

Boys to Men

Three VHS seniors are spending the semester working with preschool students and learning about caring for kids

By Scott Laird

It's not unheard of, but it is a little unusual to find a teenaged young man who is interested in spending time with small children.

This semester three Vernonia High School seniors are breaking that mold and working with preschool students at the local Head Start program.

Brett Jones, Jake Butcher, and Tristan Adams are all earning school elective credits through the school's "School-to-Career" program and are spending an hour each day, four days a week, with the 19 children at the Vernonia Head Start preschool.

"This is the type of connection we strive to have," says Dana Hyde who supervises the School-to-Career program.

The young men arrive at the Head Start building each day to a chorus of cheers of "They're here, they're here!" from the young students.

Not only is the experience a positive opportunity for the VHS seniors to interact with young children and learn patience and teaching skills, but the extra sets of hands, eyes, and ears provides some additional supervision, says Vernonia Head Start Director Jennifer Butcher. "Our teachers love having them here," says Butcher.

The Head Start program has three adults – a head teacher, an assistant teacher, and an aide, along with Butcher, who fills in as a substitute teacher, but mostly handles administrative duties. During the hour the seniors are there it gives the classroom a 3 to 1 ratio of students to adults.

When the seniors arrive the class is split into two groups; one group goes in the large playroom and has "recess" where they can play and burn off excess energy, which is great during the winter months when it's difficult to get outside. The other group stays in the classroom and does other work. Then the groups switch.

Butcher says that she has seen a lessening in behavioral issues in her students.

"The kids are much calmer," says Butcher. "This allows us to do so much more. Having a 3-1 ratio is awesome! Where else can you get that in a school setting? We have more of a chance to interact with each child and it just means that we can offer more."

Butcher says there has been a concerted effort by Head Start to add more play time to the school day to make sure students are getting enough exercise and physical activity, providing an opportunity to work on gross motor skills. Having three high school students on hand to throw balls and run around with the children, and being able to split the class into two groups, has made that much easier for the Head Start staff.

All three of the VHS seniors have a connection to working in schools.



Above: Three VHS seniors, (l-r) Tristan Adams, Jake Butcher, and Brett Jones are working with Head Start students each week. Below: Brett Jones spending one-on-one time with a student.

Brett Jones' mother is Joanie Jones, who is the head teacher at the Mist Grade School; Tristan Adams' mother Stacey Adams is an Instructional Aide at the Vernonia Schools; Jake Butcher's mother is Jennifer, the Director at the Head Start program.

Both Tristan Adams and Jake Butcher say they enjoy being around the young children although neither is considering a career in childhood education.

Brett Jones says he is interested in becoming a grade school teacher as a career, so this experience is especially rewarding and beneficial for him. "I have some Teaching Assistant classes at the school and then coming down here really helps me prepare," says Jones. "When I'm here I play with the kids, talk with them, interact with them and keep them busy."

Jennifer Butcher says the Head Start program has regularly had students from VHS help with the program through the School-to-Career program, but said they haven't had a boy in four years, and have never had three boys at one time. "It's good for the young children to have males around because all our teachers are currently female and there aren't a lot of male teachers at the Vernonia Grade School either," says Butcher.

"I've coached soccer the last few years and that has helped too," says Jones. "It's good to be around them and

learn how to deal with them and how to get through to them."

The School-to-Career program currently has other partnerships with West Oregon Electric Cooperative, Black Iron Grill, and True Value, says Supervisor Dana Hyde.

According to Hyde students are responsible for creating a Training Agreement and a Basic Fact Sheet about their work site that includes the size and history of the business where they are working. Students learn how to fill out an employment application and most importantly, they need to turn in weekly time sheets signed by them and their employer. At the end of the semester, employers fill out an evaluation form on the student. Hyde also makes surprise visits to make sure the students are where they're supposed to be.

Butcher says she hopes that more VHS students will consider taking advantage of the opportunity to get some hands-on experience working with preschool students at Head Start. "For me, and the students, I think it's a win-win situation."





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