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Day in a teacher's life is never-ending

Sunday, February 9, 2014

By JASON REYNOLDS ~ jreynolds@t-g.com



Cascade Elementary School teacher Terri Overcast assists Addison Cope with her work. See more photos at <http://www.t-g.com/gallery/18430/>. (T-G Photo by Jim Davis) [Order this photo]

A day in the life of a second-grade teacher is one that may resemble a circus juggling act or a carefully choreographed ballet.

I shadowed second-grade teacher Terri Overcast on Monday, Feb. 3, for the entire school day. I was her shadow from her busy preparations before class through multiple rotations of students to the PTO meeting after school.

Along the way I gained a little more insight into the many duties teachers face, from healer (a couple of children went to the nurse) to drill sergeant (think kids lined up like soldiers in formation to march to lunch) to disciplinarian to executive secretary keeping a CEO on schedule. And along the way, they actually find time to teach.

Overcast's day is summarized in chronological order:

5:50 a.m.: Rise and shine.

7:10 a.m.: Arrive at school.

7:45 a.m.: Intercom announcements, including a listing of lunch, which includes pepperoni pizza, tossed salad, whole kernel corn and fruit cup salad. Also includes a moment of silence.

"Let's make it a great day for yourself and others," Principal Martha Fisher concludes.

7:48 a.m.: Overcast polls students to see if they brought lunch or plan to eat cafeteria

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food.

"I'm beginning to think everybody likes pepperoni pizza. We only have one fruit."

Overcast turns in attendance online. She mentions Groundhog Day and asks who watched the Super Bowl. Most of the students raise hands. "Who rooted for Denver?" A few hands. "Who rooted for Seattle?" More hands were raised. "I knew we were in trouble after that first snap. The Seahawks played a good game."

Teacher assistant Barbara Barnes helps individual children. (Barnes also happens to be Overcast's mother and is a retired worker from the school system's central office.)

7:52 a.m.: "You'll have about 10 minutes to do personal work. Do we have any pencils that need to be sharpened?"

7:57 a.m.: "Turn over your papers. Eight plus eight equals sixteen. Can you explain how you got your answer?" A student replies it was a double eight. "Okay, good."

"What time is it on the clock (on homework)?" The student replies, "The hour and minute hand are at 12." "How would we write 12 o'clock using numbers," Overcast asks, and writes "12:00."

The math lessons continue, and move on to grammar: "a women was make cakes for the sale" is one problem.

"Ooh, that's a hard one. Sara, how do you spell woman?" Overcast writes "woman" and "women" on the board. "I know it's confusing." She coaxes from students that they need a capital "a" and explains that woman is the singular. "What else do we need, Prim?" Make becomes making. "Now, does it sound like a statement? What do we need at the end of this since it is a statement?" And a period is added to the sentence.

On grammar problem five, Logan correctly identifies which of several words is spelled correctly.

8:07 a.m.: Some students prepare to rotate to other classrooms. Three of the five second-grade classrooms rotate students among one another a number of times during the day.

"Luke, you might want to fix your pencils to get ready. Come put your paper in the top tray and make sure they are going in the same direction."

Overcast asks students if they own a book that was left behind in class last week.

"Push your chairs under and line up.

8:09 a.m.: The first rotation starts.

8:12 a.m.: Reading assignments are handed out.

The students start working on compound words. Overcast holds up both fists, says a word while moving a fist, then places her fists together to indicate how two separate words can combine a new word (a compound word). For example, play and ground form playground.

Holly Steiner, a Title I reading teacher, has replaced Barnes. Steiner assists various classes throughout the school. She points out that hammerhead is compound. Overcast makes a hammering motion, then indicates her head.

Overcast and Steiner continue to demonstrate compound words despite an interactive bulletin board that does not interact well.

8:30 a.m.: Students start forming compound words in small groups with Overcast and Steiner using dry erase boards and picture cards. Six students take turns on the classroom's three computers playing PBS Kids games, which Overcast describes as thinking games that train them on the keyboard. "They enjoy doing that; they beg to do PBS Kids."

At this point, I cannot help but compare the teachers' work to a choreographed dance, sometimes solo and sometimes with a partner like Steiner making it go easier. But Overcast is on her own for a great part of the day.

8:55 a.m.: What is something you're going to do when you have a room full of second-graders? Go to the bathroom. Overcast and Steiner line the children up by gender and remind them to be quiet and keep their eyes forward. "We're following the safety rules."

9:10 a.m.: Students have returned from their bathroom break and Overcast is trying to get them back on track. "I asked you to get your workbooks ready. We've been talking about compound words."

Some of the students do another rotation.

9:31 a.m.: New students rotate in. "If you just came in, you need to get your workbook out of the cubby."

Overcast, who is on her own, helps individual students on problems. She tells one disruptive student, "Look at Ms. Overcast. Do you need a skill sheet? Then say, 'No, ma'am.'"

10:00 a.m.: To another student, "You might want to put that in your pocket."

10:30 a.m.: Students rotate back to their homeroom. That leads to:

10:35 a.m.: Snack time (gummy bears).

10:40-11:25 a.m.: During this time, students either do gymnastics, music/art, guidance counseling or go to the library; each day of the week has a different activity assigned. Today's activity is the gym. Overcast walks her students to the gym, where another teacher takes over. For Overcast, it's planning period, which means it's time to either hold parent meetings, check email, work on paperwork or put together folders of graded work and more to send home with each student. She and another teacher, Dreonn Sintic, stuff folders today.

Each week, the second-grade teachers spend two days meeting parents and another day doing training, meaning they really get no breaks during their "break time." Overcast tells me, "As a teacher, you have to remind yourself, 'Okay, go to the bathroom.'" Sintic confides that last week, she did not make it to the bathroom.

11:30 a.m.: Students return and get a Valentine's Day list which their parents will use to buy cards for classmates. The list is used as an opportunity for the children to write names down alphabetically.

11:40 a.m.: Students line up for lunch.

After walking her students to lunch, Overcast and other teachers rush to grab their packed lunches in a Spartan breakroom filled by a refrigerator, table for eight and a side table; the blank, cinder block walls are painted a slate blue. The teachers have until students return from lunch by 12:15 at the latest.

12:12 p.m.: Students return from lunch. Since the weather is cold and wet, the kids will have to burn off their energy inside instead of on the playground. Without any help, Overcast oversees groups of second-graders doing everything from coloring to working puzzles to building towers of plastic cups (which she bought herself) to building towers of wood blocks (no higher than waist high since they could hurt when they fall).

1:05 p.m.: Another rotation happens. The students start working on compound words. They start working on safety rules because the following day they will start reading a book about safety, "Officer Buckle and Gloria."

"Why is it important to follow safety rules?" Overcast asks. Children can have a direct but endearing way of answering.

"So you don't die."

"So you don't break a leg."

"So you don't get arrested."

"So you don't catch your pants on fire."

1:33 p.m.: Overcast is going from child to child to make sure each one with a raised hand is correctly drawing a circle around each compound word in the workbook. She stops briefly to say to the increasingly noisy class in general, "I was bragging on how quiet you are."

1:59 p.m.: "Once you finish, put (the homework) in the top tray. Boys, the reason some of you are getting confused is because you've been talking during class. There's only about five minutes for you to work on some of your homework."

2:13 p.m.: The children start lining up for the final rotation. Overcast has students clear off the tables so she can disinfect them.

2:20 p.m.: Students who were good get stickers on the wall and some get to pick a small prize from the "treasure chest." The children get to talk or watch a cartoon on the smart board while they wait to leave for the day.

2:30 p.m.: Car riders line up and leave the room.

2:40 p.m.: Bus riders line up. Overcast gets a few minutes to check her email, finally, and do paperwork. She also organizes her lesson plan and materials for the next day. She admits she is OCD and worries that if she does not have the materials ready, should she unexpectedly miss class the next day, a substitute would be lost. She also sweeps the floor.

3:08 p.m.: A PTO meeting starts eight minutes late in the library. They plan for a reverse ticket drawing on March 15 to raise funds for the school. The grand prize is \$10,000, and each teacher is asked to sell at least three tickets.

3:20 p.m.: Overcast leaves for the day.

Likely, her work is not yet done. She normally works at home a couple of hours a day doing paperwork, grading and trying to stay a couple weeks ahead on her lesson plan.

And that would be the end of Day One of the week, with a repeat not far off on Tuesday.

On weekends, Overcast works on anchor charts, a new concept required by Common Core standards in which an upcoming topic like compound words is introduced on posters on the classroom walls. Her weekend work normally takes about five to six hours.

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