

Verona Area School District

Staff, students say goodbye to Sugar Creek, New Century after abrupt closure

Administrators hope to hold additional opportunities to send-off, get acquainted with sites at later dates

Kimberly Wethal Unified Newspaper Group

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People walk through the hallways of Sugar Creek Elementary during the Farewell to 420 Church Avenue/New Century School event on Saturday, Feb. 29, at the two school sites. This was the last planned goodbye event that Sugar Creek and New Century students could participate in, since schools across the state were ordered to close on March 13.

Photo by Kimberly Wethal

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In February, Sugar Creek Elementary School principal Todd Brunner had a half dozen activities scheduled for students, staff and families as a final parting gift to the 64 year old building, which is closing this month and expected to be demolished.

As he and New Century School director Ann Princl were gearing up for the public goodbye to the two buildings Feb. 29, he was also in the middle of planning a book parade, a symbolic key swap between Brunner and Badger Ridge Middle School staff and a new family orientation. Princl also had an orientation night planned to bring together students from NCS and the school it will share a building with, Verona Area International School, for the first time.

Now those goodbyes will have to take place virtually.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools across Wisconsin shut down abruptly in mid-March; in Verona, students left March 13 expecting to return for two days the next week and take an extra week off for spring break. But it soon became clear they would not return before graduation in May.

For NCS and Sugar Creek students, that meant never returning at all, as they were scheduled to be closed permanently May 29 and the property transferred to the City of Verona later this year.

"It just felt so hard and so heavy," Bruner said. "People were heartbroken, not only because of the events and the closing of this school, that we had hoped to make it an important part of our lives and the closure it gives families and kids and ourselves, but just the fact that (it) meant we wouldn't get to see kids."

While the sudden switch to teaching students remotely has been a difficult one for educators everywhere, for Brunner and Princl, the change has also meant reworking or eliminating several planned events to help students let go of any emotional attachments to the buildings where they spent some of their formative years.

Now, the new goodbyes to the old buildings, and hello to those that are new to them, will take place via online memorial videos, a virtual walk-through and social emotional learning conducted by the school's classroom teachers.

Both schools are providing videos for students to watch that say goodbye to the old school – Sugar Creek's is a spin-off from a memory book Brunner had made for staff – but students will also be able watch walk-throughs to see their new schools.

"Even though they can't be here physically to say goodbye to us and goodbye to each other and the building, they will at least always have this memory – this visual representation of where they were and where they spent their lives," Brunner said.

The transition from one school to the next will also take place within teacher's classrooms, Brunner said, as he asked staff earlier last week to consider how they can work the goodbye to the Sugar Creek building into their social emotional learning lesson plans.

And the hope is that someday, before the land the two schools sit on is turned over to the City of Verona, there will get to be one final goodbye done in-person, Brunner said. What form that takes will depend on what regulations the state still has to prevent the spread of COVID-19, he added.

In any case, Brunner hopes to have an open house for all families before any in-person schooling would start back up in the fall so students can start to get used to the school's new home.

At New Century, PrincI said they're still planning to hold an in-person "graduation" for the fifth grade students that will be leaving the school – while practicing social distancing – as well as scheduling the traditional summer "playdates" for both New Century and VAIS students once it's safe to do so.

Princl and her staff have been heartbroken over having to miss the "magic" that the last few months of school in-person brings, she told the Press in an email, but they've had no choice but to adapt.

"Teachers and students are connected, projects are underway, and the light bulb moments from our students are so exciting and rewarding to witness," she wrote. "We can't create in-person memories, so we've needed to recalibrate, and provide different opportunities."

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