

Adaptation & triumph:

D161's first year teachers share their early experiences

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The first few months in a kindergarten classroom at Serena Hills Elementary School have not been how Shaki-na Washington pictured them.

"As a new teacher, you have this ideal image of teaching, and it may not necessarily be true," Washington said. "You're having to tweak that mindset. You may not be able to do things the way you pictured it, but with a little effort and a sideways step you can still complete the end goal. It just doesn't look like what you imagined it to be."

With a pandemic still hanging over the 2021-2022 school year, things were bound to be a little different from what a first-year teacher expected. Washington thankfully had experience going from remote to hybrid learning while student teaching.

"It's made me more flexible, in that I can change things up quickly," Washington said.

Haley Erlandson, a math teacher in her first year at Parker Junior High School, said she had one major worry coming into this school year.

"I was expecting to be having to work late every single night and having to be stressed out all the time, but I'm just very supported here, have a lot of help from a lot of different people," Erlandson said. "I never feel too overwhelmed with work."

Much of that is a credit to her mentor, another math teacher who has all of the same classes, Erlandson said. She fields questions from Erlandson all the time, and they plan their lessons together.

"She's been a really good support system," Erlandson said. "Anything I need, they're there to help and support me, which is really nice. That's why I don't feel overwhelmed so often."

Jillian Jendra, a first-year kindergarten teacher at Heather Hill Elementary School, said her mentor's support has been vital. The mentor, another kindergarten teacher at Heather Hill, observes and provides feedback. Jendra also sometimes gets to observe the other class and bring ideas back to her classroom. They also plan together every week.

"We talk all the time," Jendra said. "We've been super collaborative with one another, which has been extremely beneficial. I can't even put into words how much it has helped me."



Provided photo
Haley Erlandson, front row, second from left, a math teacher in her first year at Parker Junior High School, with her homeroom class. She was worried about excessively long nights and stress, but so far she has not been overwhelmed by the experience.

Jendra said her biggest concern coming into her first school year was establishing relationships and mutual respect with her students, but it has gone better than expected.

"I just wanted them to have a place — my classroom — somewhere to feel safe, somewhere to feel loved, somewhere to feel valued," she said. "I think that's one thing I have achieved that I was super focused on right from the beginning."

Miranda Quinn, a fourth-grade teacher in her first year at Flossmoor Hills Elementary, went into school this year with a goal of her own. In middle school, a teacher helped her fall in love with reading, and Quinn wants to pass that opportunity on to her students. Just months on the job, she already had the chance.

"I introduced one of my students to one of my favorite books that that specific teacher read to me, and she loved it," Quinn said. "She was finally able to relate to a book. She hasn't felt like that before."

Kindergarten has been a particular challenge this year, because many of the students did not have preschool experience because of COVID-19 precautions last year.

"A lot of the kids, we're having to meet them where they are and walk a little more slowly with them as they acclimate to the schooling process," Washington said. "They're doing an excellent job of it. It just requires a little more flexibility and patience."

Jendra has spent time in classrooms the past three years, including where academics were always the focus. But that has had to shift this year, she said, under the assumption that students are used to their families but not each other.

"I think that has played a big part in how these children interact with one another," Jendra said. "I'm noticing there's more of a social-emotional requirement than an emphasis on academic needs. The focus of this year is a lot of social-emotional skills and just learning how to get along with each other and deal with these strong feelings. ... I don't think I was prepared for the amount of social-emotion-



Provided photo
Shaki-na Washington, a first-year kindergarten teacher at Serena Hills Elementary School, said the first months as a new teacher do not always match the "ideal image" of the job, but with some adaptations she is still meeting goals she has.

al needs that would be required this year."

COVID-19 concerned Washington coming into this school year, but she said Flossmoor School District 161 is working hard to keep people healthy and safe as much as possible to keep them in school.

"You always have it in the back of your mind that someone might come in and they might be sick, but the school has done a wonderful job of making sure people are safe, that we're social distancing, that everybody is wearing their masks, SHIELD testing," Washington said. "It's obviously working."

Erlandson said mask-wearing "can be a struggle," and she is eager for a day when she no longer has to "harp on" students about them. But she wants to keep students healthy and in her class as much as possible.

"There are struggles still, like kids having to quarantine from close contact or whatever reasons," she said. "Catching those students up is difficult."

Quinn said some of what caught her off-guard at the start of this school year was unrelated to the pandemic — just typical first-year-on-the-job lessons such as learning how to do report cards, as well as setting routines and procedures in the classroom.

"It's definitely been like something I've never experienced before," Quinn said. "I feel like when I was student teaching, they really don't show you the nitty-gritty parts of being a teacher ... all these other things I never even thought about."

But Quinn's mentor has been invaluable in helping her learn the ropes.

"She has really helped me guide specific routines in my room, specific procedures," Quinn said. "My mentor is really awesome."

Feedback from the first round of parent-teacher conferences boosted her confidence, too. Students said they love being in her class every day.

"That's something I didn't really expect," she said. "They're all so understanding that I'm a first-year teacher, that they need to teach me things sometimes because they've been here longer than I have. They know what goes on in this school, and I've still been learning everything."

Washington said she has constantly been learning this year, trying things for the first time, seeing what succeeds and fails in a new environment.