Eighteen fourth graders mill about the classroom, chatting and giggling. When it’s time to take their seats, the call of an owl directs the children’s attention to their new teacher. It’s a skill Sue Thurn brings to her new job as fourth-grade teacher at Drummond Elementary School.

As the former director of education at the Cable Natural History Museum, Thurn isn’t new to working with youngsters, or to teaching.

“Even though I am a first-year teacher, I have had 20 years of informal experience in the classroom,” Thurn said.

Thurn is a 1990 graduate of Northland College with a bachelor of science degree in biology with emphasis in outdoor education. She began her career as a naturalist at the museum, over time moving up to director of education.

“I loved working at the museum for 20 years. It was the center and focus of my life,” she said. “So much of my time at the museum was science and environmental education. I felt like a teacher who had one focus. I was the specialist.”

Thurn spent 10 years obtaining her teaching certificate because she wanted the museum to have those skills. She reached her goal in 2007 with a degree from UW-Superior in elementary education with a science major. During her student training, she found a love for this other aspect of teaching.

“At the museum I was in the classroom for 30-45 minutes. Now I can do longer-term experiments with my students,” said Thurn.

In her first week, Thurn’s students learned about trees, looking at the parts of the trees and making field guides. They made bread to learn about yeast and are now allowing the bread to produce mold. It’s part of Thurn’s experience of having to “hit the ground running.”

“I found out about this job on a Wednesday, had my application in on Friday and interviewed and was offered the position on Tuesday,” she said. “I didn’t have the same amount of time to prepare as other teachers have.”

She credits the cooperation and support of the school staff and the substitute fourth-grade teacher who began the school year in getting her up to speed.

“I came in with a plan that got me through my first week,” she said with a smile.

A quick and thorough process

Though Thurn made the transition quickly, Drummond’s District Administrator John Knight said the district went through a thorough selection process.
“After having to lay off several teachers last year, we found our numbers this year allowed us to have two sections of fourth grade,” Knight said. “We recalled two teachers who had been laid off and both had secured other positions, so we had an opening for a new teacher.”

Knight said the district advertised locally and state-wide to fill the position, received 28 applications and interviewed seven candidates.

“It was hard to pick one that was above the others,” said Knight. “They all had wonderful training and credentials. When I think about the quality of applications we had, I have confidence in where public education is going.”

Knight said he’s been smiling ever since Thurn accepted the position.

“We are extremely excited to have someone of Sue’s skill, enthusiasm and experience join our staff,” said Knight. “She has all the attributes that make an outstanding teacher. She is going to make a difference.”

Saying goodbye after 20 years

“I feel bad about leaving the museum on such short notice,” said Thurn. “I don’t want anyone to think I left because I was not happy there. I left something wonderful to go to something wonderful.”

Thurn said her commitment to the museum has not changed, but her focus has.

“At the museum I reached thousands of faces in the school districts. Here my focus is on 18 fourth graders,” she said.

It has been a year of change for Thurn, who said her new position fits her new married lifestyle.

“My husband Dave is a bus driver for Drummond so we will have the same vacations and time off,” she said. “I’m trying not to look back much. It’s hard when you leave a place you have loved so much.”

Thurn’s transition was made easier because of the relationships she has developed over the years with the school district and the people in it.

“When the kids were told Mrs. Thurn would be their teacher they were very excited because they all know her,” Knight said.

Thurn sees two sides to that familiarity.

“At the museum I was the ‘special’ teacher and they were always excited to see me,” she said. “Now I need to find ways to keep that excitement going all day long.”

Though science is her background, Thurn said she is also excited about becoming a good reading and math teacher.

“This position, being a teacher, is so important and rewarding,” she said. “I reach for the exceptional and I feel like I am among that here. I’m looking forward to finding ways to help the school district continue to be involved with the museum. There is a long-standing relationship there.”
Thurn also has a long-standing relationship with the community. She lives in Cable and serves on the Town of Cable board. She is also the chairperson for the Plan Commission for the Town of Cable. She plans to continue her relationship with the museum as a volunteer.

“I love being able to teach in the district where I live,” she said. “I can’t tell you how many times I have gotten goose bumps this week because of something important that happens in this class room.”

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