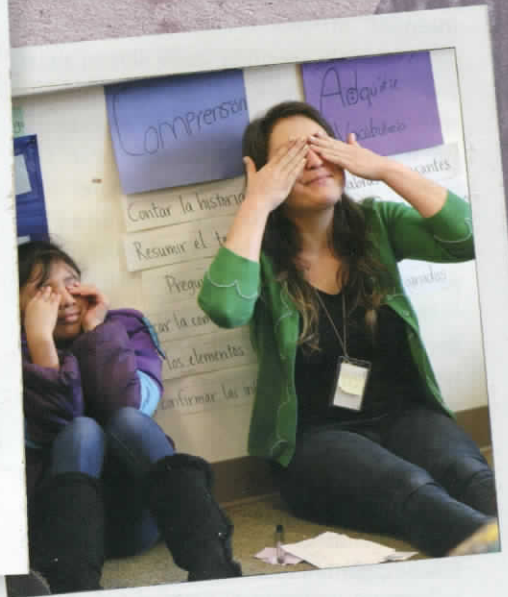


AN INEXTINGUISHABLE FORCE OF OPTIMISM



First-year Teacher Kelly Cowgill Is Building Trust at Every Level

By Laila Hirschfeld • Photos by Meg Krugel

Kelly Cowgill's class is seated in

a circle at the front of the room, with their legs crossed and their hands in their laps. Cowgill's big eyes are welcoming, but her eyebrows speak volumes: it's time to quiet down. This first-year educator, it seems, has perfected her "teacher look."

The children are participating in a community circle, and they each clamor for the glitter filled acrylic wand — the tool that gives you permission to speak. They pass the "talking stick" around the circle, telling their classmates how they're feeling. Most are happy:

EDITOR'S NOTE

This is the third in a four-part series about Kelly Cowgill, a first-year teacher from Beaverton. Kelly has graciously allowed us to help document her first year of teaching—along with all its highs and lows. To read the last installment, please see "The Toughest Challenge," on page 22 of the Winter Issue of Today's OEA.



Kelly Cowgill's class takes part in an afternoon "Community Circle," where they open up about feelings and get to know each other on a more personal level.



Kelly Cowgill takes her class on an outdoor excursion to Barnes' school garden, where they spend time identifying how the garden has evolved from its lush state last September.

they're happy because they will be seeing their newborn baby brother after school, or because they're sitting next to their friend, or just because they're "happy." One student is excited.

"I'm excited because after school my cousin is going to lend me his drone so I can prank my brother," he tells the circle, before relinquishing the talking stick. The circle rewards him with a collective giggle.

"I find these community circles to be so valuable," says Cowgill. "I want so badly to create an environment where they feel confident, and the circle opens a space that allows me to meet them where they're

at—we've truly built trust."

Community Circles are part of the culture in Beaverton's Barnes Elementary School: staff met in a circle themselves at the beginning of the year, 80 adults seated in a circle in the library.

"My first reaction was, 'are you kidding me?'," says Cowgill, who had experienced a similar group experience at what she calls her "kind-of hippie" alma mater, The Evergreen State College.

"I wouldn't say I loved 'em," she says, a bit sarcastically. "But, I was surprised at how wonderful our circle ended up being—I could feel the love and patience between

the seasoned teachers, the newer ones and those of us who were brand, brand new."

Staff used the circle as an opportunity to share their vulnerabilities and to make promises to each other and the community, which they wrote on ceramic hearts and placed in jar in the front office.

"I promised to be an inextinguishable force of optimism," says Cowgill. "I wanted my colleagues to know that if they came to me with a problem, I would always face it with a sense of optimism."

Barnes' Principal, Veronica Jones and Assistant Principal, Laurie Huntwork, established the community circle model to

encourage communication and build trust.

"At the end of the day, it's about the people — teaching is a human endeavor, and part of the work I need to do, particularly with our newer teachers, is to build trust," says Jones. "I want them to feel comfortable taking risks and pushing themselves, and the only way that can happen is if there is trust on both sides."

The practice of community circles is a hallmark of restorative justice programs, which have become more popular as educators across the country confront troubling and well-documented statistics that reveal huge racial disparities in the use of school discipline.

Edgar Solares, Barnes' Social and Emotional Support Specialist, helped bring the idea of Community Circles to Barnes after learning about the model during a summer seminar.

"I was really interested in figuring out the social dynamics in the classroom," says Solares.

"What I learned is that we have to proactively create communities of trust, where students can better understand each other and where we can all talk openly about our feelings. We want our students to be able to name the problem and then work together to find a creative solution."

"Of course," he continues, "the more comfort and trust we feel as adults, the more effective it becomes in practice."

For first year teachers especially, a strong community is key, says Cowgill.

"If you have a strong community, individuals can thrive," Cowgill says. "For me, there are so many layers of community—my own classroom, our school, my students' parents and the larger neighborhood community. And at the center of it all is trust. That's what we're building, so that everything else is possible."

She pauses. "Yeah, I spend a lot of time cultivating trust with my students."

Trust is also a driving force with Jones, who says she wants the staff to feel supported in times of both triumph and trial.

"With any learning, you know, the learning is in the mistakes that you make," says Jones. "Without trust, or a sense of



community, I just don't see how you could really grow. We all need permission to make mistakes."

Cowgill agrees, "We all make mistakes. I want my students to know that's okay. I want them to know I am human." ■

KELLY'S DIARY

During a transition, my student Parker approached me as I closed my laptop. "Maestra, can we listen to Whip and Nae Nae?!" I raised my right eyebrow.

"Parker, I don't think so. Nice try."

"Come on!" he insisted, "You said you would play it for us!"

"If I recall, I said we would listen to it only once this year in this room. Once and only once—on your birthday."

His body language told me he didn't want to give up, but his eyes caught mine and we both knew I wouldn't budge. He exhaled, groaned sonorously, and turned to his next activity.

His friend Hayden popped up and asked, "Maestra Cowgill, you don't like the Whip and Nae Nae?"

The Whip and Nae Nae is this year's chosen anthem, to the chagrin of many students (and teachers) who much prefer last year's choice of Uptown Funk.

I assented with a nod, "That song drives me bonkers."

"I don't like it either," he revealed, but didn't miss a beat to ask, "Maestra Cowgill, can we listen to Taylor Swift?"

"I don't know that her music is school appropriate," I answered.

"Aw, please?" Hayden pressed. "I have her cd in my pocket!"

As he pulled the CD from his coat pocket, I couldn't help but laugh—he is clearly infatuated with Miss Swift, carrying her latest album with him everywhere he goes, just in case an opportunity presents itself! And so it begins...