

AKD is right where new principal Nicholson wants it to be

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Clifton Nicholson is the new principal at Anna K. Davie Elementary, the first time in his career in education that he will have such a role. (Spencer Lahr / RN-T.com)

It was a bit of an unfamiliar experience for new Anna K. Davie Elementary School Principal Clifton Nicholson recently when he was thrown a surprise reception at the school that had top system officials and board of education members in attendance.

“Where I’m from, I’m not sure the superintendent even knows who you are,” said Nicholson, who since 2002 had worked as an English teacher, an academic coach and an assistant principal with Atlanta Public Schools, before coming to Rome.

Nicholson said he was ready to head to a smaller school system and a smaller town, with Rome reminding him of Athens, Alabama, where he lived for 10 years. He earned his bachelor’s degree at Athens State University, all the while working full time and going to school at night, up until the point he had to quit his job to take on a student-teaching role.

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The son of immigrant parents — his mother is from India and his father is from Jamaica — Nicholson lived in three different places from kindergarten to sixth grade, moving from Queens, New York, to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, to Jamaica. Eventually, he landed in Huntsville, Alabama, the home of Oakwood University — a school that is run by the Seventh-day Adventist Church that his parents wanted him to attend, as they are devout members of the church.

Nicholson never did end up going to Oakwood, and after he got his degree from Athens State, he decided it was time to leave town and make his way elsewhere. And, in his case, elsewhere was Georgia, where he went on to get his master's degree from Georgia State University, and an educational leadership certificate and his doctorate from Columbus State University.

The topic of Nicholson's doctorate dissertation was early literacy, which is a main focus of his as he starts his first school year at the helm of Anna K. Davie. From his experience of working in Atlanta, he said he would come across students entering into the ninth grade who had fifth grade or sixth grade reading levels. This was an impetus for him deciding that he wanted to go to the roots of where literacy begins, at the elementary level.

Nicholson said he is encouraged by the South Rome Early Learning Center, which runs through a partnership between Berry College and Rome City Schools, for three year olds at the school.

He said he wants to further advocate the center and get more kids who will attend Anna K. Davie enrolled, so they can become better accustomed to a school environment. This way, by the time they reach pre-K, it'll be less about adjustment and more about instruction, he said.



Gathering data on literacy levels at the school is also a big part of Nicholson's tasks before the school year starts, and interpreting it in a way that perhaps the state doesn't see. He said the state will look at the school's literacy levels for fifth-graders in 2016 as compared to last year's group and see a drop in the percentage of students reading at grade level, decreasing from 36 percent to 30 percent. However, he said, there was actual improvement by last year's fifth-graders from the level they were at as fourth-graders, going from 22 percent to 30 percent.

Another element of the school's effort to improve literacy is the use of the Read 180 program, that has room for 60 students right now, but Nicholson wants to increase that number. The self-paced program has a three-part instruction model where kids work with a teacher, on the computer and in a small group. Read 180 will determine a student's Lexile score, which is a way of measuring a reader's ability, and then selects text for them that match that score, and makes texts digitally interactive by pronouncing words and defining them for kids.

Cultural literacy is another element of Nicholson's plan, and he wants to have teachers go through a two-to three-part professional development on how they can incorporate it in the classroom. Educator Alfred Tatum has been a champion of the instruction model that focuses on bringing students' personal experiences into their written responses and discussions concerning texts, Nicholson said. Essentially it's about engaging with texts through a cultural lens, he added, and is a way of increasing motivation, which wanes after fourth grade once hitting a peak.

Nicholson has met about half of his staff, he said, and the keyword he keeps hearing is that being an educator at the school is a calling. And it's a calling that he doesn't plan to step away from anytime soon, he added.



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Anna K. Davie Elementary gets new principal; Rome BOE also OKs ELOST resolution