

# Voices From the Crowd: My Thoughts on Vernonia Schools

By Katie Cook

I've had a year to reflect on the choice we made to uproot our family after seventeen years and move to Vernonia and away from everything we know and everyone we love, including our schools and familiar teachers in the Hillsboro and Beaverton School Districts.

When recently asked what our thoughts were on our new school situation, my first initial idea was, "I thought I was moving to a nightmare but *possibly* ended up finding a little bit of heaven."

We moved from extremely overcrowded schools. My kids succeeded much more in the class rooms in the grade school when they had a good student/teacher relationship. In other words, the teachers *knew* the kids. In Washington County, once my children hit middle school and high school, it became visible that students became numbers. Classes were overflowing and with these high numbers came a disconnect between student and teacher. With higher numbers, individual needs were next to impossible to meet. This brought the question, "Is the time spent at school truly worth the 6 1/2 hours that my children are there? Is it even worth the teacher's time?" Even the sports programs were overcrowded. Extremely talented players were not able to play because there were simply too many students crammed up into the schools. Deserving players missed the opportunity for experience and scholarships due to the fact of the overcrowded issue. Some of my family described it as "suffocating."

As a parent, I felt I couldn't breathe. I was subsequently consumed at all times; consumed with finding other options for my children's education; consumed with trying to find tutors; consumed with searching for other opportune moments in sports; consumed with over-volunteering to try to help out; consumed with politics to try to fix the budget problems and help avoid cutting programs; consumed with keeping up with my own budget because all the money was going somewhere else to make up the difference missed in school and sports, the very system that I was pouring taxes into already. It was, in fact, suffocating and frustrating.

To top it off, essentials were being cut from the schools. PE, Music, Art, and Engineering, were all being cut, and along with it, quite honestly, the joys of what makes school exciting. Learning

is supposed to be stimulating, full of experimentation. Motivation comes with success which is usually accomplished with hands-on projects. The schools were cutting out anything hands-on and defeating the purpose of learning the sciences and math in the first place. The lack of opportunity to experiment (math in Music, Math and Science in Engineering, the science behind Home Economics and Shop and the need to understand the science of PE and the physical need for it) creates absent results of success, which leads to lack of motivation, which leads to boredom and a mundane, robotic education system.

The day came when we made a decision to buy a house. My husband found a fixer upper in Vernonia. (Fixing is something he learned with *hands-on experience* with math and science at his school.) After 17 years, it seemed a difficult leap of faith. Too often I heard it referred to as "Vernowhere."

Obviously, my first priority as a mother was to visit the school. When I approached the building, I was greeted by a staff member who seemed very relaxed and welcoming. (In Washington County many office workers seemed often overwhelmed and pulling out their hair.) She could tell I was concerned so she simply took the time to introduce herself to my children and asked their names. My thought was, "They have TIME to talk with my children," and it all launched from there.

I noticed the ample time the principal had to take with the kids and my concerns. I observed the time the office staff had to show them their lockers and assign my children to lockers nearby familiar friends that they happened to know already. I was aware there was time for staff or class officers to introduce my children to other students. They took time to make my family comfortable. We invited two family friends from Washington County to come to my daughter's graduation in May. The unanimous comment was, "They actually had time to walk across the stage and get their diploma before the next name was called rather than the assembly line in the city schools." (When my son was a senior, we were in the city and graduation took endless hours and I almost missed him because it went so fast.)

Initially, a small school caused concern but, in the end, I've never had this much time to actually step back and breathe. I knew the staff within a

few weeks and they knew my kids. My daughter who began failing some classes in her old school became a straight A student again. In her own words, "My teachers know me and it helps me want to do better." My family found time to fit in extracurricular activities because that is *exactly what they were*. They were "extra" instead of necessary activities needed to make up the difference from what they missed during the day. I found that I could replace "Consume" with "Time to" in every sentence in the above paragraph, as it became an option rather than a necessity due to the fact that their needs were being met at school. My volunteer time is not a waste here. My children's school day is not a waste here.

The most telling sentence I can share is a quote that became routine from my oldest daughter's mouth who, mind you, was a senior when we moved here. Referring to all of the unique events available, she would exclaim, "Man, we would never have been able to do that at my other school." (because of too many students)

My youngest daughter in 8<sup>th</sup> grade loves it here. She didn't know for sure what she was interested in but it's all available to her to try because it's not overcrowded here. She knows her teachers and they know her. She has tried playing volleyball, basketball and run hurdles. Because of the opportunity to try it all, she has decided that only volleyball and hurdles are in her future.

My son struggles in school. But, for the first time in years, I find myself saying things such as, "Boy, that teacher responded quickly to the email." or "Did you know your teacher called?" So, the way I would describe Vernonia schools is "Connected." There is time and opportunity for these great teachers to make up the difference where the education system lacks.

Unfortunately, there is a but. Vernonia struggles with budget cuts like other schools. Vernonia struggles with non-existent hands-on classes like Music, Art, PE, Shop, and Home Economics, including a dwindling Engineering program, just to name a few. In Vernonia, my kids are surrounded with an incredibly amazing environment for learning but the schedule options are next to barren. This was the only downfall when we moved here. This is a HUGE problem. The basics are here but the education color wheel provides



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only the primary colors. My children had to reinvent themselves with much argument. We cannot expect people to move into this extraordinary school environment yet only offer these bleak options. We have got to sacrifice somewhere so that more opportunity, or in other words, the secondary, and possibly, the tertiary colors of the color wheel can be available. It is a straightforward fact: Not all kids like or respond to merely blue, red or yellow. Consequently, VERNONIA, our schools *are* connected to our students. This is the perfect time to take advantage of our new school. With the encouragement and support of parents and community members, maybe a change can happen in the color wheel of our education system.



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