "I saw, in my opinion, teachers and administrators had a scared look on their face. Students were lost, parents were frustrated."

School board member Phillip Bowers, one of the four trustees who voted for the consolidation plan, attended meet-the-teacher events at Ambler, Hagood, Pickens and Six Mile elementary schools and came away with a different impression.

"All the buildings were in good shape. Always room for improvement but very good overall," he posted on Facebook. "Lots of new experiences across the county. Great to see everyone doing so well as a new year school year begins. Very impressed with the morale at the consolidated schools."

Principals could not be reached for comment Friday. Although classes don't start until Tuesday, teachers have been at work since Thursday.

Hagood Elementary grew from a faculty of 14 teachers to 24, according to district figures. Pickens Elementary added four teachers. Ambler has three more than it did last year. Most of the teachers affected by the school closures ended up staying in the district. One resigned and one retired from Holly Springs, and there was one resignation at Hagood, according to the district.

Eight Holly Springs teachers will be at Pickens Elementary this year, two at Hagood and two at Ambler. In all, more than 16,000 students are expected to hit the books again Tuesday in Pickens County, with some 115 buses running 11,440 miles or more each day to get them there and back again.

New this year on the high school level is a program the district is implementing in partnership with the South Carolina Governor's School of Science and Mathematics to put high school students on the fast track to an engineering degree.

The program, called Accelerate, allows students to continue at Pickens County's high schools while getting the rigorous education of the Governor's School. The classes are live via computers and teleconferencing. Students will be able to interact with their teachers and with students from across the state. Students also will be able to review recorded lessons afterward.

"This is a game-changer for students who are serious about becoming engineers," said Lori Gwinn, the district's director of secondary education. "Our students can continue to enjoy all of the benefits of school life at our high schools -- band, athletics, student government -- while taking engineering classes through the Governor's School. It's a win-win."

Students will be able to earn up to 40 hours of college credit, according to the district.

"These students can enter our engineering program at Clemson a year ahead of their peers, and can use that time to explore internship and co-op opportunities, study abroad, pursue a minor, or begin a graduate degree, all while on a 4-year scholarship — provided that they qualify for one," said Jonathan R.A. Maier of the College of Engineering and Science at Clemson University, who is the lead instructor for the Accelerate program.

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