

Montessori teacher forms lifelong bonds with students and fosters love of learning

By Rebecca Williams Special to the News Sentinel
Monday, January 30, 2012



There's a quiet, cozy atmosphere in Elizabeth Coburn's elementary classroom at Knoxville Montessori School. Coburn and her 20 students, ranging from first to fifth grade, pad around in slippers or soft plastic shoes.

"We have these comfy indoor shoes. It keeps the room a little cleaner, and we like to be comfortable," Coburn said with a laugh.

KMS Director Charlie Biggs said Coburn is an exceptional educator not just because she fosters a comfortable atmosphere in the classroom, but because of the lasting relationships she makes with students beyond elementary school.

"She's invited to a lot of high school graduations," he said. Biggs added that Coburn also pushes herself to further her own education.

In 2010, Coburn completed the two-year Southern Appalachian Naturalist Certification Program through the Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont. Many of her monthly class field trips are to rivers and parks.

"As a certified naturalist, she's really good at opening their eyes to things around them," said Kathy Saunders, whose two children have both had Coburn as a teacher. "She'll point out details along the trail that they would just run right by."

In the summer of 2011, Coburn was one of 16 teachers chosen for the National Endowment for the Humanities' summer seminar for teachers in Chicago at the Newberry Library. There she created an elaborate Cherokee history timeline for her students, which includes maps, art and stories about the tribe.

Today it stretches across the floor of the music room adjoining their class, for a visual lesson in history.

"Ms. Coburn is a good teacher because she always teaches us stuff and she learns a lot every day," said Emma Hare, 7, a second grader in Coburn's class. "I learned about the Cherokee life cycle and nutrition."

Montessori classrooms are big on hands-on experiences. Lining the shelves of the room, Coburn has neatly placed blocks, flash cards, K'nex sets, and dozens of other toy-like objects.

"Each of these is a chain of ten," said Thomas Simunovic, 10, explaining the set of Montessori math beads. "It goes by tens, to a thousand." Students stretch the string across the floor, marking it at intervals of ten. Or they fold the bead strings into squares, to show 100, or into a cube to show 1,000.

"Traditional training in math is just how to do it, and not why," said Coburn. "So we try to spend more time teaching why. That makes a whole picture, instead of isolated bits. Later when they're in algebra doing cubes and squares, they'll remember, 'Hey, that was that chain thing I folded up,'" she said.

Coburn holds a bachelor's degree in mathematics from the University of Tennessee. She is certified to teach through Montessori Educators International, which is specifically for Montessori schools.

Montessori schools typically group various ages of children together in one room so the older ones can help the younger.

"You don't really understand something thoroughly until you can teach someone else," explained Coburn. "Once you've reached that point, that's mastery."

Coburn admits she could make more money teaching in a public school. But standardized tests, while given at KMS, are not the pressure they are in public school, Coburn said. A bigger challenge is keeping up with the wide range of ability levels for the children in her class.

"I think I've seen a trend toward more students with disabilities," said Coburn. "More parents are looking for alternatives for their children, and they hear about Montessori's individualized attention.

"So each child presents a little differently, and I have to figure out what's going to click for this child and help them learn," she said.

"But I love seeing the moment when the child gets it. When they make a discovery, they really do light up."

What makes a great teacher? In this Exceptional Educators series, the News Sentinel profiles outstanding teachers from the Knoxville area. If you'd like to suggest a teacher, contact community@knoxnews.com.