

# THE TOUGHEST CHALLENGE



# First-year Teacher Kelly Cowgill Takes it to the Next Level

By Laila Hirschfeld • Photos by Thomas Patterson

## "My brain is tired."

It's a week before Thanksgiving and Kelly Cowgill, a 3rd-grade teacher at Barnes Elementary in Beaverton, is exhausted. She exhales deeply.

"It's report card time, and this whole process is new to me," she explains. "There has been so much learning happening in my classroom, and now I have to give that learning a tangible assessment. It's stressful."

Cowgill pauses, takes a moment and reflects. "It's not just stressful for me, it's stressful for my students and their parents. It's important that I get this right,

### EDITOR'S NOTE:

This is the second 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 first installment, please see "First in Class," on page 25 of the Fall Issue of *Today's OEA*.







Jim Hiller, a 26-year veteran teacher, has been an excellent sounding board for Kelly Cowgill this year.

and achieve the right balance—if the grades are too harsh, the parents might get alarmed; but if I give a grade higher than what's deserved, that could backfire, too." Cowgill's voice trails off into thought.

It's a Friday night, but Cowgill is not racing out of the building to meet friends. And even if she were, she'd likely still be thinking about her students—she says there aren't enough hours in the day to get her work done, let alone have a social life, exercise or even sleep.

"Are you asking me if I'm sleeping?" Cowgill chuckles, but only half-jokes. "I am trying to prioritize sleep—there have been

plenty of four-hour nights."

## JUST A PHASE

According to the New Teacher Center, Cowgill's experience is fairly typical. First-year teachers generally go through five phases: anticipation, survival, disillusionment, rejuvenation and reflection. The disillusionment phase—starting roughly in late October and lasting until winter break—is characterized by the center as "the toughest challenge" a new teacher may face.

According to the center, new teachers in this phase often question their

commitment to the profession, and express serious self-doubt about their practice.

"It's a completely overwhelming experience," says Jim Hiller, a 26-year veteran teacher, and Cowgill's mentor. "The first year is spent putting out fires, figuring out how to deal with challenges. You're really spending a lot of time gaining equilibrium."

Hiller has been a mentor for the last eight years and believes that mentoring can be key to teacher success and retention.

"I think there can sometimes be an attitude of 'I can do this on my own,'" says Hiller. "I understand the impulse, but our



job as a mentor isn't to tell educators what to do, it's to help them facilitate their own reflection and growth."

## AVOIDING BURN OUT

Cowgill and Hiller have been working together since September. To take advantage of the program, Cowgill is required to commit 90 hours throughout the instructional year. In return she receives confidential guidance and support, which she can trust won't be shared with anyone else, including her colleagues or administrators.

"I can say with absolute certainty that if I did not have my mentor, I would be discouraged. I would be burnt out," Cowgill says.

Hiller works with 16 new teachers as part of a program, which is partially funded by the District, and partially funded by the Oregon Department of Education.

"Each relationship is unique and different," explains Hiller. "Teachers truly are the experts of their classrooms—in fact their own approach will differ with different sets of students, or in different years. There is no one answer. Our main goal is simply to advance practice. The educators I work with will choose their own path."

Professional mentoring has been its own subject of study, with districts around the country investing more and more in similar programs. Research suggests a correlation between mentoring programs and teacher retention rates.

"It can be difficult to quantify results, or produce data that prove a causal connection," says Hiller. "But mentoring is more than just support. People tend to think it's 'meeting once a month for coffee', but it's actually about accelerated growth. When I was a new teacher, I had colleagues who were kind and generous with their time. But this is different. I see growth in my teachers over the course of one year that took me more than five years to achieve at the beginning of my own career."

Cowgill appreciates Hiller's practical advice, but says that where he is really helpful is on helping her see the way forward.

"That extra set of eyes can really make a



huge difference," says Cowgill. "I know if I'm not connecting with a student, he can help me understand why that might be. That's really important because if I can't engage them, I can't teach them. He helps me figure out the solution."

## RENEWED HOPE

After the holidays, most first year

teachers return to the classroom rejuvenated, which provides a renewed sense of hope and allows educators to begin to think about their second year.

"Over the course of my career, the educational landscape has changed tremendously," says Hiller. "But the core? That hasn't changed. Teaching is a complex job, but the benefits are so rewarding. That's why those of us who stay, stay."

For Cowgill, it's one day at a time.

"It's so important to be reflective, and that's part of the work, but it also helps you put the reward in perspective," she explains. "With these kids, all you're thinking about is what they're going to be doing in 20 years. What talent do they have that you're going to draw out of them so they can be successful? The moment you realize that responsibility lies with you... yeah, that's surreal." ■

### KELLY'S DIARY

#### THEY CAN ALWAYS MAKE ME SMILE

*I wouldn't have thought that quiet reading would be the source of so many laughs. But, when you're working with children, the quietest moments are often the ones that provide the most humor. The other day, I was working with a student, developing a strategy to help his comprehension. While we were reading, he suddenly stopped and exclaimed, "You have grey hairs!"*

*I agreed with his observation, "I do have quite a few greys."*

*"Woah," he continued, "How old are you?"*

*"28."*

*"No way, you are older than that."*

*"What? What makes you think so? I don't lie about my age..."*

*"My mom is 28 and she doesn't have that many grey hairs."*

*I thought about it for a moment, and came up with a possible explanation. "We have aged differently, your mother and I—perhaps it's all the worrying and fretting over mischievous students like you!"*

*Satisfied with this explanation, he flashed me a cheesy grin, and continued to read.*

#### Credits:

Thomas Patterson