

unlocked the doors at 7 a.m.

The children have arrived at Two-Mile Prairie Elementary School 10 miles northeast of Columbia. The day can begin.

Clay Austin swirls half a cup of coffee around in a big white mug as he paces back and forth near his post at the intersection of the three main halls in the school. It's nearly 9 a.m., and students stream past him carrying backpacks and lunch boxes as they wander down the hallways to class. Occasionally, one or two will stop to talk, their bright young faces eager for his familiar nod of approval or friendly handshake.

He calls each student by name. He knows their moms and dads. And even though he sometimes confuses one or two with an older brother or sister, it's OK. His experience and gentle manner make him popular with the students. They like him; he listens to their stories and their problems. For the past 17 years, he has been the principal.

Two-Mile Prairie is not like many other schools. Mr. Austin wears cowboy boots with his grey pinstripe suits, and he doles out a brand of justice more familiar to the country schoolhouse than that of an impersonal city school. There is a sense of family in this, the most rural of the elementary schools in the Columbia system. It is the kind of place where students, not custodians or teachers, grab the neatly folded flag from its place on the ledge of the office each morning and hoist it up the silver pole in front of the school. Mr. Austin says the closest they have come to a drug problem is a second grader he caught with chewing tobacco on the playground a few years ago.

Shortly after 9 a.m., the hallways are quiet. The first bell has rung, and most of the students are in their classrooms. Janice Knigge, the school secretary, sits in the office tabulating the lunch count and punching the attendance figures for the school's 247 students into the computer that sits on her desk. Her three grandchildren who attend the school have each been in for their morning hug to get their days started right.

The silence in the south hall is broken only by the sound of pencils grinding in the sharpener in Mrs. Watson's fourth-grade room and the hum of a Pepsi machine in the faculty lounge where an instructor is reading.

The aroma of lunch cooking in the kitchen wafts through the east hall. It starts in the gymnasium where beginning teacher Laura Dye is showing first graders tumbling exercises and wanders toward the office where Mr. Austin is busy on the telephone. "Digger," the seven-foot papier-maché prairie dog that serves as the school mascot, keeps close tabs on the youngsters from his perch in the corner of the gym. He was an art project that the whole school had a hand in creating a



Andre Davis boards the bus that will take him and his kindergarten classmates home at noon.

In her 17-year tenure, teacher Jackie Glenn has seen the student population shift from farm kids to subdivision children.

few years ago. Occasionally, Mr. Austin will wheel him out of the corner and tape a message to Digger's paws for the students to read.

"Clip, clop, clip, clop..." A boy in a blue Alf T-shirt walks slowly down the corridor that has a row of reports about presidents of the United States. This is the oldest part of the building and a tribute of sorts to people such as Jack Glenn, who was president of the school board in 1965 when three one-room schoolhouses—Murry, Judy and Jacobs—were combined and the original Two-Mile Prairie School building was constructed.

In the south hall, Glenn's daughter Jackie