

RIVERBEND Students 'empowered to make an impact'

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District 21, returned to in-person learning April 19. For another, the school, which serves grades 9-12, officially moved out of the Wahtonka campus on West 10th Street and up to The Dalles campus of Columbia Gorge Community College on Scenic Drive. The school signed the lease with the college back in July 2020, but wasn't able to utilize the facilities until in-person learning resumed this spring.

"It's still kind of mind-blowing to them," said Riverbend Executive Director Stacey Shaw. "I had one student tell me, 'It's like we're college students already!'"

But Riverbend's uniqueness extends to far more than just sharing a campus with a college, although that is pretty unique. The school, which does not charge tuition, places an emphasis on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) and CTE (Career and Technical Education) curricula, but also offers courses in journalism, creative writing, media and visual arts, and more (and of course, physical education). Students attend year-round, Mondays through Thursdays, and though it's its own entity, Riverbend has a sports and club agreement with The Dalles High School to give students more extracurricular opportunities. Riverbend is also very small, with the student body capped at 60, and class sizes no greater than 15 students, which allows teachers to have more one-on-one time with the students to help ensure they are getting the support they need.

That small class size is essential for fostering some other unique components of Riverbend Community School's pedagogy: Hands-on, project-based learning; real-world applications of concepts learned in the classroom, and emphasizing the importance of building relationships, both in and out of school.

Kieran Connolly, who teaches language arts, journalism, and physical education at Riverbend, said that he and other teachers at the school largely eschew lecturing, rote memorization, and textbooks in favor of teaching students how to find information, use that information to help develop a project, and then receive feedback to help improve the project until they ultimately demonstrate proficiency — mirroring real-world processes students might encounter when they enter the workforce. He said it's important for students to know that what they're working on is practical, not just theoretical.

"We want to flip on its head the old-school mentality that a teacher has all the knowledge that one could possibly need, especially in this day-and-age when there's so much knowledge and information at our fingertips ... it's foolish for us to think that we can offer the students everything they need to know," Connolly explained. "But what we can do is connect them with the world, and identify resources, and connect them with resources, and I think that's what we do really well."

For example, Riverbend teacher Jocelyn Paris recently worked with students on a landscape architecture project, where students researched plant types and laid out some designs. The result of that project was getting to see their plant designs installed in large containers for a local client. A student in one of Connolly's journalism classes was researching voting rights and was able to connect with Oregon Secretary of State (and The Dalles High School alum) Shemia Fagan for an interview for their project. When teaching grammar, Connolly



Kieran Connolly uses a white board as he teaches journalism at Riverbend Community School in The Dalles.



Riverbend Community School Language Arts and Journalism teacher Kieran Connolly reflects on a conversation with a student.

does so within the context of a creative writing class — which gets the students more engaged with the material, and helps them improve the syntax, grammar, and punctuation of their own stories.

Riverbend's format is beneficial from more than just an educational standpoint. Connolly noted that the small class and school size and emphasis on relationships means both students and teachers are often more in-tune with one another than what you may find at a larger school.

"We know our kids so well," he said. "If you're having a bad day, we all know it, and we'll check in with you to see what's going on."

Bear Mahn, 17, of The Dalles, who started at Riverbend a few months ago and is thinking of becoming an EMT First Responder after graduating, said the school feels like "one big family," and that it's especially welcoming to new students.

"I totally love it," he said. "All the teachers are nice. It's a very respectful and comfortable place."

Reta Rincon, 15, of Mosier, who started at Riverbend at the beginning of the school year and wants to be an orthodontist, agreed, and said that her instructors are "really helpful" and take the time to make sure students are having a good learning experience.

"The teachers really know how to focus on kids," she said.

Additionally, students are paired



Riverbend executive director and math teacher Stacey Shaw works with student Ashlyn Jones on a math assignment



At left, Riverbend senior Graciela Alvarez participating in a journalism exercise for her class at Riverbend Community School.

Photos Courtesy Sean O'Connor/Story Gorge

adults ready to exact positive changes within their communities.

"All teenagers come with frustrations, so you take what they're frustrated with, you start talking about how those things can change," Shaw explained. "And I think our teachers do a really good job of showing them, OK, this is the knowledge you need in order to make the change that you're talking about, and I'm going to help you take that knowledge to people who can help change these things. So, if our students leave Riverbend as graduates feeling empowered to make an impact on their world, I'm all about it."

Riverbend Community School is currently accepting new students. For more information about the school, including how to enroll, head to riverbendcommunity-school.org.

Story Gorge contributed to this article.

with an adviser (one of the teachers at the school) throughout the entirety of their time at Riverbend, the role of which Shaw describes as a "social and academic family."

Shaw says advisers check in with their students almost daily, serving as a kind of homeroom, but far more in-depth, with advisers asking students how they're doing both in school and in life, and whether they or their family need anything. Families, as well as others, are also

invited to Riverbend's periodic exhibitions of learning, where students present their work to the community.

Tying learning to community is important — after all, "community" is in the school's name. One of Riverbend's most important emphases is that the practical application of knowledge isn't just for preparing students to enter the workforce, but also for preparing them to be engaged, civic-minded

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Visitor Guide

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