

Mist School: The Little Schoolhouse That Could *continued from front page*



Teacher Joanie Jones helps some students at the Mist School.

were three teachers and sixty to seventy students, which included local Mist children and about forty students who were bussed from Vernonia. A few years ago, budget cuts led to eliminating the bussing of Vernonia students and talk of closing the school. But enough parents said they wanted it to stay open. The District continued to allowed Vernonia families to transfer to Mist, but they had to provide their own transportation. The Flood of 2007 chased away a few more local families and enrollment really dropped. But the District decided

els. Teaching reading to second through fifth graders at the same time provides a unique challenge for a teacher. "It's making sure that each student is getting what they need," says Jones. "It's constantly adjusting to different levels."

The small learning environment isn't just a challenge for the instructors; it can also be challenging for the students. Working on group projects together is one example. "For the most part, the older kids are always teaching the younger kids, that's just the way it is," says Jones. "But sometimes it's frustrating and just gets to the point where the older kids will think, 'I'll just do it myself.'"

There are also advantages to the small environment; one is having the same students year after year. "Each September, Coni and I are not looking at a whole new batch of fresh faces," says Jones. "We know exactly where they're at, we know exactly where they left off, and we know where we're going to go." Jones actually counts on her students to help keep track of their progress during the school year. "I keep notes of where we've left off and so do they," she says.

"We just help each other out."

Jones sees some advantages for her students in the smaller school setting. Open-ended learning, flexibility and the ability to try different approaches are one option that Jones and Hodgson have. "We were talking about fractions the other day, and the second graders were not getting

it from the worksheets we were using. So I thought, 'Let's make pizza!' So, we made pizzas from paper and talked about slices and that worked. And then we made posters for pizza restaurants and we talked about slogans-- what do you do to get people to come to your restaurant-- some of them even used alliteration because we had been talking about that. We can do things like that and they work here."

"Everyone can work at their own level and everyone knows how to do a certain thing," continues Jones. "And that's how you improve, because someone else is telling you, 'You need to remember to capitalize that or put in a comma or put in quotation marks.'"

"This is not the environment for everyone," says Jones. Students learn patience, for one thing, she notes. "They

also have to be independent learners. They often have to keep themselves going while they wait for me to help them. We talk about this a lot-- that they are here for them and not here for me. They are here for their learning, so they should learn all they can. And I think when you learn to think for yourself, you gain more

confidence. They believe in themselves, they know they can learn."

The shift to Middle School when the Mist 5th graders graduate and move on is a worrisome time for Jones. "It's different when they go on to the Middle School because they're not getting the constant instant feedback they get here. But, so far, everyone who has moved on has done really well. They've all been A and B students! And I'm so proud of them!"

"I think our Mist students arrive at our middle school well prepared," says Principal Miller when asked how the Mist program is working. "Because it's such a small class, even though Joanie has to lesson plan for six different grade levels everyday, with just sixteen kids, she is able to meet their individual academic needs. And really plan for each individual student. I think the program out there does a really good job of preparing them for middle school. The students always do exceptionally well on State Assessment Tests-- it's usually 100% of the students who are meeting or exceeding the benchmarks."



Assistant Coni Hodgson helps a younger student with reading.

long way together and they help each other out," says Jones. "Jamie helped him create a story-- they sat down and brainstormed ideas together. He helped her with fractions because she wasn't quite getting it. And while they're doing that, I can be helping someone else."

Jones says she misses having other teachers around to share ideas with. She says the volunteers that come in are a huge help, but ultimately she alone is responsible for her students learning. "It's both the good and the bad," she says. "It's being alone and being with the kids and being able to do whatever we want-- but it's also being alone and having to figure it all out ourselves."

"It's really fun to watch them grow," says Jones. Right now, for the first time, she has fifth graders who she has taught all the way through the school since kindergarten. "It's so rewarding to see their progression, how they learn. It's one thing that keeps me going."

"Joanie does a great job of mixing things up and creating that family atmosphere and maintaining it with her students over the several years that she may

have them there," says Miller. "That's a key piece-- keeping it from getting old and boring and mundane and doing the same things over and over. If that family feel wasn't there, the program would not be nearly as effective as it is. She makes it work for her students. She makes it work for her parents. And she makes it work for the many volunteers

who come out from the community."

The Mist Grade School is making the most of what they have-- a family atmosphere, willing volunteers, dedicated staff and engaged and successful students. A little schoolhouse couldn't ask for much more than that.



A photo from 1913 shows the old Mist School and its students.

to keep the school open for residents of the Mist area and for any Vernonia families who still wanted to transfer, with the District again providing transportation. Total enrollment is capped at sixteen students.

Jones and assistant Hodgson find themselves doing all kinds of things besides teaching reading, writing and arithmetic. "It's just us out here most of the time," says Jones. "So Coni and I are the secretary, the nurse-- it's all thrown in there and we just work it out!" Principal Miller goes out to visit every few weeks and the elementary school guidance counselor, David Spackman, is available to visit with students when needed. The volunteers are a big help, offering needed support and expertise. But there are numerous challenges and obstacles that have to be dealt with each and every day. But, still, "I love it--I really like my job," says Jones. "And, it's also extremely challenging."

One of those challenges includes having lessons plans for different subjects every day that include all students at all their different learning lev-



A banner lists the names of all sixteen Mist students.



The library/cafe/indoor recess room.

Jones noted an example of the family-type atmosphere and learning that takes place. She currently has two fifth graders, Jamie and Brett. Brett is very good at math and Jamie loves to read and write elaborate stories. "They are such good friends and they've come such a

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