

Chemehuevi Elementary opens for first time in six years

By KEVIN BAIRD TODAY'S NEWS-HERALD | Posted: Wednesday, August 19, 2015
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HAVASU LAKE, Calif. — Chemehuevi Valley Elementary School opened its doors for class Tuesday morning after being closed for six years, and the students, parents, and teachers are thrilled.

Two teachers, Kelly Hays-Thorson and Shannon Roach, took the Havasu Landing ferry across Lake Havasu to the reservation and it was just like the good old days.

“We taught there six years ago and we’ve been wanting it to re-open,” said Hays-Thorsen, who teaches the third through fifth grade class. “It’s a (smaller) school house and I will be able to know the students better after a few years in class.”

At a bus stop on the Chemehuevi Reservation, Daniel Leivas snapped a couple quick photos of his children before they got on the bus.

“I went to that same school for a year,” Leivas said with a smile.

John Perez, a San Bernardino County firefighter put two children on the bus and he’s happy about the shortened bus ride.

“I’m excited because they don’t have to ride the bus to Needles. My son Ruben is in head start and he would leave at 6:30 in the morning and return at 4:30 p.m. Having my son ride 400 miles on a bus in a week is unsafe. It’s a long day for a child too.”

At the school, children were in good spirits and happy to see their friends. Veronica Nimri, 8, said she missed her teachers at Havasupai Elementary School, otherwise she loved the new school.

Ruben Perez, John Perez’s son, said, “I like the first day of school here. But I’ll have hard homework. I’m going to school here because I live here.”



Kelly Hays-Thorson

Kelly Hays-Thorson instructs her third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade students on classroom expectations on the first day of school at Chemehuevi Valley Elementary School in Havasu Lake, Calif. The school was closed for six years and Hays-Thorson, who lives in Lake Havasu City, is happy to be teaching there again.

Perez added that he liked the cafeteria too, which served the students with Lucky Charms and other cereals for breakfast before class got started.

Principal Jim Rolls said there were 36 students at the school Tuesday.

“It’s fantastic to be back,” Rolls said. “It’s neat making connections with the parents who I taught here, and seeing them drop their kids off.”

Steven Escobar, 27, was one such parent.

“I remember there was maybe 40 kids in my class, and the walls were burnt orange,” Escobar said looking at the freshly painted white walls.

“I remember, I think it was built in the seventies,” Rolls said.

Rolls said renovations at the school are mostly complete, but there are still a few items on backorder so his office and the library aren’t fully operational. He said what matters most is the classrooms are complete and the students in school (there is also a library at the Chemehuevi Education Center).

Chemehuevi Education Director Dusti Rose Bacon said the Needles Unified School District has agreed to have Chemehuevi language and culture taught at the elementary school, but details still need to be ironed out. She is hoping to discuss this with the NUSD soon.

“I also wanted to thank the Lake Havasu Unified School District for the past six years. While our students attended those schools, they’ve become a part of our family,” Bacon said. “We’ll miss those people. It’s been a great experience.”

She said relations between the Chemehuevi tribe and LHUSD will continue because there are still two juniors attending Lake Havasu High School, and also, she said Principal Claude Sanders of Havasupai Elementary School said the Chemehuevi children are still welcome to attend Dr. Sues nights and other extra-curricular activities.

Bacon said she will take Sanders up on the offer.