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Principal drawn by a calling

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BY [ROSALIND ROSSI](#) Education Reporter

Some might say Alan Mather is rolling the dice by giving up a plum assignment at Northside College Prep, the state's highest-scoring public high school, to lead a long-struggling college prep in poverty-ridden West Englewood.

But Mather sees his new assignment as acting principal of the new Robert Lindblom Math & Science Academy another way.

"This is what I have been preparing for," Mather, the former assistant principal of Northside, said Tuesday after touring his newly renovated school at 61st and Wolcott. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. How often do people get a chance to start a school from scratch?"

Reopening with new focus

The move also takes him from the first Chicago public high school built in 20 years to one of the system's oldest buildings. The 1908 structure features a 1,500-seat auditorium with a double balcony, hardwood floors in the classrooms, a first-floor greenhouse and a dance room with a small stage. Mather said he was amazed to walk into the coaches' locker room to find 7-foot-high wooden lockers.

At 41, Mather has been tapped to direct a 21st century version of Lindblom, which will reopen as a college prep this fall, but with a math and science focus, after failing for years to attract the same caliber or number of high-scoring students as its fellow college preps.

Raising standards

He will be Lindblom's fourth principal since 1995, when the school designed for more than 2,000 students was threatened with closure because it held fewer than 800.

As principal of Lindblom, Mather is head of a school steeped in African-American tradition. Though now sitting in a neighborhood known for its poverty and crime, from the 1960s to the 1980s, Lindblom was the school of choice for the city's black students and one of the few city public schools that picked its kids based on tests.

Mather hopes to return Lindblom to those halcyon days -- in part by incorporating some of the hallmarks of Northside. That includes 100-minute class periods filled with a mix of teaching approaches, block scheduling, and monthly colloquiums, or mini-classes, in wide range of subjects.

However, Mather said he'd also like to see Lindblom's mini-classes focus on math and science, and use college professors to help kids develop projects in those topics. In addition, he said, he wants to discuss raising Lindblom's graduation requirements in math and science to match its new name.

Up to challenge

Though now an Evanston father of two, Mather calls himself "a country boy." The son of a Methodist minister raised in rural Indiana, he baled hay during the summer as a teenager. Later, armed with an education degree in English from the University of Evansville, he hitchhiked his way to Chicago, drawn by "a calling," he said, to teach urban kids.

He taught English at Farragut, Westinghouse and Schurz high schools, and was in a principal-training program at South Side College Prep when he stood out from the pack of applicants for the assistant principal's job at Northside, said Northside Principal James Lalley.

Mather helped design and open Northside, and is more than up for his new challenge, Lalley said.

May face resistance

"His fingerprints are all over this school," Lalley said Tuesday. "I think he has tremendous things to offer and he can really create a wonderful school there."

But Mather also may have to walk a political minefield. Some local school council members and diehard alumni feel the Board of Education slighted them by not letting the community pick a principal.

Others say Lindblom has been mistreated for years.

"It's been demoralized, stripped down, [temporarily] moved out of its building," said Julie Woestehoff of Parents United for Responsible Education. "You better believe they wouldn't do this to a school on the North Side."

Seeks applicants

Mather's first challenge will be recruitment. The acceptance period has ended for every other college prep, but 1,100 rejected college prep applicants were sent letters this week, asking them to apply to the new Lindblom.

Even so, Mather is optimistic.

"I think we have a vision for education that will attract people," Mather said. "I've had experience starting a new school. I know what it takes to start a new school. And I'm going to use that expertise to create something special."

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