

# FIRST IN CLASS





# First-year Teacher Kelly Cowgill Finds the Happy

By Laila Hirschfeld • Photos by Thomas Patterson

**I**t's back-to-school night at Barnes Elementary School in Beaverton, and the early evening sun still glows across Kelly Cowgill's classroom. Miniature chairs are set around half moon tables throughout the room. Under the window, and rounding the corner, are stacks and stacks of familiar titles, some organized in plastic containers, others shoved haphazardly in shelves. Twinkle lights glimmer along the back wall; opposite, a globe is perched proudly on a book case. The room is warm, and everyone who enters does so with a broad smile on their face, clearly pleased to learn that THIS is where their child spends most of his or her day.

## EDITOR'S NOTE:

We first met Kelly Cowgill in August, when she was gathering supplies for her classroom at Beaverton Education Association's annual New Teacher Giveaway—a "free store" for first year educators, supplied by donations from veteran or retiring educators. The first year is often the most difficult, but can also be the most triumphant in an educator's career. Kelly has agreed for us to help document this experience in a series of articles over the course of the year that will explore her first impressions, her victories and some of her challenges. We hope new educators will see themselves in Kelly's story, and that it will bring back fond memories for those who have been around a bit longer!

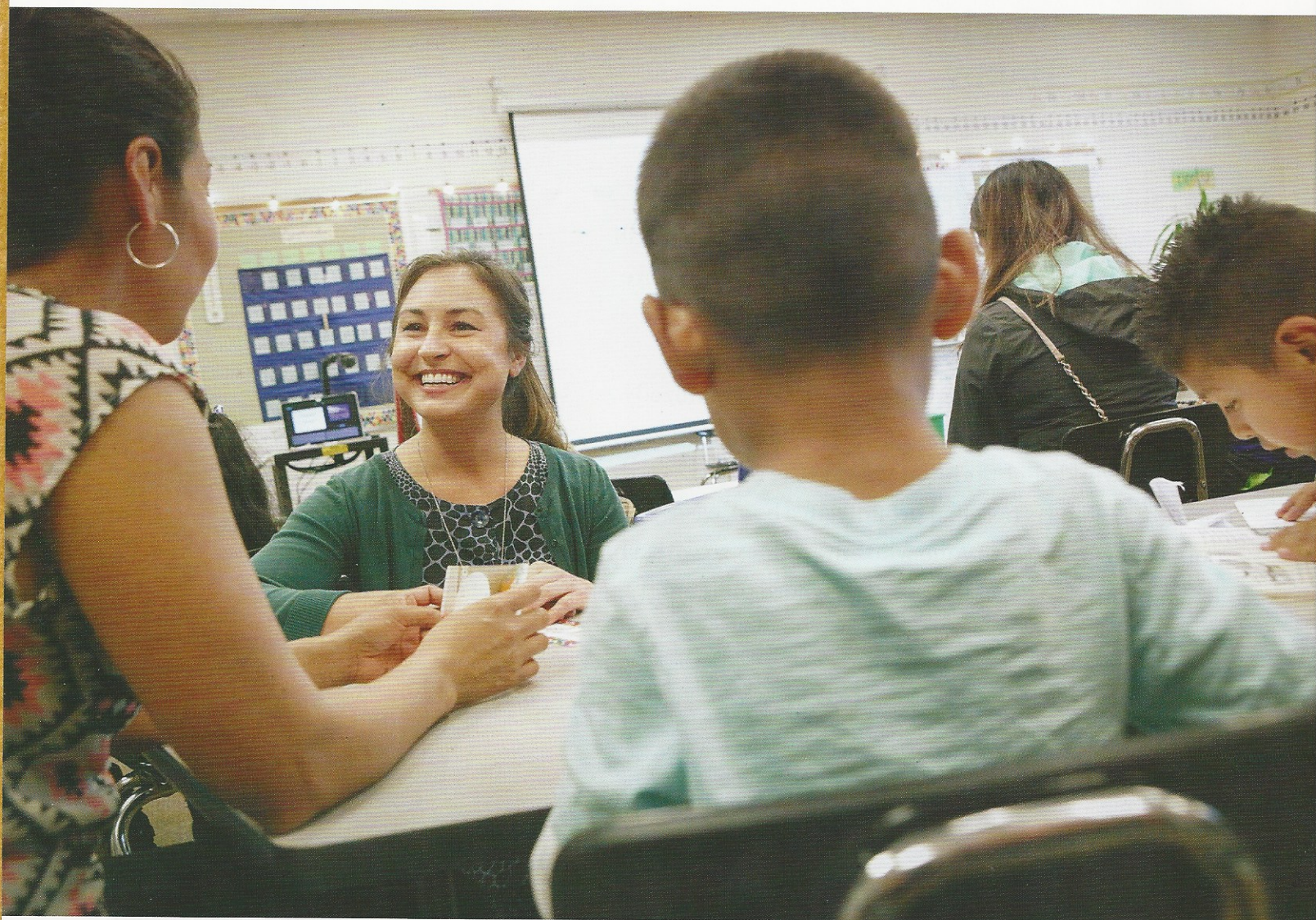


Kelly Cowgill, first-year teacher at Barnes School in Beaverton, meets the parents of her new students on back-to-school night.

### Credits:

Thomas Patterson





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## A WEEK OF FIRSTS

For Cowgill, this isn't just any back-to-school night. It's her first—one in a string of firsts that have marked the past week of her life and her first week teaching in an American classroom.

"Of course there are butterflies, but I'm looking forward to meeting my students' parents," says Cowgill. "I find it really interesting to see my kids with their families: some that are shy in class are really outgoing with their parents, and others that are louder and more boisterous, get quiet. Nights like this help you get a fuller picture of who is in your

classroom."

She nods toward one of her students, Diego. Switching to Spanish, she begins to flip through a stack of photos of her students.

"Hmmm...¿donde está Diego? Oh, mira. Este es Diego," she says as she finds his photograph. "¡Qué Guapo!" Diego's cheeks heat, turning pink. A small bead of sweat gathers at his hairline and his gaze drops to the floor.

He sneaks a quick look at his mother, to make sure she's heard, and then sheepishly mumbles, "Oh man, c'mon." His mother is pleased.

"It's important to me that I connect and engage as many parents as I can. Some parents have a lot of concerns, some are shy, some take a minute to warm-up," says Cowgill. "But, I can't do my job as well if they are not a part of this process."

On the second day of school, Cowgill asked her students to set goals. She laughs as she reports some of the funnier responses: "This year I want to train a garden snake," or, "I want to become a police officer."

"If I'm doing my job, I'm bringing them one step closer to their dream, even if it's a small step. Their dreams are real to them,



so they're real to me. It's about building trust—I want them to know who I am.”

## WHO IS KELLY COWGILL?

Cowgill's back-to-school night is divided into two sessions: one in (mostly) Spanish and the other in (mostly) English. As she runs through her presentation, she explains the basics: the daily schedule; the weekly homework cycle; appropriate snacks.

She struggles to find the right Spanish words to describe Common Core, Smarter Balanced (third grade is the first year students will take the test) and Google docs. And she tells her student's parents a little about herself: she is from Washington, she enjoys riding her bicycle and she 'loves speaking Spanish!'

The 28-year-old recently graduated from the Evergreen State College, with a Masters in Teaching. She has travelled extensively, especially through South and Central America, and is fluent in Spanish, making her an excellent candidate for Beaverton's well regarded two-way immersion program (TWI).

She's had extensive student teaching experience both here and abroad, and is no stranger to the profession—her mother is a teacher.

"I remember, very clearly, the moment I decided to become a teacher," recalls Cowgill. "I was 19 years old and had decided to take a quarter off to travel throughout Uruguay. I met so many incredible educators on my trip, visited their schools and met the students. I have this one memory of a student who said his parents listened to American music. When I asked to hear the song, his voice became low and he crooned, 'Come on baby, light my fire.' And there was so much joy there, a common bond, and I just lost it. I realized in that moment that THIS was what teaching was, and right then I knew I would be an educator. My mom was, of course, delighted."

Cowgill is an anomaly. The number of people entering teacher preparation programs dropped precipitously over the first half of the decade (a 30 percent drop from 2010 to 2014).

Teacher retention is also a concern: more than 50 percent leave the profession in the first five years. But Cowgill insists the classroom is where she belongs: "In the bad moments, you push through and find the happy. When they [your students] all get it, it's a joy you can't explain. It's why you're a teacher."

## THE FIRST WEEK

The first week was a roller coaster, says Cowgill. The first day full of excitement, and nervousness. The second day? Well, that was tricky.

"I have a few students who present significant behavior challenges, and of course they found each other," explains Cowgill. "When something like that happens you have to find balance—the students can't see you lose your cool, and you can't take it personally. We're all learning about each other, learning boundaries."

Kara Ferris, a 13-year veteran Social Studies teacher at Westview High School, commiserates.

"There is definitely a sense of being thrown in, and having to hit the ground running," she says. "You're suddenly responsible for a classroom full of children, and you spend a lot of time thinking, 'How am I going to teach this, how am I going to fit it all in?'"

Cowgill chuckles, admitting that there were moments her students had the upper hand.

"You just have to be persistent. Time in the classroom is very strange—it moves very, very fast and at the same time, very slow. It can be tempting to throw in the towel, but you just have to keep going. It's an ongoing decision-making process."

And then there are the moments of levity that make everything just a little easier.

"On Friday afternoon, everyone has some free time. Since this was our first block, we discussed some of the ways it's appropriate to use our free time. One of my students raised her hand and asked, 'Can we use our free time to whip and Nae Nae?'" ■

## KELLY'S DIARY | A FUN MOMENT!

*At morning recess today, a student walked with me from the building to the wood chips. He watched our feet traverse the pavement, then looked at me suddenly.*

*"Why are you wearing those shoes today?" he asked incredulously.*

*"Oh, these shoes? What do you mean?" I laughed.*

*"I mean, of all of them, you wore those to school?" he pushed. "For dancing?!" I had on my Peruvian leather, kiltie flapped, \$6 thrift store find, soft-soled, sometimes-for-dancin' shoes.*

*"Are you thinking about the purpose of these shoes? Why, I wear these for all kinds of occasions, school too." I smiled.*

*My student was referring to the shoe lesson I delivered a few days ago—The Sisters' Good-Fit Book lesson (CAFE's Gail Boushey and Joan Moser). In the lesson, I compared my own shoes to books, explaining that selecting the appropriate shoes for an occasion (dancing shoes, slippers, sandals, tennis shoes, etc.) is like deciding which is the best book to choose (chapter book, informational text, graphic novel, reference collection, etc.) So, why, my student wanted to know, was I wearing my dancing loafers to work, or the playground, even? Clearly I had forgotten their purpose.*

*I commended my kiddo for having such a good memory before a pick-up football game captured his attention.*

### Credits:

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