

# School program demanding, rewarding

By IAN ROSS

## STAFF WRITER

The students of Paul Platt, a civics teacher at Murdock Middle School, got a surprise Tuesday when Paul Stamoulis, Charlotte County supervisor of elections, stepped out of the closet dressed as James Madison.

Stamoulis and 22 others took on the job of a teacher or staff member for the school day as part of I've Been Back to School, a program that aimed to promote greater understanding of schools on the part of the community.

Tuesday's event was the first of its kind in Charlotte County.

Brittany Beasley, a student in Platt's seventh-grade class, said Stamoulis wore long, high socks, brown pants, and a coat with buttons that didn't match. He was holding the Virginia Plan in his hand, rolled up on old, yellow paper.

As a teacher, Brittany said, "he did pretty good. He stood at the front of the class, told us what we needed to know, and told us what to write down." Stamoulis, she said, seemed "really happy to teach us, really excited. He was smiling a lot."

At the beginning of Wednesday's classes, Platt said, students were asking if James Madison was going to be in the closet again.

The idea for I've Been Back to School was brought to the Charlotte County School District by the Charlotte County Support Personnel Association, which saw the program succeed in other states. The association, the district, and the Charlotte Florida Education Foundation partnered to bring the program to Charlotte County. One challenge of the event, said Bonnie Bistarkey, president of the Charlotte County Support Personnel Association, was selling the idea of having professionals take a day off work. An additional difficulty was convincing people that a support job, such as school custodian, has challenges that are different from the same job outside of school.

Lee Swift, chairman of the Charlotte County School Board, worked Tuesday alongside the school custodian at Neil Armstrong Elementary as part of the event. Swift said that supporting so many students added unexpected challenges to the custodial job.

"I wished I had thought to put a pedometer on," Swift reflected Thursday, thinking about how much ground he covered. "I just had not thought about how constant the demands are all day long."

The custodian has regular cleaning duties that are scheduled, but "if a kid gets sick you have to go clean it up right then."

School officials, including Charlotte County Superintendent Doug Whittaker, considered the effort a success.

"As far as getting the hosts and participants together, it worked out very well. And the actual event itself went off without a glitch," he said.

Now that I've Been Back to School has tested successfully in its first year, the program's organizers are thinking about how to follow through and expand it in the future.

Susan Sutherland, executive director of the Charlotte County School Employees Union, said that "looking ahead to next year, we want to bring more people who are critics of the schools." That, she said, would spark real discussion for improving education.

Whittaker hopes to follow up with those who participated in this year's program.

"I'll be sending invites (to the participants) for conversations. It may be helpful to have community input now that they've been in the schools," he said.

The input and collaboration between community and schools that the organizers had hoped to spark may already be in play. Stamoulis, in his preparation for the event with Platt, saw campaign posters for student government elections, and offered to let the students use real voting equipment. Today, Murdock Middle School students will vote electronically using the same equipment that is used in county elections.

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