

1 school mentality

• Rome students return to school Friday to kick off a new year, and at North Heights new Principal Wesley Styles spreads the message of a united school.

 By Spencer Lahr

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Principal Wesley Styles

On the T-shirts worn by North Heights Elementary School staff on the first day of school Friday, there was a motto printed on the back: "2 schools are better as 1 team."

This is the second school year where students in the Main Elementary attendance area are attending North Heights Elementary while the new Main Elementary is constructed. Once the new school is finished, which is expected to be by the start of the 2019-2020 school year, the students from both attendance areas will go to Main, and North Heights will be refurbished into a sixth-grade academy.

But whether students are attending North Heights or Main Elementary, new Principal Wesley Styles is hoping to foster the belief in one school.

"We're all the same kids," Styles said, adding there are not North Heights students and teachers and Main students and teachers, there is just a unified school.

Styles, who previously taught at Rome High before taking an administrative role in the Polk County School District, was announced as the replacement for former Principal Tonya Wood in May. Wood is now the grant coordinator at the central office.

See more Back to School photos in Sunday's edition for Floyd County's first day Thursday as well as Rome City Schools' first day Friday.

Among the things to focus on for the new school year, Styles said the aim is to increase the visibility of the school out in the community along with bringing community members into the school more. Coupled with this, is helping to grow students' soft skills, to better their interactions with adults and their peers, he said.

Preparing students for this comes down to them following the principles of PAWS, the acronym for the school's Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports initiative, Styles said. PAWS stands for prompt, accept responsibility, work hard and show respect.

Styles said he wants kids to go "above and beyond" in exhibiting positive behavior while out in the community and to its members when they are in the school.

Other focuses for the school year are to have more third-graders reading on or above grade level and more gaining proficiency in math, Styles said.

As the first day neared its end, several classrooms were finishing up activities. In second-grade teacher Jodie Noles classroom, her new students were tasked with two STEM challenges, using popsicles sticks and clips to build the sturdiest structure and then the tallest structure.

North Heights received its STEM — science, technology, engineering and mathematics — certification from the state last year.

Out in sixth-grade teacher Lori Rader's trailer classroom, students were attempting to get off an island they became stranded on when their boat crashed, since they were reading so much — her class is focused on literacy.

The Breakout EDU activity saw groups of four students team up to solve the clues, which blew up onto the beach, to unlock the five locks to open up a box. The slips of paper had symbols — like of a river to represent water, and of fire, to boil the water — which had to be arranged to find the right combination to unlock a lock.

Though the activity is not literacy focused, the first day was about having students work together toward a common goal and tune up their minds for problem solving. The challenge is for the students in each group to think together on a mutual problem and find its solution, she continued.