



Provided photo

Jillian Jendra, a first-year kindergarten teacher at Heather Hill Elementary School, and Flossmoor School District 161 Superintendent Dana Smith pose for a photo with students.

"I'm very appreciative of all my co-workers," Washington said. "I work with very strong and educated teachers who have helped mentor me along the process."

If she has one piece of advice for others, it is this:

"Things are still challenging, not only for the students but for parents and teachers alike," Washington said. "We just need to continue to give each other grace and understand that we're all getting through this the best we can together."

Erlandson noted because she went to college during a pandemic she feels she can relate in some ways to the struggle students are facing.

"Everyone's going through a weird time, so it is helpful we're all in the same boat," she said.

Despite the challenges of the pandemic that cannot be over soon enough, some adaptations have proven useful. Erlandson said she hopes "anything virtual" sticks around. Those tools undoubtedly help keep students from falling behind.

"If there are students that are quarantined or out for a longer period of

time, things like Canvas and stuff we can post all the assignments in, they can stay up to date when they're not at school," Erlandson said. "Kids that even lose papers on a daily basis can go to Canvas or online platforms to get caught up."

Jendra said guidelines and requirements continue to change. Nothing she knows has been "the norm."

"It's been continuously changing," she said. "I'm just rolling with the punches."

And though she was not ready for it coming into this school year, Jendra said the social-emotional component has become incredibly important to her. She designates time to explicitly teach those skills, helping students "learn what the big emotions are that they may feel as well as how to cope with them."

"I would hope that social-emotional emphasis continues to stay," Jendra said. "I believe at the kindergarten age it is extremely important and valuable to ensure these students know they are loved, valued and cared for."

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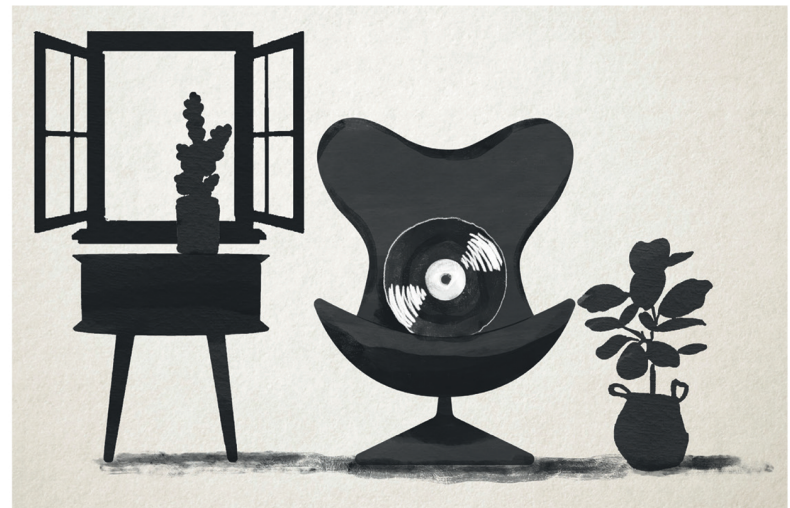
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