

‘Principal for a Day’ gives inside look at local schools

A call comes over Principal Gwendolyn Thomas’ radio, and before I comprehend what it’s about, she’s on her feet.

“Let’s go,” she says.

She bolts from her office chair and in three large steps is out the door. I fall in behind, trying to keep up. Thomas’ black, ankle-height boots click on the floor as she walks, head high, shoulders back.



Rebecca Lutz
Interim Executive Editor

By now, I’ve figured out that a teacher has radioed for help resolving a student dispute that has the potential to turn physical.

Thomas, an attractive woman with an athletic build, is strong and steady. She advances with urgency, but makes eye contact with each student we pass, including two boys sitting in a hallway.

She never raises her voice, but when she speaks, students listen.

“Go to my conference room and wait on your mother,” she says to one of the boys, whose mom has been called because he had an angry outburst earlier. It wasn’t the first time.

The other boy is balancing a lunch tray of chicken and rice on his knees. “Take that in there,” Thomas says pointing to a nearby conference room, “and eat at the table.”

When we arrive, a boy and girl are standing outside the classroom. Assistant Principal Ben Threadgill has separated



Rebecca Lutz meets with Griffin Middle School Principal Gwendolyn Thomas and holds Thomas’ trusty hand-held radio.

them. Thomas looks at the girl.

“Go to my office and wait on me,” she says.

The girl walks away, leaving Thomas with the boy.

“You owe me an apology,” Thomas says. “Do you know what for?”

“Yes,” the boy says sheepishly, “for getting everybody off task.”

“Right,” Thomas says. “They can’t learn, and you can’t learn when you’re not in the classroom.”

Welcome to Griffin Middle School and a day in the life of Principal Thomas.

I shadowed Thomas on Thursday as part of Leon County Schools Foundation’s Principal for a Day event. More than 20 community members followed principals for a first-hand look at the job. My take-away from the experience? Dale Landry summed it up best.

“We all think we understand as parents what happens in school, but it’s a whole different story when you cross the street and go in,” said Landry, president of the Tallahassee branch of the NAACP. He is employed at Griffin as a consultant who manages a restor-

ative justice program for students.

As a journalist, I’m used to deadlines, a fast pace and triage, but after a few hours with Thomas, I was beat. All of the administrators at Griffin carry hand-held radios for constant communication – and interruption.

“It’s 11:15, and I have not looked at my email yet,” Thomas said earlier in her office. “I came in and had a hot topic right away.”

About 500 students attend the school in the Griffin-Heights neighborhood. Adolescent conflicts like the one that

erupted between the boy and girl are common. He used to like her best friend. She said something about his mom he didn’t like. All normal stuff.

About 90 percent of the students at Griffin qualify for free or reduced lunch, so meals are provided free for all students. They come to school with a variety of problems and without the advantages children in more affluent districts have. But they’re good kids.

“We rarely have (first) fights,” Threadgill said. “We don’t have a lot of

drugs, but there are conflicts so we spend a lot of time with the kids problem-solving.”

Between 9:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m., I watched Thomas counsel numerous children, all while juggling budget questions, checking references for two open teacher positions and leading a meeting to discuss a trial run of the computer system used for administering standardized tests.

During the meeting in Thomas’ conference room, a boy who recently enrolled at Griffin and has had trouble adjusting, asked to speak to her. She said to send him back.

The boy walked down the hallway toward the meeting.

“Go on in my office and have a seat sweetheart,” Thomas said through the open door.

I most enjoyed Thomas’ interaction with students. She delivers discipline with a heavy dose of compassion.

The boy and girl arguing in the classroom found themselves seated next to one another at a table with Thomas beside them. At first, they refused to look at one another. With her prodding, they began to talk.

Within 10 minutes both were apologizing. Thomas then counseled them individually about their grades. Her message was clear: neither had time for nonsense that took them out of the classroom. They needed to pull up their grades.

She signed one of the students up for after-school help.

“You have to teach them and you have to discipline them with love,” she said.

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Don’t let yourself hide in box when the party is just outside

Does your household contain members about whom you might say they “derive comfort and security from enclosed spaces” and instead of trying to “work things out” are “more inclined to simply run away from their problems or avoid them altogether”?

Would you also describe these members of your household as relying on, or perhaps drawn to — as if by instinct — a “safe zone, a place where sources of anxiety, hostility and unwanted attention simply disappear”?

Do they also eat a lot of fish, sleep between 17 and 20 hours out of every 24 and claw at the screen when they want to get out of the house?

No, we’re not talking about “The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills.”

More than 57,000 Facebook users recently shared a link to the article addressing these issues.

How could a link that had nothing to do with nude models, naked women or disgraced famous people (whether or not they are from Beverly Hills) get such attention?

It’s because the article, published by “Wired,” is titled “What’s Up with That: Why Do Cats Love Boxes So Much?”

Written by Bryan Gardiner, the brief discussion in “Wired” draws



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Cats seem to love boxes of any kind.

on research concerning how cats cope with “environmental changes and stressors.”

And while it does include some cute cat pictures and one mildly cute cat video, I don’t think these alone can explain its success.

I think folks are sharing the article because it confirms to what we already know and not just about cats: If you can convince yourself that you’re effectively hidden, you’ll be less anxious than if you feel you’re exposed.

If you were originally a predator (and who wasn’t, however many thousands of years ago it seems?) would you want to be out in the open with everybody staring at you, commenting on you and about to scoop you up into their arms while asking, “Who’s fat and fuzzy today? What’s fuzzy and fat?”

Such vulnerability is both terrifying and embarrassing in equal measures.

Better, surely, to box one’s self in and remain out of sight?

Ah, but then you don’t get the pleasures of company: There are no consoling and soothing voices, no treats and no lingering strokes on the back of the neck. Yet I understand the desire to hide away.

While never having been described as an introvert, I nevertheless spent several years living in a small, dark apartment on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. It wasn’t a box, exactly, but it was pretty close.

In retrospect, I see that I developed what might be called “neighborhood agoraphobia”: I convinced myself, gradually but powerfully, that there were almost no reasons to travel beyond the 10 or 12 blocks marking my “safe zone,” as the kitty researchers would have defined it.

I had everything I needed: good cheap places to eat, movie houses, libraries and

shops. The longer I lived in my little rent-stabilized one-bedroom, the less I felt like going uptown, let alone out of the state or out of the country.

It wasn’t until I got a job teaching in Connecticut that I got a driver’s license — even at age 30, there were other New Yorkers who’d never learned to drive — and began wandering further and further into new territories.

Mind you, I’d spent years living in New Hampshire and even in England; it wasn’t that I’d never been away from home. But once securely within a place that made me feel safe (that there were crimes committed every night on my block didn’t bother me a bit, either) it took a great deal of courage and energy to get out.

It took years to face some of the reasons I was frightfully eager to avoid sources of anxiety and stress, but when I did, it was like letting the cat of the bag: I had to scratch through old beliefs and bring buried problems to light.

All boxed up, you swap security and autonomy for the delights of shiny objects being dangled just out of reach and the thrill of the chase. Yes, you’re warmer and safer with four walls around you, but it’s not exactly where the fun is; even with the flaps folded down, the party is happening outside the box.

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risk of/or using drugs, and getting them help with the involvement of their slim network of counselors and the child’s parents.

“It used to be about 14 when we started getting kids,” Burkhardt said. “We are starting to get some now at 12 and younger coming in through the school program.”

She referred me to Leon County data of the Florida Youth Substance Abuse Survey for 2014 (myflfamilies.com/service-programs/substance-abuse/fysas/2014), based on a sampling of 1,625 students in grades 6 through 12:

» In Leon County, past-30-day alcohol use was reported at 18.4 percent, compared to 20.5 percent across the statewide sample. This is actually an improvement from 2012 when 30-day alcohol use was 23.2 percent, and down from 26.8 percent in 2010.

» Those acknowledging binge drinking in 2014 was at 8.7 percent, compared to 11.2 percent in 2012 and 14.8 percent in 2010.

» Those reporting marijuana use in the past 30 days was 9.8 percent in 2014, compared to 13.6 percent in 2012 and 13.9 percent in 2010.

» Twenty-four percent of high-school students who said they had been drinking alcohol in the past 30 days said the booze was bought for them, while nearly 40 percent said someone gave it to them and nearly 10 percent said they took it from a family member.

The percentage of

high school students who have ridden in a car with a driver who was under the influence of alcohol was 15.8 percent, and 21.2 percent have ridden with a driver under the influence of marijuana.

Even while putting the numbers in context, Burkhardt said, “It is very shocking,” noting the access students have to alcohol, marijuana and prescription drugs.

“(Prescription) drug abuse is a trend occurring in Leon County; it is occurring all over Florida,” she said.

Students who have had issues with alcohol and other drugs attend schools all over the county,” she said, and it’s not defined by socioeconomic factors.

“They’re all doing it,” she said. “It’s just a prevalent thing in this generation.” She pointed out the students she sees are the ones who have gotten in trouble or are suspected of having issues, but it shouldn’t be an indictment of the majority of students in our schools.

The bottom line, she said, is that parents must be more questioning of their children’s activities and the activities of their children’s friends.

“You want to trust them but you want to protect them, too,” she said. “Trust has nothing to do with supervision. We need to follow up. We need to know what they are doing.”

Nearly every day, we witness or read about something that remind us that the challenges of parenting are greater than many of us realize.

Have a comment? You can reach associate editor Byron Dobson at 850-599-2258 or at bdobson@tallahassee.com, or friend him on Facebook and follow him on Twitter at [@byrondobson](https://twitter.com/byrondobson).