

Tribute to Walter McGrail – Gates Principal – 38 years

Walter McGrail has spent the better part of four decades serving the students and families of the Acton Public Schools. A native of Lowell, he attended its university earning both undergraduate and graduate degrees. Anticipating a future in education, he did his practice teaching right here in Acton. Most significantly, while here he met his bride-to-be, Susan.

Walter began his career as a fifth grade teacher at Douglas. Three years later he moved to a fifth-grade position at Merriam. While there, he was subsequently “promoted” to sixth grade and was teaching at that level when the school closed in 1981. After a year at sixth grade at Conant, he rejoined Principal Bill Sparks at Douglas for two more years. 1984 found Walter transferring to Gates where he joined the fifth-grade team. During all of these years, he was a member of numerous committees and served on more than a few summer R&Ds, especially in math, social studies, and science.

In January 2001, circumstances caused a change in Walter’s role at Gates: with virtually no notice, he was appointed interim principal. That summer, he attended an institute on administrative leadership at Harvard and in 2003 was named the full-time principal of the school. As many of the veteran Gates teachers retired, Walter oversaw the hiring of more than thirty certified and non-certified members of the staff, cementing the fine reputation of the school for years to come.

If only Walter had decided to delay his retirement a few years, he might have been able to complete an A.P.S. Grand Slam by spending some time at McCarthy-Towne, the only school he’s missed in his distinguished career.

In addition to his many accomplishments as an educator, Walter has been actively involved in a variety of other pursuits. A year’s leave of absence from teaching in 1985 found him working at Harvard University’s construction management office in charge of remodeling a biology lab. Perhaps this experience led him to serve as his own general contractor when Sue and he built a new home in Lowell. He would stop by the work site every afternoon after school, never missing a single day in the classroom. If you’ve had a chance to see the beautiful end result of this endeavor, then you’ll easily understand why subsequently he was successful in obtaining a construction supervisor’s license from the state.

Beside Sue, their son Jim, and his time in Acton, Walter's next passion is skiing. He recently received a service award from Bretton Woods for his 35 years there as a certified ski instructor. Many Acton families and staff members can attest to his prowess on the slopes, but the accolades don't stop there. *Ski* magazine identified Walter as one of their top 100 ski instructors in 2002. As Sue likes to say, Walter skis like some men play golf.

In retirement, he is anticipating more time to read, hike, remodel, and (in the fervent hope of this writer) to golf. High on his agenda is traveling, and he and Sue are eagerly looking forward to an upcoming trip to China for the 2008 Olympics.

We wish Walter all the best in joining Sue in retirement and know that his many contributions to the Acton Public Schools will endure.