

EDUCATOR SPOTLIGHT

Second-grade teacher emphasizes importance of social and emotional learning

By Alana Lackner
Columbia Gorge News

For teachers, one of the biggest themes throughout the pandemic has been formulating and maintaining relationships with students even in an online classroom. For Jennifer Vaught, a second-grade teacher at Colonel Wright Elementary School, this held especially true.

Vaught struggled with the transition to online school, mostly because she was worried about being able to support her students as well as she wanted to.

"I couldn't do my job how I normally would, and didn't feel like I had the tools or the training or definitely the experience, to feel very confident or successful in meeting the needs of my students," she said. "We had to adapt quickly and then adapt over and over to the ever changing new regulations, and nothing was certain. That was really difficult."

Vaught said that normal routines and ways of doing school were thrown out of the window, which made things difficult in many ways, especially emotionally. It was a lonely time for students and staff both, she said.

"Even though we worked hard to make those meaningful connections with students over screen, it still just couldn't replace that face-to-face relationship that we were used to having," she said.

Because communication with the kids was more difficult due to the online format, Vaught said working with the families was more important than ever.

"I think no teacher would argue that the fact that strong relationships with students and families are important and have always been important," she said. "But I think going through this year and a half of pandemic has really made it clear to all of us that these relationships

are most important. And it definitely took a village."

Families stepped up to support and teach at home, Vaught said. She said families and school staff became more of a team, which was incredibly rewarding.

"We all kind of learned together a new way of doing school so it made those family relationships with the school a whole lot more meaningful and strong," she said. "Our staff and our families have really shown to be resilient and courageous. Throughout this we're all showing up and doing our best and working together, trying new things ... That's something that's really been inspiring to be a part of."

Vaught said by March 2021, the hybrid school model was much needed. She said the teachers missed being with the students and the students missed being with each other.

She said that during hybrid learning, she had 12 kids in her classroom for half of the day. "(That) was really important for I think some healing that needed to take place after all this," Vaught said. "Just having more adult-to-kid ratio, interaction, building those relationships, talking about what we've been through and how we felt, and then just figuring out school all over again."

However, even with the half days in the spring, full-time in-person school came as a shock to everyone's systems this fall, she said.

Vaught said there have been learning gaps that needed to be addressed, and it has been difficult as a teacher not to feel overwhelmed.

"There's pressure to kind of make up for what has been lost, some might say," she said. "But it's also important to just take a look at the big picture and think about it a little bit differently, that nothing has really been lost. These kids have still been learning and growing."



Jennifer Vaught, a second-grade teacher, stands in her classroom at Colonel Wright Elementary.

Contributed Photo

"We all kind of learned together a new way of doing school so it made those family relationships with the school a whole lot more meaningful and strong."

Jennifer Vaught
Colonel Wright Elementary

One of the biggest focuses this year has been on social and emotional learning, Vaught said. Her classroom currently uses a "Mood Meter," where kids are taught to identify the emotions they're feeling and place them on a square.

The meter has four sectors: Red, yellow, green and blue. Red and yellow are on the top half, and blue and green are on the bottom. The top indicates high energy levels, whereas the bottom half is lower energy levels, and the left side is uncomfortable feelings whereas the right is comfortable feelings.

As such, the red quadrant is high-energy uncomfortable feelings such as anger or agitation, and the yellow quadrant is high-energy comfortable feelings like excitement or joy. The blue quadrant is low-energy uncomfortable feelings like sadness or exhaustion, and the green quadrant is low-energy comfortable feelings like calmness and a more peaceful happiness.

Vaught has also found a way to use mornings to focus on students and their emotions.

"One thing I've enjoyed this year is we do breakfast

in the classroom," she said. "So the kids kind of trickle in in the morning for about 15 minutes, as they get dropped off, and they come in and they'll get breakfast, or have a morning activity to work on. But I use that time to really connect with each kid one-on-one in the morning and check in with them and see how they're doing. It seems to start our day off really well. All the kids feel like they're welcome, and they're excited that I'm excited that they're there and they know that they are important to our school to me."

Vaught said she's been glad to help students through social and emotional learning, because emotions have been difficult throughout this past year and a half.

"It has been a scary time and so much is out of our control, and just navigating this fear with staff and

students and families in our community has been hard," she said. "But I think because so much felt out of our control, the things that we could control became even more important, like just loving the people in front of us. And being intentional about creating the world that we want to be within our realm of influence. For me, this starts every morning, in my classroom with each student that walks in the door. Again, I can't tell you how excited I am right now that they are actually walking through the door. So it's been pretty cool to be able to be neat, in person and full time. And definitely, you know, there are challenges, and they feel so full and so busy right now. But it feels more like how it was supposed to be."

Managing your land to reduce wildfire danger

By Shilah Olson
Wasco County Soil & Water Conservation District

Whether you have a small lot or a large acreage, you can implement environmentally friendly land management strategies to reduce fire danger and prevent future catastrophic loss. First, you must understand fire behavior. With that knowledge, inventory your land and assess the risks to create a site-specific plan that reflects your personal land management goals.

All fires require heat or an ignition source, fuel, and oxygen. Once a fire starts, its behavior is influenced by weather, topography, and fuels. Each of these factors must be considered to develop an effective management plan. Weather and topography are largely out of our control, so the area we can have the most meaningful influence upon is fuels. Fuel management can help prevent fires from starting in the first place and make them more manageable when they do start.

A good aerial photo and topographical map can help you understand how fire might move on the

landscape. Fire will typically move more quickly uphill than downhill or on flat terrain. It is also important to determine the prevailing wind direction as this will influence the path that a fire will follow.

Wildfire fuels include everything from native trees and grasses to landscaping ornamentals, and even buildings and homes. We can manage fuels by reducing their amount, height, and continuity. Take note of the density of fuels across your landscape and refer to your map to consider how steep slopes and prevailing winds might cause a fire to burn faster or hotter.

Consider possible ignition sources. Two major fire causes are lightning and humans. Not all human causes are arson or carelessness. Fires can also be sparked by powerlines, railroad tracks, or faulty mechanics. Note on your map areas with the most likely ignition sources, which may extend well beyond your property but can give you an idea of the direction(s) that fire may come from.

Once you understand the fuel loads and how a fire might move across your

land, you can design ways to strategically reduce fuels. Not everyone will have the same goals for their property, but fire management strategies can work with many different priorities. There are several ways to manage vegetation. This can be done mechanically by mowing or cutting, through chemical means such as herbicides (this should always be done selectively and in accordance with the label), or biological means including grazing with livestock.

For structural protection, it is critical to create defensible space around homes and buildings. This can be done by creating fuel breaks of bare ground or low vegetation close to the structure and pruning branches on trees to reduce the risk of flames climbing into the tops of trees.

Thinning vegetation and overgrazing can have negative impacts on wildlife habitat so it's important to

find a balance. Decrease thinning activity in areas of flatter terrain and along waterways. Determine proper stocking rates and develop a prescribed grazing plan prior to turning animals out. Consider leaving clumps of brush for animals to nest and hide in, and strategically leave some dead trees and down logs for habitat and to return nutrients to the environment.

While wildfires can be frightening, they have always been a part of our landscape. Residents and landowners can work to meaningfully reduce the threat of a catastrophic wildfire. Your local Conservation District can help you achieve land and fire management goals while balancing watershed health and economic strategies.

Conservation Districts are local, non-regulatory, public agencies charged with assisting landowners and residents with responsible natural

resource management and stewardship. Hood River Soil and Water Conservation District in Hood River, Wasco County Soil and Water Conservation District in The Dalles, and Underwood Conservation District in

White Salmon are available to assist with a variety of natural resource issues, including soil health, water quality, fish habitat, wildfire risk, forest management, noxious weeds, pollinators, wildlife, livestock and agriculture.

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TRASH TALK

Q. Is there a place where can I take old computers, VCR's and other electronics for recycling?

Jared, The Dalles

A. Jared, I don't know of any local options for VCR or stereo recycling. You do have an option in our area for "e-waste" though. The Oregon Electronics Recycling Program (E-Cycles) accepts seven items for free: computer monitors and towers, T.V.s, laptops, printers, keyboards and mice. Three drop sites: Hood River Transfer Station, The Dalles Disposal, and Sherman County Transfer Station near Biggs Junction.

questions to:

Tri-County
Hazardous Waste & Recycling Program
(541)-506-2636 www.tricountyrecycle.com