

Whittell principal calling it quits

By Kathryn Reed

Sue Shannon will in essence be graduating with the class she welcomed as freshmen to Whittell High School.

The principal is retiring at the end of the school after being at the helm for four years and in education for 39 years.

The Zephyr Cove 7-12 school is a much different place compared to when she started. For starters, it was a 9-12 school. Classes were taught five days instead of the current four. The disconnect between the school and community was enormous.

One thing the next principal will have in common with Shannon is starting the school year with a new superintendent prowling the offices in Minden. The board now has two major vacancies to fill.

But beyond the obvious changes to an outsider, Shannon altered the culture of the school. She took over from Janie Gray, who was not well received by staff, parents or students. In fact, teachers walked out in protest while she was there.

Shannon, though, won't take full credit for the changes.

"A lot of it was modeling, being clear about what I expected," Shannon said. "And it was identifying student leaders to make those changes."

She credits the staff, parents and community for being part of the change as well.

When declining enrollment forced Kingsbury Middle School to close and Whittell to add two grade levels, Shannon formed a consolidation committee made up of students. She renamed it

the Student Issues Committee when the transition was completed. This was to allow a free flow of ideas between her and students.

"I believe there is a very solid foundation," Shannon said of Whittell.

Coming from Los Angeles, Shannon anticipated the smallness of the school and the good and bad that might come with that.

"I didn't anticipate the phenomenal community and parent support," Shannon said.

She says the job of an educator is never done. Even though academic achievement is high at Whittell, she said a goal would be to rise to the next level.

"I'm always wanting more students to take ownership of the functioning of the school. I would like to increase the percentage of students in that matter," she said.

In terms of education as a whole, after nearly four decades in the business, Shannon says the system is better and worse off than when she started.

"No Child Left Behind did raise the expectations of every child, not just the strong students. Conversely, I hope at some point No Child Left Behind will go to a growth model instead of just criteria because it doesn't reward and recognize schools which maybe haven't met the bar, but made tremendous growth," Shannon said.

Shannon can't imagine not working, but what she might do for part-time work after retirement remains to be seen. Traveling and exploring Tahoe are definitely on the 61-year-old's to-do list.

"For one thing, I want to try cross country skiing and snowshoeing," Shannon said. "I live in beautiful Lake Tahoe and there is so much I want to experience."

Starting her day by being on campus before 7am, attending several night events each week and busy weekends have not allowed the Stateline resident to see much of Lake Tahoe.

“I have thoroughly enjoyed working at this school. This is a fabulous way to end my career,” Shannon said.