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Thurman Francis principal leaving post

Helton praised for hands-on, 'outstanding' leadership

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Helton

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SMYRNA — After six years at the helm, Thurman Francis Arts Academy Principal Andra Helton won't return to the school this fall.

She recently told her staff in person and let parents know via a school-wide recorded message.

"It has nothing to do with any situation at school. I love the kids, the parents and the staff. The journey's just over now," Helton said.

Her last day of work will be June 15. Helton began her career with the district 29 years ago and started as a speech therapist, working at John Coleman School, Smyrna Elementary and Middle. She spent several years teaching sixth-grade math and science

at Campus School before moving to the K-8 magnet school seven years ago.

First-grade parent Jessie Clark said she was caught off guard by Helton's message last Thursday, which started by reminding parents that school was not in session on Good Friday.

"I told my daughter and she didn't want Dr. Helton to leave. It was exciting to hear a 6-year old say that. That tells me she's a hands-on principal and just doesn't sit in her office and push paperwork. She's a big part of their universe and has really connected with them," Clark said.

Beth Binkley, whose sons are in eighth, fourth and first grades, said Helton has always been receptive to the needs of parents and students.

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"She came in and started making visual improvements to the school and greets the kids each morning. I've been very impressed with her," said Binkley, who heads up the school's annual Ram Run fundraiser.



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Helton plans to continue her career in education, but declined to say in what capacity.

“It was hard to tell the staff, but I felt it was important for me to encourage them and let them know what a good job they’ve done.

This year’s been really challenging (with changes from the state Department of

Education), but we got through it,” Helton said.

Director of Schools Harry Gill Jr., who is also retiring this year, said the principal’s leadership has been “outstanding.”

“As a testament to her performance, she’s going to be recognized by the Education Consumers Foundation for the school’s value-added and achievement scores,” he said.

The school has been notified that it has placed first in Middle Tennessee in the middle school division for the Education Consumers Foundation award, for which Helton will be recognized later this school year.

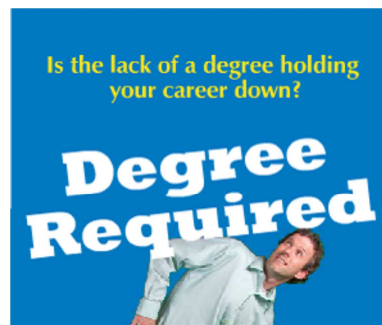
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