



Unable to hire a teacher, Whiteley forms multi-age classes

By Kimberly Pohl | Daily Herald Staff

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As each parent walked through the doors of Frank C. Whiteley School for student registration, Principal Mary Szuch realized she had a growing staffing dilemma on her hands: two second-grade teachers, 65 second-grade students and zero chance of hiring anyone.

The best solution, Szuch and a team of teachers at the Hoffman Estates school decided, was to combine about 125 first- and second-graders into five multi-age classrooms.

"As new as this model is to some parents, that's how comfortable we are because a curriculum is already in place," Szuch said.

But news of the arrangement prompted enough questions and complaints that administrators held a special meeting Monday night attended by 50 or so parents.

Jim Garwood, assistant superintendent of administrative services at Palatine Township Elementary District 15, explained that hiring a third second-grade teacher wasn't an option because a new hire costs about \$50,000 with salary and benefits. Each school year, he said, there are typically eight to 10 similar staffing situations.

"If you (hire another teacher) for one school, you really have to do it for all," Garwood said. "Unfortunately with the economy this isn't a time we can make that kind of half-million-dollar decision."

The late development upset some parents, who expected their children to have certain teachers and instead had to explain why their second-graders had to return to a first-grade class.

Garwood follows the school board's parameters on classroom size to allocate teachers to each school. Where to put those teachers is up to each principal.

Typically, Szuch counts on two second-graders registering late in the summer. Whiteley got about 10 additional second-grade students this year, raising the average second-grade class size to 32.5 students - way above District 15's guideline that lowers primary grades' average of 24 students per class.

One reason for the influx is that parents, some citing the economy, pulled their children out of expensive private schools.

Whiteley's first- and second-grade split format is hardly a new concept to District 15, which now boasts about 65 multi-age classrooms, according to Mary Zarr, assistant superintendent of instructional services.

Zarr said research shows 90 percent of students in multi-age classes either match or outperform the academic performance of their peers in traditional classes. Benefits include increased self-esteem and personal responsibility, and fewer discipline problems. She said the older students take on a leadership role.

"Someone who didn't necessarily shine in the first grade gets that chance in the second grade," Zarr said.

Classes: Research shows positive results, benefits