

A mile in a poor student's shoes

Poverty simulation helps educators understand impact of economic hardships

By **SEAN HART**
Staff Writer

Students who live in poverty face a number of challenges that can negatively impact their educational performance.

To better understand what these students and their families experience, Stanfield and Echo school district staff participated in a poverty simulation Thursday provided by CoActive Connections.

Lori Beamer, director of operations and outreach for the Salem-based organization, said many of the barriers impoverished students encounter are not immediately apparent to people who have not experienced them.

For example, a student who fails to turn in homework may not have a room or another quiet place to study, she said, or may have

to care for other siblings while parents are working. A parent who misses a conference with a teacher may lack money for child care or transportation or may be unable to attend because of work hours, she said.

After a previous simulation at a middle school in the state, Beamer said teachers there began offering home visits for parents who missed conferences when they realized what these students and families face.

"The goal is that the educators and the staff are able to move forward and improve outcomes for those students and, therefore, improve outcomes for the community as a whole," she said. "When students feel respected, when they feel understood, when barriers that exist are broken down because they're identified and discussed, then students have a much greater chance at achievement."

Stanfield School District Superintendent Shelley Liscom said that because so many of the district's students live in poverty, she wanted her staff to "walk a mile in their shoes."

According to the latest U.S. Census Bureau data from 2013, 16.5 percent of Umatilla County residents live in poverty. Students who experience economic hardship without technically being below the poverty level are reflected by the percentage that receives free or reduced-price meals at school, which are offered to students whose families earn less than 185 percent of the poverty level. According to the Oregon Department of Education, 63.4 percent of students in Umatilla County qualified in the 2014-15 school year,

including 49.4 percent in the Pendleton School District, 65.6 in the Hermiston School District, 70.8 percent in the Stanfield School District and 80 percent in the Umatilla School District.

Any way you slice it, a good percentage of students in any class in Umatilla County have financial challenges outside the classroom.

"There are certain strategies and things that we do that really don't help (students in poverty)," Liscom said. "Part of it is because I think we don't really understand what that feels like, what that means. The idea is, by having this simulation, we have a better understanding."

Beamer said the simulation was based on actual experiences of people in poverty. The participants were assigned specific family roles and incomes and tried to fulfill their basic needs over the course of a simulated month. The exercise took about an hour. Through interactions with people representing social service agencies, schools, mortgage companies, homeless shelters, police, businesses and other organizations, some of the staff members in the simulation experienced poverty for the first time.

"I thought it was good to let us see the perspective of people in poverty, the things they have to deal with on a regular basis," Stanfield High School social studies teacher Brad Rogers said. "I guess I kind of understood some of the things that they went through, but I've never really thought to the extent of how difficult it is."

Rogers said he plans to be more empathetic this year when students request additional time to complete an assignment when they had to care for siblings while parents were working.

Laura Eddy, who teaches fourth and fifth grades at Stanfield Elementary School, said she doesn't often think about poverty. After the simulation, however, she said she could pinpoint students who were in her class last year that struggled because of economic issues. She said she plans to evaluate her classroom structure and homework policies.

"Last year, I had a lot of students who didn't turn in homework," she said. "Is there any way that I can do homework that'll meet the needs of those students who that isn't a priority for because they just want to get through? How can I find a way to compromise with them so they're getting this skill while recognizing that



Tina Williams and Darcy Gabriel pretend like they are a couple discussing their tight financial situation during a poverty simulation Thursday at the Stanfield Elementary School.

there is a challenge?"

At the conclusion of the simulation, the participants were provided with information from CoActive Connections about re-

sources available in the community. A packet from the organization also recommended that the educators continue to learn about and address student barriers



Kara MacKenzie, a first-grade teacher in Echo, stands in line at the faux hospital employment department and learns her employment status from a human resources person, played by Dr. Phil Mills, of the InterMountain Education Service District. The poverty simulation took place in the Stanfield Elementary School gym.

created by poverty through activities such as scheduling monthly staff meet-

ings, exploring mentoring programs and developing student strengths, relation-

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STAFF PHOTO BY KATHY ANEY

Stanfield librarian Penny Anderson takes part in the poverty simulation Thursday in the Stanfield Elementary School gym. While getting a payday loan, she discovers the guy behind the counter (played by Echo Principal Keith Holman) has shorted her some cash.

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