

Principal sits on roof, dreams big dreams

The man pacing back and forth on the roof of School 45 wore jeans, a navy coat and a red fur hat decorated with lights. He waved at cars driving back and forth along Clifford Avenue and at people waiting for the bus.

Those who didn't recognize Jason Wertz as the principal might have thought the school was being visited by a cheerful low-budget Santa Claus. When you see a man leaping around on a roof in red and white at this time of year, that's where your mind goes.

Wertz had promised to spend the day on the school roof if his kids met a reading goal. They came through, and so did he.

A fire truck boosted him up to the top of the school early Wednesday morning as the kids watched and laughed.

Throughout the day, different classes came outside to see if he was still up there. He was.

With a bullhorn, Wertz would lean over and shout down to them, "You've got me stuck up here!!"

Some shouted back, "Don't fall!"

It was freezing on the roof, but the view was great. He could see all the way to the downtown skyline. He had a bird's-eye view of the streets surrounding his school, where homes cheerfully decorated for the holidays often sit alongside the ghosts of houses abandoned long ago.

Like many of his students who look forward to Christmas, Wertz has a long wish list.

He pointed down to a couple of spots where he might like to put a school health center. He pointed to another place that would make a nice community garden. The health center would help students whose asthma keeps them out of school.

The garden could encourage healthy eating.

Wertz would like to be able to keep the school gymnasium open on weekends and to see it full of kids. He'd like to double the size of the playground. He'd like a state-of-the-art sensory room for the 60 children in his school who are on the autism spectrum.

He'd like more and more parents to drop their kids off at school and head over to the school's community room to work on their own educations. (The school houses GED classes and the Work Experience Program. For more information about how to sign up or to volunteer at School 45, call (585) 325-6945.) Wertz would like some afterschool programs.

He'd like soccer goals for the soccer field. He'd like more picnic tables. He'd like child-designed signs all over the streets surrounding the school. He'd like for at least two-thirds of his students to live in the neighborhood.

Currently, only about a third do.

Every single principal I have spoken to since the school year began expressed a wish for a school that draws most of its kids from the surrounding neighborhood.

A school that helps to improve its neighborhood by offering intergenerational services and hope. School 17 principal Ralph Spezio says a school should be the "the center of an urban village." Wertz wants to make School 45 a "community school" that would provide whatever the community needs, "24-7, 365 days a year."

A veteran of the Rochester School District, Wertz became principal of School 45 this year. He smiles and jumps when he talks about his ideas for his students. It might have been the cold, but he struck me as the kind of person who is often energetic like that.

With the Rochester School District facing a \$66 million budget gap, it will take a miracle for Wertz to be able to give his kids all the things on his principal's wish list.

On Wednesday afternoon, he seemed happy to sit on the roof and give them a fun story to take home for Christmas break. "I just want them to have memories and smiles," he said.

[Twitter.com/Erica_Bryant](https://twitter.com/Erica_Bryant)



Erica Bryant

COLUMNIST

[EBRYANT@Democrat andChronicle.com](mailto:EBRYANT@Democrat_andChronicle.com)



Jason Wertz, principal of School 45, on the school's roof this week.

ERICA BRYANT/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Powered by [TECNAVIA](#)

Copyright © 2014 Democrat and Chronicle 12/20/2014