

For this principal, classroom is the place to be

By Gary Weckselblatt Staff Writer | Posted: Thursday, July 2, 2015 4:00 am

When her 4½-year-old twins began asking her not to leave home when she left for work, Keely Mahan felt the emotional tugging of a mom whose growing children were becoming more aware of her absences.

“I don’t know if that’s the way I want them to remember me,” Mahan said. “Up until this point, they weren’t aware as babies. Now that they’re older, maybe I need to re-evaluate things.”

That evaluation wasn’t so simple. Her workday as principal at McDonald Elementary School included looking out for 900 children and 130 staff members.

“I remember someone once telling me, ‘Imagine your heaviest wool coat. Dip it in water. That’s the weight of a principal,’ ” she said. “You treat them like they’re your own and put everything else to the side.”

Ultimately, Mahan decided, “It’s time to put mine in front.”

So Mahan, a principal in the Centennial School District since 2004, first at the former Longstreth Elementary School and at McDonald since October 2008, is giving up that wool coat in favor of a teaching position at Davis Elementary.

“Eleven years ago I didn’t have the twins,” she said of Jackson and Rebecca. “I could stay late, go to events, go to meetings and it didn’t really affect much. Today, my family has to come first.”

As she looked over a table in her office, where packed boxes waited to be carried to her car, Mahan spoke of a McDonald school that will be tough to get out of her system.

“There’s a wonderful home and school association and a great staff here,” she said. There’s also Michael VanBuren, assistant principal at McDonald since 2010, who’s been named to replace Mahan.

About two dozen members of the school’s staff attended last week’s school board meeting to cheer on VanBuren’s promotion. The new principal called Mahan “a mentor and a friend throughout my career.”

Board president Jane Schrader Lynch told Mahan: “You have done a tremendous job in that school. You have made that school click.”



Keely Mahan has been the principal at McDonald Elementary School in Warminster since 2008. In September, she's heading back in the classroom. She'll be teaching at Davis Elementary School in Upper Southampton.

Moving back to the classroom won't be an entirely new experience for Mahan, who received a bachelor's degree in early and elementary education from Bloomsburg University and earned a master's degree in elementary education with a concentration in technology from Arcadia University.

She started her career as a student teacher at McDonald in the fall of 1992 in kindergarten and fifth grade. After working with third- and fifth-grade students in reading and mathematics at Willow Dale, she taught first- and fifth-grade at McDonald and remained there until becoming principal at Longstreth.

"I remember sitting and reading to a class and thinking 'This is what I was meant to do,' " she said. "That's where my heart lies. That's where I can make a difference."

Mark Miller, whose son was one of Mahan's students, told her, "I still owe you a lifetime debt of gratitude for what you put up with. ... Thank you again from the bottom of my heart."

Wayne McCulloch, who serves on the board of the Centennial Education Foundation with Mahan, describes her as "a very compassionate person. She always took the children's interests to heart. She's a very good listener and communicates with students as well as parents."

Mahan appreciates the compliments.

"I know how hard it is to leave your children," she said. "They're trusting us with their most precious possession, their children."

Speaking from personal experience, she said, "It's tough being a parent, rushing out the door. You want to know you're taking them to a safe place, leaving that in good hands."

Will she ever go back to being a principal again?

"I can't imagine that (the twins) are not going to need me for the next 16 years at least," she said. "I started as teacher, and it looks like I'm going to end my career as a teacher. It may not be the usual path, but it's the one that works for me and my family."