

ELC says farewell to Song

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Last month, Open School's ELC lost two prep teachers as a direct result of dwindling numbers in the school's elementary population. However, the remaining classroom teachers were unable to find feet to fill the empty shoes. This has led to the outsourcing of yet another ELC teacher, Song Thao.

Open School had to lose at least one full time employee due to the decrease in elementary student attendance. The original plan was to cut the two part time prep teachers, equivalent to one full time employee. The ELC then had to make a decision about what teacher would be willing leave their classroom and take over the science prep teacher position. Since nobody came forward, Principal Ruth Pechmann notified Song, as the staff member with the least district seniority, that she would have to take the science

prep position. Song declined. "It was my choice," said Song. "I don't think that science is my big thing because you teach best when you're passionate about something."

At an October 12th Site Council meeting, concern rose for the children and the impact the disbanding will have on them one fifth of the way through the year. Bracing for Song's absence, her third grade class is now taught by ELC teacher Kelly Jensen. Kelly's old class is divided up between her and ELC teachers Jack Mills, Ruth Alexander, and Kevin Cooper.

Despite Song's disappointment, she seemed philosophical about the decision. "When things don't make sense to me I question it and when I have no control over it, I do what I can control," stated Song. She said that part of the reason it didn't

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make sense to her was having to disband a classroom, then "touching another classroom that didn't need to be touched." She also feels there could've been less disruption to the students, "It's all because of seniority and it didn't need to be seniority."

Song started her new job at Hayden Heights Elementary School Monday. She'll be working in the TLC program or Transitional Learning Center for new Hmong kids coming to Minnesota from Thailand. She tells her students that if you lose your job you can always get another one, but if you lose your education it's very hard to get back. Song learned many things at Open School, one being to mean what you say and say what you mean. She says you can only control yourself. She wanted to be helpful where she knew she could be helpful.

ELC teacher Jack Mills expressed disappointment about the way events unfolded. The ELC was down to 160 kids all year. The district told the principal that the school was down 40 kids and that the school would lose \$70,000. The money would come out of the ELC because that's where all the kids were missing.

On Friday October 1st, Ruth informed the

ELC that they would be losing a staff member, and that if no one chose to transfer voluntarily, she would be forced to make the choice based upon seniority. In addition, Ruth said that she met with the leadership team, which included Song, to discuss alternatives to the classroom teacher reduction. She eventually cut an ELC advisor, while Jack thinks other options could have been considered. "We presented to Ruth other alternatives to cutting an advisor," he said. "Because if anything, research indicates small classes mean better learning and better tests and right now both the SLC and ELC are on the A.Y.P. list, which means we're not making adequate yearly progress."

Maureen Peltier, the Literacy Coordinator, is not an advisor and has less seniority than Song. Ruth couldn't cut Maureen, however, for reasons having to do with the difference between the general fund and Title One money. Ruth pointed out that the Literacy Coordinator position encompasses the curriculum library, the Open Book mentoring program, and parent involvement. These tasks need to be covered and Title One covers the costs for this position.

The team then suggested redistribution of

Title One funds. "All the reasons we wanted to keep Song were for academic, personal, humane, Open School reasons. We came up with a way to redistribute funds which could've been done without a whole lot of difficulty," said Jack.

Ruth asked the district about the redistribution of Title One funds. They responded that Title One is supposed to be supplemental, meaning it cannot be used to take the place of other funds, nor to replace lost staff.

The original two excess teachers now have jobs. Both Allison Hakseth and Geri Rogers are in full-time positions. Allison is at Dayton's Bluff Elementary and Geri got a full-time job as a science teacher at Webster.

Open School welcomed full-time science teacher Linda Bishop-Kowitz, who started last Friday, which was also the last day for Song. Despite the disbanding of students, kindergarten through sixth grade now have an average student/teacher ratio of 23:1. "Some have more, some have less, but the average is 23," said Ruth. Jack and Kevin have about 25. Linda will set up shop in room 104, while Jody Holmstrom is relocating to 102.