

New Parker Junior High principal ready to listen to families

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Ursula Parris took only a few days off work to uproot her life in Florida and start to settle into her new role at Parker Junior High School in Flossmoor.

"I worked my previous job until June 28, went to Puerto Rico for a few days, came back and pretty much slept all of July 3 and 4, then started here on July 5," Parris said, sitting in her new office.

Now that she's settling in at Parker, Parris said she's ready to start digging into data and listening to parents. Along the way she'll use what experiences she gained as a teacher and administrator working in schools with families at different ends of the income spectrum.

"It all comes back to listening," she said. "Families across the world don't get that enough, especially in education."

Working and learning in her home state

In Florida, school districts comprise vastly greater numbers of schools than in Illinois. Districts cover multiple counties, encompassing hundreds of schools at every grade level.

"As a teacher, I've worked in probably the roughest areas you could even imagine in terms of resources. I was also able to work in more affluent schools in growing communities," Parris said.

"They all deserve education. We're trying to get them all to proficiency."

A native Floridian, Parris graduated from Florida State University in 1990 with a food service management degree. She worked for the company Aramark as a school food service director before deciding to try substitute teaching.

Parris worked her way up to teach-

ing full time, and then earned a master of science degree in educational leadership from Nova Southeastern University Florida in 1999.

Coming from a family with a history in education-related professions, Parris worked for seven years as assistant principal at a high school within Duval County Schools. During that time, she said the staff elevated the school's state rating from an F to a B.

Following that, she worked as assistant principal of curriculum at Pinellas County Schools. For the past five years, Parris has served as a middle school principal in Pinellas County.

Why middle school matters so much

Parris said the middle school years present a critical time for educators to work with children and their parents to lay the groundwork for future educational and career opportunities. Staff can help by encouraging all children to consider advanced placement courses.

"I think it's important that we sell what we can offer as a school to our scholars," Parris said. "The piece that families don't see immediately is, 'Where is your child going to end up 4 to 5 years from now? Could this decision make a difference on a military exam your child wants to take, or in their college experience, or helping them get certifications to move directly into the workforce?'"

"We should be giving them the opportunity to critically analyze this question earlier in the middle school years so that it builds a foundation. It's our role as educators to communicate that effectively to our families."

Flossmoor School District 161 includes Flossmoor along with portions of Chicago Heights, Olympia Fields, Hazel Crest and Homewood. All sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders in the district attend Parker, creating



Carole Sharwarko/H-F Chronicle
Ursula Parris, a Florida native, is the new principal of Parker Junior High School in Flossmoor. She started work July 1.

a broad mix of children with various access to resources.

To ensure all students have equal opportunity to advanced placement courses, Parris said she wants to step away from the formalization of these decisions and make them more personalized.

It's critical to use assessments that extend beyond pen-and-paper and computers, she said, and also consider input from parents and students alongside that of teachers and administrators.

"Teachers are content experts, and principals and administrators are leadership experts, but how do we take our expertise and allow the needs of the families to be infused into our decision making?" she said. "We have to create structures and systems so that we don't put one kid in a big box."

Parris earned the designation of Equity Champion while working for Pinellas County schools, a title that took 18 months to acquire, and also challenges her to keep learning along the "continuum" of equity.

Combining data, observation and listening

A lifelong lover of math and science, Parris said she relies heavily on both data analysis and observation.

"I'm extremely data driven. I love spending hours desegregating data," she said. "Then we take that data and identify holes or deficits, and develop resources and interventions so the scholar can meet their targets."

To serve the needs of all students, she looks to experience with her own children, who are now adults. Her daughter was a natural reader and independent student, while her son struggled and needed more help.

Parris said she wants to help Parker teachers build toolkits that prepare them to meet the needs of both types of students.

"It's tough to do that. It's not overnight. It's not one day of training. It's not one day of professional development. It's every single day, every single week, revisiting it over and over again," she said.

"And then when you're done with one school year and the scholar moves from sixth to seventh grade, you do it again. And then to eighth grade, you do it again. It has to be a continuum all the way until they graduate."

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