

It's only August, but schools already about to open doors

Teachers report early, get to know the lay of the land

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The hallways of Monroe County's schools were echoing with the patter of rather large feet this week. Students don't return to the classrooms until next Monday, but the School District's 676 teachers started this past Monday to prepare classrooms, attend professional instruction and get reacquainted after the summer break.

"Brand-new teachers, those who are new to Monroe County, actually started last Thursday," Superintendent Randy Acevedo said. "But this week everyone has been receiving professional development, focusing on differentiated instruction so they can appeal to varying levels of receptivity in their students."

After years of high teacher turnover, Acevedo says this is a banner year.

"We only had to hire 40 new teachers," he said. "Last year it was 75."

"As a school, we have had very little teacher turnover," said Amber Bosco, principal at Poinciana Elementary School in Key West. "We only have two brand-new teachers to the county."

The number of students who walk through the door Monday is the great unknown. At the end of June, the district counted more than 8,200 students.

Acevedo said it's hard to know what to plan on for the coming school year. | "There are three factors that play into the number of students at the beginning of the school year," he said. "Many don't start class until after Labor Day. Others may not wait that long, but they come after family vacations end. And finally, we experienced a flat line on enrollment last year due to the housing market."

He said there's a good chance that housing could have a similar effect this year. It might even account for some decline in enrollment, he said.

But the district doesn't take the numbers to heart until after Labor Day, which falls on Sept. 1 this year, two weeks after school begins.

Bosco says she expects between 600 and 620 kids, which pretty much maxes out the classrooms. The school was built for 599 students and completed in 2006. She said last year, the year-end student population was 628.

She said this is the first year the school will be considered a Title 1 school, a designation based on the number of children that receive free or reduced-priced lunches.

This is also the first year when the entire school has gone to laptops in each classroom.

At Horace O'Bryant Middle School in Key West and Marathon High School, a new program has been developed to help teachers teach kids to read.

"It taught teachers to teach reading in their content area," Acevedo said. So for example, if a teacher has a student that excels in math but cannot read well, that math teacher has strategies to help those students."