

New year, new spirit, at Nims Middle School

By Jennifer Portman DEMOCRAT SENIOR WRITER

Of course, I couldn't stay away. The second day of classes, I was back at Nims Middle School, following Principal Kay Collins on her relentless rounds around campus.

The difference from the beginning of school last year was astounding.

I saw just two pairs of flip-flops and almost no saggy jeans. Virtually everyone met the dress code. There was no yelling and very little running between classes. Once-surly faces were all smiles.

Last year at this time, it seemed every kid was cutting up in class or flat not paying attention. Mayhem was the norm. On my latest tour of classes, the one kid I saw acting up stood out in sharp contrast to the others quietly going about their work. I noticed just one boy with his head on the desk.

"This is the best start of school I've ever seen," said academic coach Christopher Small.

Collins has changed

the entire layout of the school. Sixth grade, which for years had been isolated in Building 9, is now upstairs in the main building, right outside Collins' office. Last year, Nims' sixth-graders failed to make the academic progress Collins had hoped for, and she's not going to let that happen again. All but one of this year's sixth-grade teachers are new to Nims.

Last year's sixth-graders remain in Building 9 in the hopes that, as seventh-graders, they'll get it right this time.

Guiding them are some of Nims' strongest teachers, including reading teacher Janet Renfroe and Daisy Bush, a veteran language-arts teacher who was reassigned from the eighth grade to work with the struggling underclassmen.

Nims' standout band continues to blossom under director Marcus Scott, who surpassed his goal of 100 members. Last year, he had 89 members.

When asked how many he has now, Scott shouted from the second-floor hallway, "139!" (Since then, it has increased further, to 142.)

Enrollment continues to be a concern, but it looks to be stronger. Only 238 students initially showed up last year (the school's official total ended up at 330). This year, 315 students were there on the second day - and 326 by the second week. Once immunizations are done and stragglers make it back, Collins hopes to see enrollment rise, maybe reaching close to 350.

She's worried, however, about the impact of changes in the neighborhood. Nearby low-income apartments are closing, and some of her families will be forced to move out of Nims' district.

"That could kill us," Collins said.

But there is one huge bright spot at Nims: the dreaded cafetorium.

Once dark and dreary, the lunchroom reflected

the sad resignation of a school left to die. After a summer makeover courtesy of the district, and the General Contractor, Southland Contracting, Inc., it is luminous with promise.

New ceiling, new lights, new two-tone paint job.

The right setting for a whole new Nims.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

· Jennifer Portman, a Tallahassee Democrat senior writer, visited Nims Middle School throughout the 2007-08 school year. In her "Turning Nims Around" series in the Democrat, she charted the school's yearlong rise from an F to a C.

YOU CAN HELP

· If you or your organization wants to help Nims, contact Alicia Washington at (850) 488-5960 or washingtona2@mail.leon.k12.fl.us. Contact Principal Kay Collins at the number above or at collinsk2@mail.leon.k12.fl.us.