'I had no idea what to expect': School reporter gets the chance to be principal of Philadelphia school

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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"Core values are a part of the Edison program," [Romesa Scott] said. "It's embedded in everything we do."

FULL TEXT

About two weeks ago, Philadelphia Cares spokesman Anthony Johnson called to see if I wanted to be a principal for a day in any one of the city's schools. I immediately jumped on the offer and seized it as an opportunity to get the inside scoop on what really goes on inside the walls of these buildings.

Johnson was especially happy I chose Gillespie Middle School, because a teacher had called him a month ago to complain about the lack of volunteerism the school receives during Philadelphia Cares events. Though I was excited to visit the school, I couldn't help but wonder why no one had really gone to that school to participate in previous activities. Was the school really that bad?

Of course, I knew it wasn't going to be like the private middle school I attended in South Jersey. But I really had no idea what to expect. However, I was up for the challenge.

In September, the school endured a suspicious fire set by toilet paper. Some rumors pointed the finger at some of the students.

The school is located on 18th and Pike, near Simon Gratz High School. It has 700 students, ranging from the sixth to the eighth grade. There were two gymnasiums, four separate lunch periods to accommodate all the students, four floors and a library that was scheduled to open soon. Gillespie Middle School Principal Romesa Scott said their enrollment was down this year, but for someone like me, who went to a middle school with 30 kids in my entire grade, this was huge.

8:00 a.m. -- I slid into the side door of the school. The security guard posted at that particular door led me to the front of the school where I signed in. On our way up the stairs, his smile assured me that I was going to have a very interesting day posing as the principal. Then, we entered the office, where I was pleasantly greeted by Principal Scott.

8:15 a.m. -- There was no time to waste and before I even really got a chance to get acquainted with my surroundings, there was serious work to do. Scott and I had to figure out which staff members were going to cover the classes of the teachers who were absent. Scott said there were no substitutes available from the school district. Therefore, each classroom had to be supervised by an adult.

8:25 a.m. -- Scott gave me the grand tour of the middle school. Meanwhile, students had flooded the hallways and were making their way to their destinations. It was obvious the students really respected Scott because as soon as they saw her coming, they'd stop clowning around in the hallways and head straight to their classroom.

9:00 a.m. - Only minutes after we returned to the principal's office, Nurse Jack Driscoll came in with a serious problem. Although school had been in session for more than three months, there were still 46 students who hadn't been immunized. And according to the state law, Scott said, students cannot stay in their classes without having them done.

"Once they get in to school, we've been holding them in a room," she said to me. "The parents have been warned and we are required to follow the law."

9:30 a.m. - Our scheduled parent, teacher, principal meeting was cancelled. Therefore, I went down to math teacher Michael Knight's room. He was using huge bags of M&Ms to figure out percentages. At the time it seemed like a good idea since the students seemed to really learning from it. But not all of the teachers felt the same, when the students came to their classrooms throwing the M&Ms. By using a product they are familiar with, Knight said, the kids are able to get a better understanding of percentages. Also, working in groups helps them learn to work with people they like or dislike to achieve a common goal.

10:30 a.m. - It was time for me to stop playing with M&Ms and get down to real principal business. I had a meeting with Edison Risk Management Team Representative Jonathan Czar and Security Imaging Systems President and CEO Jeffrey Burns. The new security system, which was presented to us in the office, will be tested out at Stetson and Gillespie Middle Schools. When it is implemented in January, visitors will have to log in with identification that contains a bar code and they will need to enter the reasoning of their visit.

"We will be able to figure out who's still in the building should there be a problem," Burns said. "It's to keep the students safe."

11:00 a.m. - During our second tour of the school, we checked in on classes and told the few students who were roaming around the halls to get back into their classes. When we walked into reading and language teacher Sigrid McCall's classroom, the students were very anxious to recite their core values. And they took pride in reciting the poem "Dreams," by Langston Hughes.

"Core values are a part of the Edison program," Scott said. "It's embedded in everything we do."

12:00 p.m. - By the time we got back to the office, I was absolutely starving. And the food Scott and I ordered had just arrived. But just when I thought I was about to eat, a parent came in and wanted to meet with us. A mother was concerned about her 13-year-old son, whose behavior was changing before her eyes. The woman was in tears. However, Scott explained to her the changes kids often go through at that age and offered to work with the woman in making sure her son turned out fine. Additionally, we signed the boy up to talk with a male role model that often counsels some of the students.

12:45 p.m. - Scott and I finally got to eat lunch, and I was soon on my way back to the newsroom.

At the end of the day, I realized that Gillespie Middle School is not as bad as people make it out to be. The students at Gillespie just want to be loved, like every other kid in the world.

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