

# Ruralite

WEST OREGON

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From left, Jamie Lake-Cieloha, Mario Espinoza Jr. and Levi Lake-Cieloha practice playing recorders during music class at Mist Elementary School.  
PHOTO BY SCOTT LAIRD

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# The Little SCHOOLHOUSE That Could

Mist Elementary School is a throwback to schoolhouses of yesteryear, offering blended grades and small class sizes. Students, teachers and parents love the unique approach to education, which embraces some modern updates.

**Story and photos by Scott Laird**

On an unusually cold but sunny day in February, a young girl on the school playground boldly introduces herself to a visitor and asks excitedly, “Do you want to see the cocoon we found?” before pointing out the furry blob tucked into a crevice and then rushing off with classmates to a play structure.

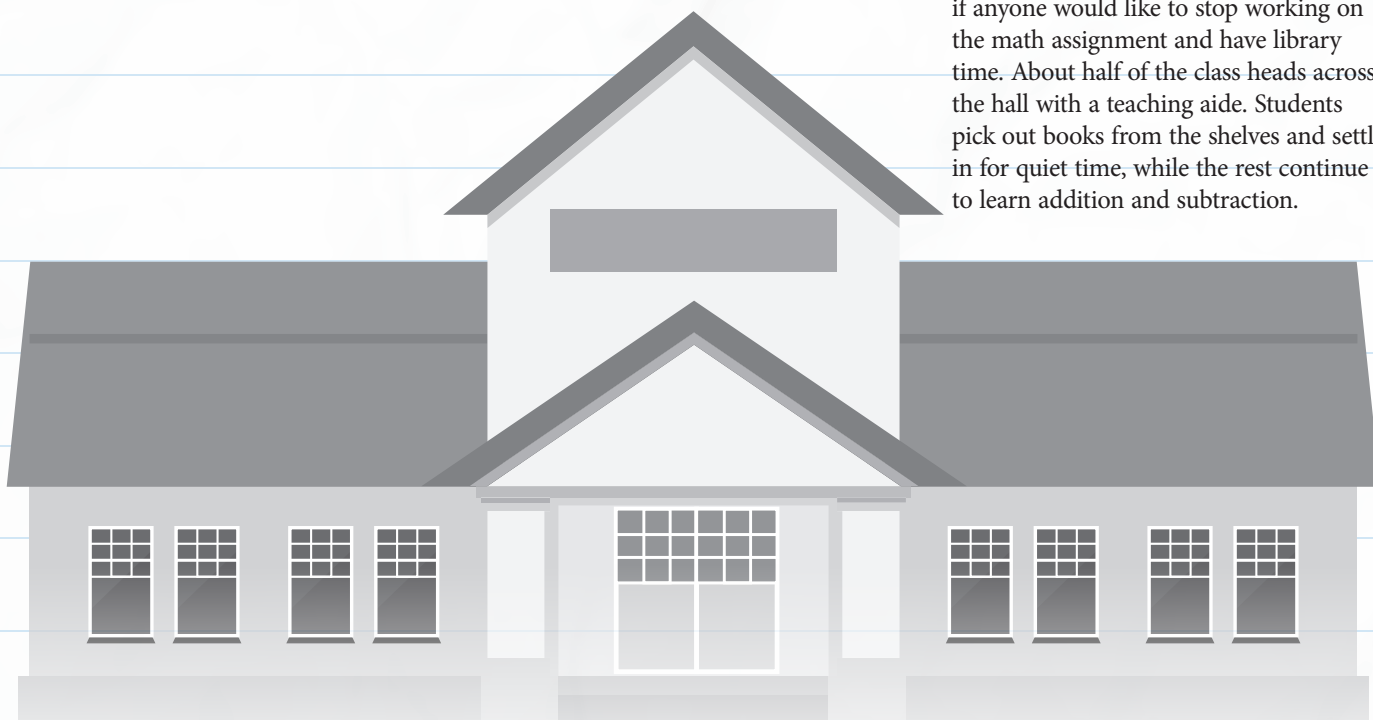
The teacher explains the students have been observing the cocoon for several days, waiting expectantly to see what emerges.

Inside the schoolhouse, a small class

of older students sits on couches and the floor working on a history lesson. They listen while a boy reads his imagined letter home to Europe from Jamestown—the New World colony in Virginia where hundreds of settlers died from starvation the previous winter.

The other students offer him ideas and constructive criticism on how to improve his assignment, while searching through both online and book thesauruses, looking for alternative words to use in their writing projects.

Later, a teacher asks her younger class if anyone would like to stop working on the math assignment and have library time. About half of the class heads across the hall with a teaching aide. Students pick out books from the shelves and settle in for quiet time, while the rest continue to learn addition and subtraction.



Mist Elementary School—a four-room rural schoolhouse in northwest Oregon—offers a unique educational alternative for students, parents and teachers. PHOTO TAKEN DURING COVID-19 MASK REQUIREMENTS



Welcome to Mist Elementary School—a remarkable, four-room rural school that is part of the Vernonia School District, tucked in the northwest corner of Oregon.

It is a place where students are encouraged to explore their interests. Older students assist the teachers and help younger students and peers learn new lessons. Community members volunteer to teach students life skills, such as cooking and crafts.

Students learn at their own pace, and instructors expand on the traditional three R's to teach skills such as resourcefulness, respect and responsibility.

Mist Elementary offers students and their families an alternative to larger classrooms at the district's main building of 550 students. Students receive individual attention in the two blended K-2 and grades 3-5 classrooms.

Teachers appreciate the flexibility the setting offers, and parents love the family atmosphere, open communication with teachers, and support the school receives from Mist and Birkenfeld—communities served by the school.

Sena Wilmoth is in her 30th year in education and her second year at Mist Elementary, where she teaches grades 3-5.

"As an educator, I believe in raising the whole child, so the Mist school really aligns with my teaching philosophy," Sena says. "It excites me to see students get excited about learning. We talk a lot about being a community of learners."

"It doesn't matter where a student is in their skills, everyone has something to contribute, and we help each other to learn. It's so easy to foster that philosophy in this environment."

"We just have more freedom to encourage students to ask questions and use critical thinking, and then we can dive into things. It's more of an organic way of learning."

Aaron Miller, Vernonia School District superintendent, says the school setup was thought out.



**With just 23 elementary students, Mist Elementary School offers individual attention that allows students to learn at their own pace, explore ideas and thrive. "It's just more of an organic way of learning," says teacher Sena Wilmoth.**

"At Mist, we've put kids together intentionally, and then developed our program so we can implement the curriculum at different years," Aaron says. "I think there are a lot of advantages to having multilevel classrooms. There are so many things you can do with them together, and there is a wide range of skills to build on and help each other move forward."

Celeste Avy teaches the K-2 class. Tabettha Groshong is the instructional assistant for the classes and teaches physical education. She also serves as part-time custodian, nurse and recess monitor. Megan Peterson is a part-time educational assistant.

Because only two classes share the library, gym and playground, there is freedom in how teachers structure the school day.

Recently, a local volunteer from the community began teaching students to crochet, telling the children that fishermen use those skills, which engages their interest in the craft.

Aaron says Mist Elementary is designated by the Oregon Department of Education as a remote school.

"It's located 16 miles from our main building," Aaron says. "It's off by itself and it serves a community that is very rural and spread out. But it's a really tightknit community that works together, and that builds on the family atmosphere."

Aaron says Mist Elementary fills a gap

between traditional classroom learning in a larger building and home-schooling—the other alternative families are looking to in recent years. He notes the Vernonia School District recently developed the Vernonia Family Academy to support home-school families and offer an online option for students.

"We're trying to provide as many options as we can for all of our patrons and meet the needs of all of our students equitably—making education accessible for what each student needs to help them be successful," Aaron says.

Families have attended Mist Elementary for generations. When the area was first settled in the late 1870s, a schoolhouse was built on the current school site. Around 1920, the old building was dismantled and part of the current building was constructed. Around 1940, the gym was built. In 1980, the schoolhouse was expanded.

Former teacher Joanie Jones spent 17 years teaching at Mist Elementary. She lived across the street from the school for many of those years.

"My husband Thomas' great-grandmother, his grandmother and his great-aunts all went to school there, and so did his children," says Joanie, who now serves on the Vernonia School Board. "There are still a lot of people in the community who have relatives who went to school there."

"Living across the street, I would see older people stop and take photos of

themselves in front of the building, and I would go over and talk to them. They would tell me about the potbellied stove and how the teacher would pay them a quarter to chop the wood because she didn't want to do it."

She recalls Bob Eastman—who still lives in Mist—once brought a beehive to school because he thought it was amazing. By lunchtime, bees were swarming throughout the school.

"The kids got an extra recess that day," Joanie says.

Today, the school has changed in some ways. The building recently was hooked up to a satellite internet connection, and students can do their work on laptops.

One of the four classrooms is a library/resource room. The library is mostly stocked with books by community



**Student Angela Lorrie Shipley rings the bell, calling her classmates back from recess.**

doing some type of art, there is learning in all of that. There is reading and writing and math, and that is all applicable. But it's also a real, essential, life skill that they're working on. It draws a student out, and they're engaged in their learning and building confidence. They can learn

members, Joanie says.

Thanks to bond funding, the school recently was renovated, with new siding, roofing, gutters, windows, carpeting, interior paint, cement walkways and playground equipment. The gym floor and walls also were refurbished.

But some things are the same, such as low student numbers. The K-2 class has just 12 students, and the grades 3-5 class has 11.

"Some students can really thrive in this different environment," Joanie says. "If a child is crocheting or cooking or

for themselves and about themselves, and become individuals."

Shannon Romtvedt has two students at Mist Elementary. She likes the school's educational model and family feel.

"Because classes are grouped K-2 and 3-5, kids can be taught to their level in subjects, which can be above or below grade level," Shannon says. "Sometimes all the grades get to join together for projects, with older kids teaching younger. The kids get to know each other very well and have a respect for one another."

"Mist is a great fit for my kids. They are thriving, and they come home happy."

During the COVID-19 pandemic, volunteerism by parents and community members was restricted, but the connection to the community remains a strong part of the school's identity.

After the annual Christmas party was canceled at the last minute in 2021, Mist-Birkenfeld Rural Fire Protection District arranged for Santa to visit the students in late January.

As part of the bond upgrade projects, Mist Helping Circle—a local community organization—helped refurbish the kitchen space in the gymnasium, which is sometimes used as a community center.

"The school wouldn't exist without the community," Joanie says. "Life is about helping other people, and people will do what they can out here for this school because they want to be a part of it."

"It's important that people have the opportunity to be involved in their schools, because they want to make a difference just as much as educators want to make a difference. The community/school partnership is vital for our students."

Mist Elementary doesn't just provide a great education for its students. Joanie says her experience as a teacher at the school provided her with enriching moments and was invaluable.

"The school itself is a mini-community," she says. "That environment does not work unless you have trust and respect between all the people there."

"I learned more about myself as a human being—and what I represented and what I stood for—during those years in that building with those kids." ■



**Teachers at Mist Elementary School wear many hats and have to be creative. Sena teaches her students to play a recorder, with the help of a YouTube instructional video.**