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Noah Lenstra <nlenstr2@gmail.com>

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patricia lewis <patlvjss1123@att.net>

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To: Noah Lenstra <nlenstr2@gmail.com>

Cc: patlvjss1123@att.net



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Last day of school

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CHAMPAIGN – Kenwood Elementary School Principal Patricia Lewis said an emotional goodbye to her students on the last day of school Friday.

It wasn't just goodbye for the summer. It was Lewis' last day with the Champaign school district, where she has spent her entire 33-year career.

"The last couple of days I would get teary-eyed, then have to pull myself together and say, 'You're going get through this.' I knew it would be an emotional day," she said Friday. "When I started talking, addressing the students for the last time as their principal, I began to get emotional. I felt so much warmth and love from the students and staff and parents, knowing we've supported each other during my tenure at Kenwood.

"The hardest thing is leaving the children," Lewis said. "After watching them grow as individuals and grow academically, I won't be there to see them continue their growth."

Lewis taught elementary school for 22 years, 19 of them as a fifth-grade teacher at Robeson Elementary School. She then moved into administration at Jefferson Middle School, serving as a dean, then an assistant principal.

While at Jefferson, Lewis was part of the staff that turned the school from one with a troubled reputation to recognition as a Blue Ribbon School by the U.S. Department of Education.

But when she was asked to step in as interim principal at Stratton Elementary School for a few months, Lewis realized she wanted to be with elementary students again.

"I just love that age level," she said. "I love the energy of the students. It's really rewarding to see them grow academically at that level. Their eyes shine. They're enthusiastic about learning. They're appreciative."

When she came to Kenwood as principal in 2003, the school was not making adequate yearly progress on state test scores. Lewis said her proudest achievement was the significant improvements made at Kenwood during her tenure.

"It happened because the staff came together and became focused on academic achievement as the number one goal. We also made reading a very strong focus in the school," she said. "We were able to achieve the goals we set for ourselves and actually exceed them."

Donna McLaughlin, a second-grade teacher at Kenwood, said Lewis was always a positive presence in the school.

"She's been very affirming of what a great staff we have," McLaughlin said. "We have a very experienced staff. I think she appreciates the expertise we bring to our grade levels, but she's also done a good job of challenging us to do our jobs a little bit better or think of other ways to accomplish our goals."

Lewis said her goal for the school was not only to improve performance but to make it a place that was sensitive to the emotional, social and developmental needs of students.

"I wanted Kenwood to become a school where decisions would be made based on what's best for children, and I feel I accomplished that," she said. "I think, as a school, we became more focused on what can we do at the school for our kids to be successful, and not make excuses about what parents are not doing or the community is not doing."

Last year, Lewis began meeting with a group of seven fourth-grade girls, whom she suspected might develop some discipline issues. They met every Friday and talked about setting goals, making choices and the consequences of their choices, and developing better relationships with teachers, bus drivers and other students.

This year, the group expanded to 13 girls, and Lewis saw a change.

"Not only were they not in trouble with discipline issues, they also had good grades," she said. "By developing a relationship with them and knowing they had someone they could come to, they made better choices as fifth-graders and it really affected the school climate in a positive way."

Lewis plans to check up on the girls next year when they are in middle school.

"She really tries hard to find those students who maybe don't fit in with the rest of the group,

and she really tries to motivate them to do better," McLaughlin said. "Her main goal is for kids to know that there are opportunities and possibilities out there for everybody."

Lewis and her husband raised two sons, and one of them has been a considerable influence on her teaching career. He contracted meningitis as an infant, and the disease caused him to become deaf and blind and suffer from cerebral palsy.

"I don't take for granted the things he's had to learn," Lewis said. "It made me more patient as a teacher. It's made me more creative in trying to meet the needs of students who have special needs. It's made me more understanding when I talk to parents, because I can identify with them. I have walked in their shoes."

Patricia Lewis

Position: Retiring as principal of Kenwood Elementary School. She has been in the Champaign school district as a teacher and administrator for 33 years.

Hometown: Lewis grew up in Danville. She now lives in Savoy.

Education: Recruited to the University of Illinois as part of Project 500, its effort to increase the number of black students at the school in the 1960s. She received bachelor's and master's degrees from the UI, and later got her advanced certificate in administration there as well.

Motto she would repeat for her students at Kenwood: 'If God gives you the wings of an eagle, don't hang around with the chickens. Chickens can't fly. At Kenwood, we're all eagles.'

Organizations: Reading Is Fundamental project coordinator for Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority for 26 years. President of Gamma Epsilon Psi Society, which sponsors a cotillion ball and raises money for college scholarships. Active in St. Luke Christian Methodist Episcopal Church. Member of the state board of directors for the Illinois Principals Association.

Retirement plans: 'I plan to sleep past 5 in the morning.' She and her husband will travel to Mexico in July, and Hawaii and California in November. Also on the agenda are some home projects and possibly some consulting.

Patricia McKinney Lewis
1802 Lyndhurst Dr.
Savoy, IL 61874
[217-352-3752](tel:217-352-3752)