

'This Is To Say Thank You'

Students' Letters Bring Responses From Soldiers

BY HARRISON MINES

"Your letter was so good, I thought you were at least in middle school," Principal Lisa Clark read aloud from a soldier's letter to the students of Kling Elementary School on Friday afternoon.

Alongside Clark at the front of the cafeteria sat Kling secretary Robin Thomas, her husband John Thomas Sr., their son John Thomas Jr., and his fiancé Kelsi. The students' attention was fixated on a small postal service box with a return address to Afghanistan.

The box, unbeknownst to the students at the beginning of the assembly, was filled with responses to letters the second grade class had mailed to John Jr.'s U.S. Army unit a year prior.

As the students took their seats, Principal Clark explained John Thomas Jr.'s military fatigues and announced that he had arrived with something very special for the school.

The students were quickly reminded of a writer's workshop project they completed around the holidays last year, in which they reached out to Army men and women who were far away from home. The project was proposed by Robin Thomas, whose own son would be spending the holidays serving his country.

"I got the idea around Thanksgiving," she explained before the assembly. "I wanted to support my son and encourage the soldiers. I wanted to lift their spirits."

Though this project was a first for Kling Elementary, Robin Thomas and her family are not strangers to communicating with servicemen overseas.

Other than John Jr., Robin has two sons who have also served in the military. Jason Underwood, 36, has served six tours in Iraq, and Justin Underwood, 34, has served three tours in Afghanistan. Jason's wife Michelle has also served five tours in Iraq.

While the army runs in the family for their children, John Sr. and Robin marvel at their sons' decisions with great pride.

"This whole tradition started with Jason," John Thomas Sr. said. "It was all totally their choice."

John Sr. works with Welsh Construction in Lexington and Robin has been a school secretary for Buena Vista schools for the past 17 years.

A military life path was not always the plan for John Jr., 19, who completed his first tour in Afghanistan this year.

"He talked about going to Virginia Tech for a long time," his father said. "He was worried about what Robin would think when he made his decision."

"It was just easier for me," John Jr. said of his choice to enter the army.

John Thomas Jr. began his Army career as an aircraft operator two years ago. He is a specialist, piloting a Gray Eagle Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV).

John Jr.'s mother told him of the incoming letters around the holidays. He decided to keep the letters a surprise for his fellow soldiers.

Headed their way were neatly written well-wishes and thank-yous from the Kling El-

ementary first grade writer's workshop class.

Leslie Royer, writer's workshop teacher, worked with first-graders for over a week to help with Robin's idea.

"Letters are different than stories," Royer said. "I work with my kindergarteners on just writing a sentence; first- and second-graders work on writing short true narrative stories."

"I introduced Robin's project by reading a story book about a military family whose father went overseas," Royer continued. "I wanted to focus on how hard it is to be away from family. We wanted them to understand why we say 'thank you.'"

"You are a very brave person," first-grader Isaiah wrote, one of many of his classmates to express gratitude. "I will do anything to help you. Thank you and get home safe."

"They were all really excited to hear from the kids," John Thomas Jr. said of the arrival of the letters in Afghanistan.

The messages from Kling made such an impression on his unit that John Jr.'s commander, Sgt. Aaron W. Mur-

phy, announced an initiative to write the students back.

In the Kling cafeteria Friday, the now second-graders were delighted to hear their letters had responses addressed to them personally.

"It's awesome to know what I'm doing is really making a difference," one soldier said.

"The holidays are special times for troops. We may not be able to be with our families, but that is a choice so that you can be with yours," another letter read.

"You and your classmates are the reason my friends and I willingly serve our country."

"I think we've learned that communication is really important," Principal Clark announced after reading the letters. "These boys and girls wrote letters and they got responses from people who live oceans away."

"Because kids in our school did this in support of these guys and what they're doing," Clark continued, "they decided to do something for us," she motioned to John Jr.

John Thomas Jr. stood to reveal a framed flag, positioned above a certificate from

the Operation Freedom's Sentinel and the Resolute Support Mission. The flag comes from the Gray Eagle UAV John Jr. pilots, also pictured in the certificate.

The letters from both the students and soldiers are to be placed in the back of the frame before it will be hung in the Kling front office for students and faculty to admire daily.

"We'll play it by ear," Robin said of letter-writing becoming a tradition at Kling. "We may do it again, but we're not expecting anything in return. This is to say thank you."

At the top left and right corners of the frame's matting, Robin cut small squares to place John Jr.'s senior portrait and military headshot.

Concluding the assembly, John Thomas Jr. stood with Clark and accepted student questions. He chuckled his way through various inquiries about drones, jets, and his special outfit.

"One last question," Principal Clark said as she pointed to a single raised hand.

A small voice asked, "Do you know my dad? He's in the army, too!"

'Great Year' Ahead

Students Head Back To School

BY HARRISON MINES

The party, otherwise known as the first day of school, began for all Rock-bridge area students Monday morning.

Playing over a portable speaker placed at the school's entryway, "Who Let the Dogs Out" ushered in Waddell Elementary Bulldogs either returning for a new year or coming to school for the very first time at 7:30 a.m.

Despite their early start, energy radiated from Waddell teachers and staff buzzing about the campus, offering high-fives and hugs to all who entered through the school's archway. Between the music and chatter among families and friends, students had every reason to believe the first day of school was the event of the year.

Principal Melanie Camden manned the central Waddell crosswalk, happy as ever to see the influx of Lexington folks holding their students' hands on their walk to school.

"Good morning, Neveah! Good morning, Genesis!



MOUNTAIN VIEW ELEMENTARY teacher Tammy Nicely escorts a student into school Monday. (Stephanie Mikels Blevins photo)

Good morning, Smith family!"

Unicorn backpacks, light-up sneakers and kitty-ear head bands filled the bleachers in the Waddell auditorium, where students sat by grade level until they were dismissed to find their classroom. Some soaked up their last few minutes with mom and dad,

others confidently banded together with their buddies and classmates.

As the final "first-day" pictures were snapped and grade levels began to descend upon the hallways, the school day was officially underway.

Across town, after Central Elementary Bears passed welcome balloons of every color

into their classrooms, it was time to get down to business at 8 a.m. sharp.

Principal Robin Parker gave an official welcome to students over the intercom, kicking off what will become an everyday routine for Central students: morning announcements.

Though the initial excitement of entering school might have worn off, Parker reminded students fun still has a place at school, announcing Tuesday to be "joke day" and a "Music Minute" occurring at the start of the day on Wednesday.

Central teachers, who, liked teachers throughout the area, worked days in advance to prepare for that morning, delved into housekeeping items right away. All the important bases were covered throughout the grade levels. Hayley Smith showed her second grade class where to put their pencils when they become dull and Christina Trombetta instructed her kindergarteners when to stand for their first-ever Pledge of Allegiance.

At Kling Elementary in Buena Vista, the process of settling in on the first day was just as immediate for the Little Blues.

Principal Lisa Clark took a

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lap around the building at 8:30 a.m., stopping to check in on each classroom. Clark left each stop with a smile, happy that teachers and students were getting into their groove once the bustling drop-off period was through.

Scenes at Kling varied room to room. Kindergarteners in Marcie Carte's class identified their cubbies with a new coloring page, Catherine Trotman passed out a supply of glue sticks to her first-graders, and Lisa Davis' first grade class was elated to receive Play-Doh at their desks. Some classes began new crafts and other teachers invited students to take a seat on the carpet for story time.

By 9 a.m., the last of parents who stuck around made their exit through the office and classroom doors began to shut. The halls that echoed with dozens of little footsteps minutes ago were finally quiet. It was time for Kling students to carry on with the first of many regular school days.

First-morning scenes such as these played out throughout all of the schools of the three local divisions.

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Now for the numbers.

Rockbridge County Public Schools were attended by a total of 2,763 students on Monday, with 503 at Central Elementary, 269 at Fairfield Elementary, 122 at Mountain View Elementary, 245 at Natural Bridge Elementary, 662 at Maury River Middle School and 962 at Rockbridge County High School.

"These numbers are what we were expecting for today," Rockbridge Superintendent Dr. Phillip Thompson told *The News-Gazette*. "But as past experiences have taught us, these numbers will fluctuate until Labor Day."

The *News-Gazette* was unable to obtain first-day enrollment figures for Buena Vista City Schools.

Lexington City Schools had 481 students enrolled on the first day, with 322 students attending Waddell and 159 students attending Lylburn Downing Middle School.

"Our first day was fantastic," Lexington Superintendent Rebecca Walters told the *News-Gazette* Tuesday. "Students and parents were excited to be back in our schools, and our staff had worked very hard to prepare for their arrival today.

"If today is any indication," she continued, "it's going to be a great year!"

Good News For Area Schools

All Schools Now Fully Accredited

BY HARRISON MINES

Buena Vista, Lexington and Rockbridge County schools all received full accreditation from the Virginia Department of Education as part of the department's annual accreditation ratings, announced Monday.

Area schools succeeded in their ratings by achieving standards put in place last year by the department to measure continuous academic progress and achievement. Rather than receiving accreditation by raw test scores, the Virginia Department of Education considers a school's accreditation by SOL test performance, attendance and monitoring achievement gaps among student subgroups.

State proficiencies in academic achievement are English, 75 percent; math, 70 percent; and science, 70 percent.

Performance levels in the different factors determining accreditation are as follows: Level 1 - meets or exceeds standard or sufficient improvement; Level 2 - near standard or making sufficient improvement; Level 3 - below standard.

Accredited schools show all school-quality indicators at either Level 1 or 2. Schools accredited with conditions show one or more school-quality indicators at Level 3. High-performing schools with

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waivers from annual accreditation authorized by the General Assembly are rated as accredited.

Seven area schools were accredited with granted waivers: Rockbridge County High, Parry McCluer Middle, Lylburn Downing Middle, Waddell and Mountain View, 2019 through 2021, and Central and Fairfield, 2018 through 2020.

‘The Ultimate Championship’

Perhaps the greatest success in local schools’ steps toward achievement occurred in Buena Vista, where Parry McCluer High School rose from accredited with conditions to full accreditation this year, rounding out their division’s accredited rating.

“It’s hard to put into words,” Buena Vista City Superintendent John Keeler told the News-Gazette in August, not long after the division was informed to expect full accreditation. “This is the ultimate championship.”

According to Keeler, Buena Vista faculty and staff were elated to hear the news of full accreditation after falling short one year prior in high school math scores. “It hasn’t been a quick fix,” Keeler said, explaining the division has passionately worked toward upping its academic achievements in all areas for a number of years.

“We developed a common literacy plan in the division that has served us well. The implementation of Writer’s Workshop has paid dividends at Kling in English and we plan to expand the program to Enderly in the future.”

Keeler also said the division “believes in transition points,” where teachers honed in on the needs of students in their crossover from second grade at Kling to third grade at Enderly, rising into middle school and ultimately transitioning into the high school curriculum.

“We were able to loop math and reading at the middle school level, which showed the highest scores we’ve had in six years. We also created ‘teaching teams’ in our schools where our talented teachers paired up in the classroom,” said Keeler.

Along with improvements within Buena Vista curriculums, the division worked to reward and excite

its students to boost attendance. Improvements to the high school gymnasium, the Ramsey Center student art gallery, “beefed-up” technology course offerings, opportunities for career exploration and “good news” social media coverage are a few of the moves Buena Vista has made to encourage its students to succeed, according to Keeler. “We have happier people now,” he said.

“Full accreditation gives us the confidence to try other things in the division. We want to work to keep it and branch out in our schools,” Keeler said. “Now we can look back and see what we have accomplished together.”

Parry McCluer High School scored straight Level 1 for academic achievement in English, math and science. In achievement gaps, PMHS posted at Level 2 in both English and math, rising from Level 3 in math in 2017-2018. Parry McCluer High School’s chronic absenteeism was posted at Level 1, with 9.45 percent chronically absent in the 2018-19 school year, dropping from 13.25 percent for the previous year.

Parry McCluer Middle School posted all Level 1s in academic achievement, academic gaps and chronic absenteeism. Where 21 percent of PMMS students were chronically absent in the 2017-2018 school year, the middle school experienced an excellent 3.64 percent chronic absentee rate last year.

Kling and Enderly Heights elementary schools posted all Level 1s in academic achievement. In achievement gaps, both elementary schools posted Level 1s in math and Level 2s in English. Chronic absenteeism at both schools scored Level 1s, with 12.5 percent of students chronically absent at Kling and 7.82 percent at Enderly.

Attendance Matters In Rockbridge

“We are very pleased that all Rockbridge County schools have earned the opportunity to celebrate full accreditation again this year,” Rockbridge County Superintendent Phillip Thompson said of the division’s overall rating. Along with strides in academic performance, the

Rockbridge division experienced a significant decrease in chronic absenteeism last year.

Rockbridge County High School previously earned a Level 3 score for chronic absenteeism at 30.56 percent in the 2017-18 school year. Similarly, Maury River Middle School struggled with attendance in 2017-2018 with nearly 23 percent of students being chronically absent. In 2018-2019, MRMS saw a drop in chronic absenteeism to 14.63 percent and only 9.16 percent of RCHS students were chronically absent.

“I must attribute our improvement in our absenteeism rates to our Attendance Matters campaign we started last year,” Thompson said. “By collaborating with parents and students and educating them on the importance of consistent school attendance we were able to realize some wonderful gains last year.”

Thompson also sees the pay-off of project-based learning being implemented in Rockbridge County Schools.

“So many students of all backgrounds and ability levels achieve more when instruction occurs in a student-centered environment allowing for the enhancement of skills that revolve around communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creative thinking,” he explained. “I believe our students are responding well to these techniques in both the academic and career and technical environments and as a result, we have seen improvements among all ability levels.”

Rockbridge County High School, along with three division elementary schools, Central, Mountain View and Natural Bridge Elementary, swept all school quality indicators with Level 1 scores. The rate of chronic absenteeism at Central was 10.63 percent, 3.48 percent at Mountain View and 5.81 percent at Natural Bridge.

MRMS scored all Level 1s in academic achievement, as well as Level 1 in achievement gaps in math, which rose from Level 3 in the 2017-2018 school year. MRMS posted Level 2 in achievement gaps in English.

Fairfield Elementary scored Level 1s in all areas, except for a Level 2 score in achievement gaps in English.

Chronic absenteeism at Fairfield was 12.45 percent last year.

Lexington Always Focused On Improving

“Our students, teachers, and division staff are to be commended for their hard work and focus on student growth and achievement,” Lexington City Schools Rebecca Walters told The News-Gazette of the division’s ratings, of which both Waddell Elementary and Lylburn Downing Middle were accredited. “We saw some very good gains this year.”

Waddell posted all Level 1 scores for academic achievement and achievement gaps, rising from a single Level 2 score in the achievement gap for math in the 2017-2018 school year. Waddell’s chronic absenteeism came in at 6.55 percent with a Level 1 score.

Lylburn Downing Middle School, though accredited with a waiver, saw a Level 3 score in the achievement gap for English. Specifically, black students and students with disabilities at LDMS scored under state standard last year. The achievement gap for math rose to a Level 1 from the Level 2 rating in the previous year. Academic achievement came in at Level 1s across the board along with chronic absenteeism at 8.42 percent.

“With our ever-constant focus on improvement, we are analyzing the data to direct our approach,” Walters said of the division’s steps to address the achievement gap among student groups.

“Our administrators and teachers work hard each day to make sure all of our students have the best possible chance to be successful in school. This includes identifying those students who are struggling and making sure we provide them with the supports and resources needed to grow as learners,” she said. “Our intervention programs place an emphasis on ‘unfinished learning’ and offer individualized instructional support. We will continue to work tirelessly to increase student achievement across the board.”

Remember To Recycle