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A ‘super’ teacher

Crook County School District Superintendent teaches a Human Development class at CCHS

“What’s your favorite thing that begins with the letter W?”

The teen reads aloud the question from her Chat Pack card.

“Honestly, it’s water. I have a serious obsession with water,” she told her classmates.

“That’s a healthy thing,” her teacher responded. “Your body is made up of water, so you’re probably going to enhance your health. Right on.”

Students took turns holding a “talking piece” while they sat in a circle, answering questions presented on their Chat Pack cards.

“There’s a lot of research about circle work with kids,” pointed out Crook County School District Superintendent Dr. Sara Johnson. “Circle is a process for gaining connections between one another, and when your brain feels connected to your environment, you’re a better learner.”

She uses this circle time technique with the 11 students in her Human Development class at Crook County High School.

Each school day – during what would normally be her lunch hour – the superintendent heads off to CCHS to be a teacher. During that time, she is totally focused on her students.

Not every superintendent gets this lucky.

When Johnson discovered that there was a need for the Human Development course in the high school, she offered to teach the class. She had taught Human Development at the college level and felt she could offer students a great experience.

“I thought about the opportunity to connect to students, teachers and staff by working right at the classroom level,” she said. “If I truly want to understand the work in the classroom from the current culture and time, what better way to refresh my skills and stay relevant than to get in there and do the work of teaching.”

And her students say they like having the district superintendent as their teacher.

“It’s a different environment than the rest of the teachers,” said CCHS sophomore Brooklyn Hamlin, adding that she thinks it’s really smart of Dr. Johnson to teach a high school class.

“She has taught college classes, so she has experience, and it helps because she gets to be back in a classroom with the kids she’s in charge of,” said Hamlin, who is interested in psychology. “She said that she hasn’t been in a classroom for a long time.”

Johnson knew she'd gain empathy by being in a high school classroom – and increase connections.

“Connections to the schools are very important to me. I'm getting to experience our high school from the inside, to get to know the daily grind of committing to teaching,” she said. “It has increased my load, but I know it is worth it.”

And the Human Development students – many of whom are interested in careers in education and nursing – are also teaching the superintendent a thing or two. Like what it's like to be present as a high school student in 2019 and what they experience and value.

“Because of my students, I can better understand the challenges they encounter and the effort and energy it takes to be a high school student,” she says. “From our students, I'm learning how to make our school a better place for all students. They are beautiful people, authentic and savvy.”

Johnson is committed to teaching the 18-week course this term and uses “Change Your Brain Change Your Life Before 25” by Jesse Payne as the textbook. The students are even eligible for Central Oregon Community College credit.

She appreciates her students welcoming her as their teacher.

“Having me lead this class requires them to be flexible and willing to allow me to re-learn daily teaching strategies,” Johnson says. “It has been fun – and challenging.”



Students in Dr. Sara Johnson's class pass around a “talking piece” while they take turns during circle time.



Dr. Johnson helps CCHS student Kendra Mack with her child development time line.

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